

THE ALCHEMY LECTURE

The City of Our Dreaming

LALEH KHALILI

V. MITCH MCEWEN

GABRIELA LEANDRO PEREIRA

LEANNE BETASAMOSAKE SIMPSON

With an Introduction by

CHRISTINA SHARPE

THE ALCHEMY LECTURE SERIES

The annual Alchemy Lecture is a collaboration between York University and Knopf Canada. Grounded in the idea of alchemy as a “form of speculative thought” and “a process of transformation and creation,” it brings together distinguished thinkers from different disciplines and geographies to address the most pressing issues of our times. Each year, the Lecture takes the form of a live, multi-vocal public event presented by York University followed by a book published under the Alchemy imprimatur at Knopf Canada.

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Five Manifestos for the Beautiful World



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CONTENTS

Introduction by Christina Sharpe 1

"buoyant futures, after fixity, dreaming in bounce"

V. MITCH MCEWEN

7

"Breaking Bread Together"

LALEH KHALILI

39

"Three Gestures of Black Freedom and a Dream Map"

GABRIELA LEANDRO PEREIRA

77

"No Line Could Make Sense of It"

LEANNE BETASAMOSAKE SIMPSON

113

Notes and References 151

About the Alchemists 169

Acknowledgements 173

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PRESS**

INTRODUCTION

In 1964 the poet, essayist, novelist, educator and activist June Jordan invited the architect Buckminster Fuller to think with her about “a collaborative architectural redesign of Harlem.”¹ At the center of Jordan’s and Fuller’s ambitious plan was that, for Harlem’s then majority 250,000 Black residents, living should be good. Jordan was well aware that “too often, urban renewal meant Negro removal, as the street saying phrased it. Serious improvement of a physical community where Black people lived almost always meant the literal eviction of Black families while redevelopment took place and then exclusion of these families by means of subsequently high rents they could not afford.”² The result of Jordan’s and Fuller’s thinking was Skyrise for Harlem, what Jordan called a “poetics of form,”³ a plan for a city that would refuse the logics of anti-Blackness, so-called urban renewal and racist and classist explanations for the uprisings of Black people in Harlem and elsewhere in the United States.

This city was never realized, but it was and it is a plan of possibility, a city of Jordan’s and Fuller’s, and our, dreaming.

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1

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“All cities are ambiguous and not just in fog or snow or rain.”⁴ Those of us who are drawn to cities imagine them as much as find them. We imagine places for collective living, art- and community-making. What we find is that we are pushed out by capital, condofication and financialization.

What are the cities of our dreaming? Who lives there and how do we live there? The gerund form in the title of this year’s Alchemy Lecture combines the noun and the verb—the thing and the work—because dreaming is active. We cannot live in the ever-expanding catalog of atrocity. This is why we need our collective dreaming of cities made for inhabitation.

The four speakers for “The City of Our Dreaming” imagine the architectures and infrastructures that make possible, inevitable and irresistible gestures of freedom, modes of sustenance and the necessity and pleasure of breaking bread together.

In last year’s Lecture, “Five Manifestos for the Beautiful World,” Cristina Rivera Garza invoked the subjunctive as a tense for living. She said, “If we were to write a house. If a house were a communal pact, a collaborative belaboring, a form of direct action that required the time of others, their hands and lungs, their eyes, their hope. If a house were the opposite of war” and then this: “In the subjunctive, no one takes anyone’s life.” In the subjunctive, in the *if* of our collective summoning, the city of our dreaming may be buoyant, it may be filled with gathering places and gardens, it may be a marronage. In it everyone has shelter and circulating air and sunlight. The city of our dreaming may be one that is suffused with music, where the answer to a crisis is “one hundred musicians,” and never more police.⁵ The city of our dreaming has abandoned private property in favor of a

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thriving commons. The city of our dreaming is one of solidarity, one of our collective inhabitations, an antifascist spaceplacetime in which we actively care for each other in all of our hungers.

We arrive at the city of our dreaming from where we live—from the deprivations and excesses of financialization, capital’s multiple manufactured crises, as well as the abundance and possibility of cities, of living together in density with human and nonhuman neighbors. From our collective and powerful imaginations. Alongside June Jordan’s unrealized plan for a city with people’s well-being at the center, I return often to the imagining work done by ten Black architects (of which Mitch was one) in the Black Reconstruction Project’s *Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America*. I also think often of the seven-year-old Black boy who visited the exhibition with his father, who was reviewing it. The reviewer described his son standing “transfixed before Jeyifous’s otherworldly renderings, asking me, ‘Where is this? Is it real? Is it a video game? Can we go there?’”⁶

Each of these lectures speaks from the structural conditions under which we live and labor, in order to think through and beyond and at the edges of the crises and structures that we inhabit to imagine the places where we *want* to live.

V. Mitch McEwen’s “buoyant futures, after fixity, dreaming in bounce” takes us into the architecture of dreaming, the architecture of the eye—and its memory visions—floating . . . She says, “When I dream of floating, I am thinking of how we assemble in this city.” And we are invited to both imagine and know other modes that “un/build or un/form,” that are responsive. These are buildings that “will roll and drift.”

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Laleh Khalili speaks in “Breaking Bread Together” of feasting and sharing a meal; of hospitality and plenitude in a time of famishing; of reciprocal obligation as that which binds us. There is intimacy in refusing “subordination to a bare life, stripped of its pleasures and camaraderie.” The city that Khalili summons is one of generous abundance.

In “Three Gestures of Black Freedom and a Dream Map,” **Gabriela Leandro Pereira** quotes the artist Castiel Vitorino Brasileiro, who insists that dreams allow us to undo colonial epistemologies and, necessarily, “to remember what the traumas of racialization have made us forget: freedom.” Could the dreams be a “speculative place of encounters” with the cities? Can we de-think the world in this way? And she tells us that “the city that emerges from these dreamed gestures is constituted by projects paved by the audacity to inhabit, in an ambivalent way, impossible, conflictive spatialities, where life is cared for in defiance of the desires and projects of extermination, past, present or future.”

And this space—which is also relation—where life is cared for despite projects of extermination, moves us to **Leanne Betasamosake Simpson**’s “No Line Could Make Sense of It,” in which she tells us that this city, Toronto, is a molecule, is a lake, is a blizzard, is solidarity. She offers her summons for alchemists, and her intention is as interweaving as “sinter,” as “an interwoven system of circularity” that is already being made.

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In the midst of ongoing genocide, in this time of monsters and of nightmares made policy and flesh, in this interregnum, we are truly lucky to join with these four lecturers and with each other in the hard, joyous and necessary work of dreaming.

Together these lectures have made room—to breathe and think and be together in the knowledge that the city of our dreaming, in its many forms, might be right here.

—CHRISTINA SHARPE, Toronto, 2025

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Introduction

CHRISTINA SHARPE

NOTES

1. Claire Schwartz, “When June Jordan and Buckminster Fuller Tried to Redesign Harlem,” *New Yorker*, August 22, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/when-june-jordan-and-buckminster-fuller-tried-to-redesign-harlem>.
2. June Jordan, “Letter to Buckminster Fuller (1964),” in *Civil Wars* (Touchstone, 1995), 23–28.
3. Schwartz, “June Jordan and Buckminster Fuller.”
4. Dionne Brand, *Love Enough* (Knopf, 2014), 27.
5. I borrow “one hundred musicians” from Dionne Brand’s novel *Love Enough*, in which the character June has “heard something on the radio that wakes her. ‘One hundred musicians?’ she says. ‘Great!’” Her lover Sydney contradicts her: “Musicians? Policemen. One hundred policemen.” *Love Enough*, 27–28.
6. Jay Cephas, “Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America,” Free Forms, *Artforum*, April 19, 2021, <https://www.artforum.com/columns/jay-cephas-on-reconstructions-architecture-and-blackness-in-america-249777/>.

DUKE

153

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