

Y3K: On Distant Keys

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“To speak about decoloniality, we have to come to a post-humanist perspective... that the world is just as much alive as we think we are. It’s intelligent, it’s animated, it’s vital.”

—Bayo Akomolafe, *The Multicultural Futuring Symposium*¹

INTRODUCTION.

In the face of escalating environmental degradation, the Rights of Nature movement has emerged as a revolutionary paradigm for Repair. The Rights of Nature (RoN) posits that nature, in all its forms, possesses intrinsic rights.² This framework has gained traction through various legal initiatives, such as Ecuador’s 2008 Constitution, which recognizes the rights of Pachamama (Mother Earth),³ and local ordinances in the United States that afford legal personhood to rivers and forests. Advocates argue that granting legal rights to nature not only protects ecosystems but also acknowledges their vital role in sustaining human life.

The RoN movement is a response to the anthropocentric worldview that has historically dominated environmental policy, where nature is viewed as a mere resource for human exploitation. RoN advocates challenge this notion by asserting that ecosystems have an inherent right to exist, flourish, and evolve, regardless of their utility to humans. This shift in perspective encourages a more holistic approach to environmental governance, one that recognizes the interdependence of all living entities.

At the heart of the RoN movement lies the notion of the sentience of place. This concept suggests that ecosystems and landscapes possess their own forms of awareness and life. To theorize the sentience of place is to acknowledge that natural environments are not passive backdrops to human activity but active participants in the web of life. As this socio-political shift takes place, the next generation of architects and designers yearn for narratives—both new and old—that animate nature and highlight our relationality. This paper gives a brief overview of a multi-year transdisciplinary research project called On Distant Keys (ODK).

ON DISTANT KEYS


On Distant Keys is a growing collective of artists, designers, writers, scientists, and activists working collaboratively to generate speculative futures in the wake of climate change. Through a series of workshops in 2022, ODK explored speculative modes of representation such as art, literature and theory to envision futures that are not only possible and probable, but also preferable. ODK has invited students, creators, and thinkers from many backgrounds and disciplines to share their strategies for image-making and composition, including some outlandish propositions for problem-solving and future prediction. What emerged the following year were two curated exhibitions—The Futuring Lab and Y3K: On Distant Keys.

THE FUTURING LAB

The first exhibition, taking place in November 2023, was called The Futuring Lab. Thematically grounded in notions of time, this exhibition hosted an array of events (Fig 1) that explored geological time, Indigenous time, and afro-retro futurist perspectives. Programming for this exhibition invited community members, students, staff, and faculty to engage in conversations about carbon literacy, climate grief, and environmental humanities. It also featured a large interactive timeline-mural (Fig 2) where visitors could post both personal and political events, historical and speculative, known and unknown over a 2000-year time span.

Futuring, as a verb, is a creative and systematic practice used to understand, analyze, and design the yet-to-be. It combines elements of artistic expression and critical thinking to identify, describe, and generate preferable futures. During the exhibit, the Futuring Lab hosted five days of programming, each with a thematic and/or mythological motif—The Sirens, The Sages, The Tricksters, The Fates, and The Carbon Carousel.

I. The Sirens kicked off our events at the opening reception. This event had a musical and lyrical theme. In Greek mythology, the irresistible songs of the Sirens led sailors off course into danger, but sirens also alarm us into paying attention. Musicians and writers performed together at this event which featured a James Joyce reading from *Ulysses*.



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Imagining futures that are not only possible and probable, but also preferable






	WEDNESDAY 11/8	Opening Reception: The Sirens	4:30 Reception 5:15 Gallery Talk 5:30 James Joyce reading and musical performance with Katherine O'Callaghan, Ben Richter, and Jonathan Hulting-Cohen
	THURSDAY 11/9	Contemplative Futuring: The Sages	12:00 Lunch with pizza all are welcome 12:30 Beauty, Grief, Action: a conversation in the round with Trebbe Johnson 3:00 A Constellation Workshop: embodying time travel with Marianne Connor
	TUESDAY 11/28	Inclusive Futuring: The Tricksters	2:00 Deep Listening Workshop with Ben Richter 3:00 Rooted in Truth with Andre Strongbearheart 4:00 Crip Time, Crip Space, Crip Scene with Jeff Kasper 5:00 Afro-Retro Futurism: a storytelling workshop with Oluwatoyin T. Okele & Richie Wills
	WEDNESDAY 11/29	Interactive Futuring: The Fates	3:00 Ensemble Building & Applied Theater with Rebecca Brown Adelman 4:00 Metaphysical Carwash: fortunes & poetry with Edie Meidav & Friends 6:00 Future Slam: open mic poetry & prose with MC Montanna Harling
	THURSDAY 11/30	Elemental Futuring: The Carbon Carousel	3:30 The Renaissance of the Earth with Suzette Martin's "Tipping Points" 4:00 Carbon Cycle 101 with Rob DeConto and Julie Brigham-Grette 4:30 Carbon Culture & Environmental Humanities with Malcolm Sen

Figure 1. Poster for The Futuring Lab showing the 5 days of events



Figure 2. Installation of The Futuring Lab. Image credit: Jan Sabach.

II. The next day, The Sages focused on more contemplative aspects of futuring. This began with a council-style workshop called Beauty Grief Action: A Conversation in the Round and concluded with a workshop that employed the relational practice of constellation therapy to examine various notions of embodied time.

III. The third event called forth The Tricksters to remind us not only to question our rules but also to playfully disrupt social norms. The Trickster crosses various cultural traditions throughout the world and is associated with magical powers of transformation, resurrection, and “medicine.” Guests at this event were invited to speak about Indigenous time, crip-time, and Afro/retro time.

IV. Perhaps the most carnivalesque events of the series occurred during The Fates, an all-women-led set of programs that empowered participants to intervene with destiny through improvisational dance (Fig 3), interactive theater, “poetry-on-demand” and fortune telling.

V. In closing the exhibition, The Carbon Carousel, invited climate scientists to explain the carbon cycle while humanists and artists explored the cultural dimensions of carbon, the fourth most abundant element in the universe. This 5-person panel revealed the ubiquitous nature of carbon as it relates to our climate, our chemistry, and our humanity.



Figure 3. Improvisation dancers in the Lab.

Y3K: ON DISTANT KEYS

While the Futuring Lab sought alternative perceptions of time, Y3K: On Distant Keys explored the spatial possibilities for place-based consciousness. Set in the year 3000, the world of On Distant Keys emerged from a geologic cone of variability with wide-ranging environmental and philosophical potential. Not only did this allow for a broad spectrum of plausible scenarios, but it also offered a chance to travel away from the present day to consider a millennial perspective—from where we were a thousand years ago, to where we are headed a thousand years from now—a mere blink in geologic time. With a virtual twist and a playful shake, On Distant Keys invites cross-pollination and re-definition, resource-sharing and provocation.

In this future fiction landforms are recognized as sentient beings with legal rights and the ability to self-govern. With a lively new materialist perspective, a curated selection of art, artifacts, maps, music, videos, and text, offered interpretations of eight distinct landforms—harbor, river, forest, mountain, trail, orchard, academy, and field.

Narratives that animate our environment are not new. The idea that landscapes possess their own forms of awareness and life resonates with Indigenous worldviews, which see the land as a living entity imbued with spirit and consciousness. These places are often seen as guardians or instructors, offering gifts of “story, place, sustenance, and belonging. The land is not a static object; it is alive, it is kin,”⁴⁴ and it is bound up with culture.



Figure 4. Image caption. Image credit.

Evolutionary Biologist Lynn Margulis has shown that symbiotic relationships are a driving evolutionary force⁵ and that the biosphere is an active adaptive agent seeking homeostasis.⁶ Feelings, such as desire or fear, operate within this system-- from a micro-cellular level, to large keystone predators-- helping to guide and maintain its overall health and wellbeing.⁷ Sentience is associated with feeling, which could include pain and suffering as well as care and concern.

The making of place is entangled with the geological, the biological, and the cultural. But in In Y3K, places don't belong to humans; humans belong to place, along with all other matter that resides there. Objects and artifacts in this exhibition were arranged to emphasize the inseparability of human and non-human making. Mother-of-pearl buttons, sheeps wool thread, bone, shell, fossil, crab, and tassel are all constituents of a place. (fig 7).

The lexical arrangement of images and artifacts cultivate a language of things. Just as words in a sentence derive meaning from their order and relationships, so too do objects and images. This notion proposes that non-verbal, material things—images, artifacts, natural objects—can be arranged in a way that communicates meaning, much like words in a sentence. In this framework, things do not exist in isolation; they communicate through their intra-active relationships.

In one case, a river and ribbon form a narrative around ceramic breasts, stones, and poems. In another case, feathers and gloves

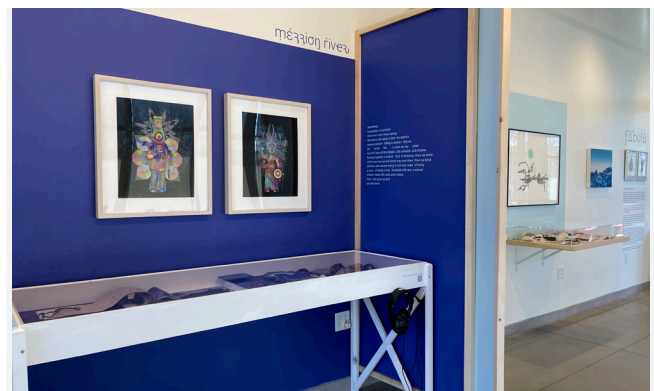


Figure 5. Installation of Y3K: On Distant Keys.

suggest an interspecies sign language (Fig 9-10). These playful juxtapositions suggest a more wildly feral and inclusive civility. For the language of place is the language of things that inhabit that place. Humans are not writing the story, but we are part of the story writing itself. Every action of listening and responding, of making and voicing, has an ethically entangled effect on how that story unfolds and envisions repair.

CONCLUSION

As we confront the multifaceted crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental injustice, it is imperative that architects and designers consider the intrinsic rights of nature and consciousness embedded within our landscapes. Doing so not only strengthens our ethical relationship with the



Figure 6. Installation of Y3K, showing student work



Figure 7. Detail of display cabinet in Y3K: On Distant Keys.



Figure 8. Installation of Y3K: On Distant Keys.



Figure 9. Installation of Y3K: On Distant Keys.



Figure 10. Detail of display cabinet in Y3K: On Distant Keys.

environment but also paves the way for a more sustainable and just future, where humanity and nature are not seen as separate entities but integrated within a whole. Narratives like *On Distant Keys* play an important role in helping to envision a world where the rights of all beings—human and non-human—are respected and protected, ensuring a legacy of ecological integrity for generations to come.

ENDNOTES

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