
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Anticipatory Ontologies: Prefiguring the Necessary in the Chthulucene

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| ABSTRACT

Contemporary critical theory is caught in a double bind: radical diagnoses of anthropocentrism and planetary crisis tend toward paralysing stasis, while mainstream normative ethics (utilitarianism, egalitarian contractualism, capability approaches) dilute transformative demands into incremental reforms that remain internal to the onto-epistemology they seek to challenge. This paper proposes a third path: anticipatory ontology. Drawing on feminist new materialism, posthumanities, and queer ecologies (Haraway, Barad, Tsing, Bennett, Braidotti, Povinelli, Stengers), anticipatory ontology refuses both apocalyptic waiting and reformist gradualism by prefiguring, here and now, modes of existence that dominant assemblages still code as impossible at scale. Through practices of speculative fabulation, prefigurative enactment, and minor ontogenesis, it treats art, architecture, dietary reconfiguration, and micro-communal experimentation as material-semiotic technologies for partially inhabiting necessary futures in the present. The paper maps the contemporary impasse, articulates the core operations of anticipatory ontology, and answers objections concerning symbolic inefficacy, elitism, and political quietism. It argues that anticipatory practices do not await favourable conditions but seed new capacities to affect and be affected, thereby widening the range of the possible when dominant arrangements begin to falter. In an era of closure, keeping alternative worlds alive is already a form of power.

| KEYWORDS

Anticipatory practices, prefiguration, posthumanities, new materialism, more-than-human politics, speculative fabulation, Chthulucene, ontogenesis

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1. Introduction

The contemporary philosophical landscape is marked by a persistent dilemma: on one side, radical critique risks collapsing into a paralysing stasis that diagnoses the ills of anthropocentrism, extractivism, and planetary collapse without offering practicable paths forward; on the other, mainstream normative frameworks—utilitarianism, contractalist egalitarianism, and liberal capability approaches—dilute transformative demands into incremental reforms that remain internal to the very onto-epistemology they claim to challenge (Malm 2018; Moore 2015; Chakrabarty 2021). This binary—radical immobility versus compromised pragmatism—has produced what Claire Colebrook has called a “stasis of the imaginable,” a condition in which the future appears either as inevitable catastrophe or as endlessly deferred amelioration (Colebrook 2014, 22).

This paper advances a third trajectory, here termed anticipatory ontology, a practice that refuses both the immobilising purity of negative critique and the assimilative logic of ethical compromise. Drawing on recent speculative turns in feminist new materialism, queer ecology, and posthumanities (Haraway 2016; Barad 2007;

Braidotti 2019; Tsing 2015), anticipatory ontology proposes to prefigure—rather than merely prophesy or gradually reform—those modes of existence that are already becoming-necessary within the cracks of the present, even when dominant socio-technical assemblages render them apparently unfeasible at scale.

Unlike utopian blueprints that project ideal societies into a distant tomorrow, or accelerationist gambles that seek to push the current system past its breaking point (Srnicek and Williams 2015), anticipatory practices operate through speculative fabulation (Haraway 2016, 134) and arts of living on a damaged planet (Tsing et al. 2017). They enact partial, situated, and materially embedded “otherwise worlds” (Povinelli 2016, 19) here and now: micro-communities, architectural interventions, dietary reconfigurations, and aesthetic experiments that function as ontogenetic devices—to borrow a term from Simondon via Combes (2013)—capable of seeding alternative forms of life before the conditions for their generalised viability have arrived.

The concept resonates with what Jane Bennett (2010) describes as the political task of “cultivating a stance of presumptive generosity toward the future” (xii), yet it radicalises this stance by refusing to wait for favourable conditions. It also extends Karen Barad’s notion of “intra-active becoming” (2007, 151) into an explicitly political register: every anticipatory act is an entanglement that reconfigures the material-semiotic possibilities, making certain futures more thinkable, liveable, and eventually unavoidable.

Although the neologism “anticipazionismo” has occasionally appeared in recent European posthuman debate, the cluster of practices it designates has gained far wider traction in transnational feminist materialist and more-than-human scholarship that includes Donna Haraway’s “staying with the trouble,” Anna Tsing’s “arts of noticing,” Isabelle Stengers’ “slow science,” and Rosi Braidotti’s “affirmative ethics.” Rather than treating these as parallel traditions, this paper argues that they collectively articulate a coherent anticipatory paradigm whose political force lies precisely in its refusal of both apocalyptic resignation and reformist capture.

The argument proceeds in three movements. First, I map the contemporary impasse between radical critique and normative compromise, showing how both remain trapped within anthropocentric temporalities. Second, I develop the core features of anticipatory ontology through a dialogue with new materialist and posthumanist scholarship, emphasising the role of speculative art and minoritarian praxis as world-making technologies. Third, I address objections concerning feasibility, scale, and the risk of political quietism, demonstrating that anticipatory practices are neither symbolic consolation nor proto-revolutionary vanguardism, but rather ontopolitical experiments whose efficacy is measured in the proliferation of new capacities to affect and be affected (Deleuze 1988; Manning 2016). By the conclusion, anticipatory ontology will appear not as one more ethical programme competing for allegiance, but as an immanent mode of resistance that transforms the very temporal structure of the possible.

Section 1: The Contemporary Impasse: Radical Stasis and Ethical Compromise

The current conjuncture is defined by a double bind that has structured much critical theory since the early 2000s: either one embraces a radical diagnosis of planetary crisis that refuses all compromise with existing institutions, or one accepts the necessity of pragmatic, incrementalist ethics that inevitably dilute transformative aspirations. Neither path, however, succeeds in opening a genuinely new political temporality.

On the side of radical critique, the dominant mood has oscillated between melancholic resignation and apocalyptic acceleration. Thinkers associated with speculative realism, dark ecology, and certain strands of anarcho-primitivism have offered devastating accounts of anthropogenic extinction (Morton 2013; Thacker 2011) or capitalogenic climate collapse (Malm 2018; Moore 2015). Yet the very force of these diagnoses often produces a kind of theoretical paralysis: once the Anthropocene is revealed as an onto-story of no return (Yusoff 2018), and once every reformist gesture is unmasked as a form of “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011), the only remaining stance appears to be one of lucid despair or, at best, a preparatory waiting for systemic breakdown. Even the more activist variants of accelerationism (Srnicek and Williams 2015) ultimately rely on a temporal schema in which the future must first be catastrophically cleared before anything new can emerge. As Claire Colebrook has repeatedly argued, this posture

risks converting extinction into “a new form of transcendental horizon” that blocks the imagination of affirmative alternatives (Colebrook 2014, 28–29).

On the other side stand the major normative frameworks that continue to dominate Anglo-American moral and political philosophy: utilitarianism in its various hedonic, preference-based, or objective-list forms; Rawlsian contractualism and its egalitarian offshoots; and Sen-Nussbaum capability approaches. These traditions share a commitment to impartial justification and gradual institutional reform. Their strength (systematicity, applicability to policy) is also their limit: they remain internal to an anthropocentric, growth-oriented ontology that treats non-human entities as resources or as bearers of instrumental value at best (Bennett 2010, 10–13). When confronted with the scale of the present crisis, they can offer nothing more ambitious than optimized trade-offs within a damaged system. As Dipesh Chakrabarty notes, the universalist subject of liberal ethics was “born in the age of coal and capital” and is structurally incapable of thinking planetary mutation at the level of species history (Chakrabarty 2021, 71).

More recent attempts to “green” these frameworks (e.g., effective altruism applied to animal welfare or climate mitigation) do not escape the problem. Peter Singer’s utilitarian calculus, for instance, continues to rely on commensurable units of suffering and treats systemic transformation as a long-term aggregate outcome rather than an immediate ontological imperative (Singer 2015). The result is what Elizabeth Povinelli has called a “late liberal governance of the Prior” (Povinelli 2016, 24): a form of ethical management that endlessly defers the radical redistribution of life chances across species and geontological strata.

Both poles of the impasse, then, remain caught in what Grosz (following Nietzsche and Darwin) describes as a reactive relationship to time: either the future is already written (catastrophe or techno-salvation), or it must be laboriously constructed through the accumulation of morally justified increments (Grosz 2004, 117). In neither case does the present become a site of genuine ontogenetic experimentation. Radical critique preserves its purity by refusing to act “too soon”; normative ethics preserves its realism by refusing to act “too differently.” The political imagination is thereby confined to two temporal modes: apocalyptic futurity and meliorist gradualism.

This binary has been diagnosed (and to some extent performed) by numerous contemporary thinkers. Bruno Latour speaks of a “bifurcation of temporality” in which modernity simultaneously accelerates toward collapse and multiplies procedures for slowing down without ever changing direction (Latour 2018, 56). Kathryn Yusoff describes the resulting affective structure as one of “billion black Anthropocenes” in which the geological present is both overdetermined and politically foreclosed (Yusoff 2018). Even accelerationist manifestos, for all their rhetoric of seizing the means of futurity, end up reproducing the same dilemma: either one waits for capital to implode, or one captures state power to redirect it, both strategies premised on the continued dominance of the very megamachines one claims to overcome (Srnicek and Williams 2015).

What is missing from this landscape is a practice that refuses the alternation between premature action and deferred revolution, between symbolic ineffectuality and systemic capture. The anticipatory ontology developed in the following sections emerges precisely from this absence. Rather than asking “Under what future conditions will transformation become possible?” it begins by asking “How can we partially inhabit, today, forms of life that the dominant apparatus still codes as impossible?” The shift is from epistemology to ontology, from justification to prefiguration, from representation to world-making. It is a shift, in short, from waiting for the future to beginning to live as if certain futures were already incompletely but really here.

Section 2: Core Features of Anticipatory Ontology: Prefiguration, Speculative Fabulation, and Minor Ontogenesis

Anticipatory ontology is not a doctrine but a set of practices that operate through three intertwined operations:

- (1) prefigurative enactment,
- (2) speculative fabulation, and
- (3) minor ontogenesis.

Each refuses the temporal deferral characteristic of both radical critique and normative compromise, insisting instead that the future can be partially lived in the present through material-semiotic reconfigurations that are at once aesthetic, ethical, and political.

2.1 Prefigurative Enactment: Living the Necessary before It Is Possible at Scale

Prefiguration has a long history in anarchist and feminist thought, yet recent posthuman scholarship has radicalised the concept by detaching it from any teleological horizon of victory. Anna Tsing's work on "living in the ruins" is exemplary: the matsutake mushroom economies she studies do not aim to restore a pre-capitalist past or to scale up into a new global order; they are arts of surviving-and-thriving otherwise within damaged landscapes (Tsing 2015, 2017). Similarly, Donna Haraway's "making kin" is not a programme for eventual multispecies justice but an immediate practice of "becoming-with" non-humans that alters the very texture of inheritance (Haraway 2016, 102–107).

These practices share a refusal of the utilitarian question "Will this action maximise future good?" in favour of the ontological question "Does this way of living already belong to the worlds we claim are becoming-necessary?" The shift is decisive: efficacy is no longer measured by aggregate outcomes but by the capacity to render certain assemblages more thinkable, sensible, and habitable. As Erin Manning writes, prefiguration is "not a miniature of the future but a minor gesture that shifts the major" (Manning 2016, 27).

2.2 Speculative Fabulation and the Arts of Anticipatory Worlding

Anticipatory ontology depends heavily on what Haraway calls "speculative fabulation" (SF): string figures, science fiction, speculative feminism, science fact, and fabulatory fact all rolled into one (Haraway 2016, 134). Far from escapism, SF is a material-semiotic technology for composing liveable worlds. Karen Barad's concept of "diffraction" provides the ontological grounding: every act of reading, making, or narrating diffracts spacetime differently, producing new patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Barad 2007, 2017).

Artistic and architectural practices have become privileged sites for such diffraction. Stacy Alaimo's "exposed" bodies entangled with toxic seas, Elaine Gan's fungal diagrams that re-temporalise agriculture, or the architectural experiments of the Waiting Posthuman collective (which build partial habitats for non-anthropocentric forms of life) all function as anticipatory devices. They do not represent alternative futures; they partially actualise them, creating pockets where different laws of existence momentarily apply (Alaimo 2016; Gan 2017). In Isabelle Stengers' terms, these are "intrusions" that force the present to hesitate and open itself to what it has been excluding (Stengers 2010–2011).

A paradigmatic example is the "Feral Atlas" project (Tsing et al. 2021), an interactive digital platform where artists, scientists, and indigenous knowledge-holders collaborate to map "feral" effects of human infrastructure—unintended proliferations like invasive species or chemical spills. Rather than merely documenting damage, the atlas fabulates speculative narratives that anticipate multispecies responses, turning observation into a tool for inhabiting emergent ecologies. Such initiatives demonstrate how speculative fabulation can bridge aesthetic experimentation with on-the-ground worlding, making the "not-yet" tangible without awaiting systemic permission.

2.3 Minor Ontogenesis: Seeding Capacities Rather than Scaling Solutions

The third operation draws on Gilbert Simondon's theory of individuation, re-read through feminist and postcolonial lenses (Combes 2013; Grosz 2004). Anticipatory practices do not seek to leap directly to a new collective subject (the revolutionary proletariat, the multitude, the posthuman species). Instead, they cultivate what Elizabeth Povinelli calls "geontopower's outside-from-within" (Povinelli 2016): minor processes that alter the field of relation without needing to become majoritarian.

This is the profound meaning of minoritarian veganisms, urban foraging collectives, off-grid micro-communities, or queer ecological kinship networks. They are not prototypes waiting to be universalised; they are ontogenetic events that increase the degrees of freedom in the present. As Rosi Braidotti argues, affirmative ethics works through

“endurance within the impossible” rather than transcendence of it (Braidotti 2019, 165). The point is not to win but to keep alternative worlds in existence long enough for them to become thinkable as real options when the dominant arrangement begins to falter.

Taken together, these three operations constitute a coherent anticipatory paradigm: prefiguration supplies the practical immediacy, speculative fabulation the imaginative excess, and minor ontogenesis the differential repetition that prevents capture by the logic of scale. The result is a politics of the “not-yet” that is simultaneously a politics of the “already-here” – a temporal torsion that breaks the binary of radical waiting and reformist gradualism.

Section 3: Objections and Responses – Feasibility, Scale, and the Charge of Quietism

Anticipatory ontology invites three predictable and serious objections. Each must be met head-on if the proposal is to avoid collapsing back into either utopian escapism or performative radicalism.

Objection 1: Symbolic Inefficacy

Critics will insist that prefiguring posthuman or multispecies worlds in small-scale artistic, dietary, or communal experiments changes nothing at the level of global assemblages. A vegan micro-community in Berlin or an architectural pavilion for interspecies cohabitation does not slow Amazonian deforestation, reduce methane emissions, or dismantle industrial animal agriculture. At best, these are gestures of “beautiful soul” conscience; at worst, they provide greenwashing alibis for the continuation of extractivism elsewhere (Malm and the Hornborg critique of new materialism, 2021).

Response

The objection assumes a single metric of efficacy: measurable causal impact on macro-structures. Anticipatory practices, however, operate on a different ontology of the virtual rather than the actual. Drawing on Deleuze via Manning and Massumi, they function by “widening the range of the possible” and altering what counts as a real constraint (Massumi 2015; Manning 2016). A minoritarian practice that succeeds in making a previously unthinkable mode of existence sensorium, relation, or metabolism felt as liveable has already shifted the conditions of possibility for future large-scale change. History is full of examples: the Paris Commune lasted seventy-two days, yet it irreversibly altered the imagination of working-class power; nineteenth-century vegetarian communes were statistically irrelevant, yet they seeded the affective conditions without which twentieth-century animal movements would have been inconceivable. The point is not that small experiments “scale up” directly, but that they keep alternative ontologies in existence until a crisis in the dominant arrangement renders them suddenly contagious (Tsing 2015, 282–285).

Objection 2: Elitism and Unequal Access

Only relatively privileged subjects (artists, academics, urban creatives with cultural and economic capital) can afford to inhabit experimental micro-worlds. Anticipatory practices therefore risk reproducing the very exclusions they claim to overcome, leaving the majority of humans and almost all non-humans to bear the brute force of the present (Yusoff 2018; Todd 2020).

Response

The charge is not false, but it mistakes the vocation of anticipatory practices. They are not proposed as a new universal ethics but as fugitive research programs whose task is to generate new capacities that can later be appropriated, translated, and mutated by those who did not originate them. As Haraway repeatedly emphasises, “it matters what stories make worlds, and what worlds make stories” (Haraway 2016, 12). Privileged locations are not the endpoint but the laboratory; the wager is that techniques of multispecies care, queer kinship, or feral architecture will migrate and hybridise when the conditions are ripe. Historical analogues include the way feminist consciousness-raising circles of the 1970s, initially bourgeois and white, were later taken up and radically transformed by Black, Chicana, and transnational feminisms. The politics of anticipation is therefore not one of exemplary morality but of contagious ontogenesis.

Objection 3: Political Quietism

By refusing both revolutionary seizure of power and reformist policy negotiation, anticipatory ontology appears to abandon the terrain of macropolitics altogether, offering “resistance as lifestyle” instead of systemic confrontation (Žižek 2008; Dean 2012).

Response

The dichotomy between micro-experimentation and macropolitical struggle is itself a modernist inheritance that anticipatory practices reject. Bruno Latour’s later work is decisive here: in an era when the very composition of the common world is at stake, politics must begin with the slow, tentative composition of new attachments rather than the capture of an already-constituted “whole” (Latour 2018). Moreover, many anticipatory experiments are far from politically innocent: seed-saving networks in India, Indigenous-led land-back occupations, or urban squatter gardens frequently find themselves in direct confrontation with state and corporate power. The point is that such confrontations are no longer justified by a transcendent revolutionary horizon; they emerge immanently from the defence of already-existing alternative worlds. Anticipation is therefore not the opposite of militancy, but militancy detached from the eschatological temporality of the Event.

4. Conclusion: Toward an Affirmative Politics of the Not-Yet-Here

Anticipatory ontology does not promise salvation, nor does it console with the certainty of eventual victory. It offers something more modest and, paradoxically, more radical: a practice that refuses to let the future be colonised either by apocalyptic foreclosure or by reformist management. By prefiguring fragments of necessary worlds within the cracks of the present, it transforms the very meaning of political agency: no longer the sovereign subject who masters history, but the entangled, exposed, response-able creature who keeps alternative stories alive long enough for them to become infrastructure for those who come after.

As Isabelle Stengers warns, the coming barbarism will not be a return to the past but the triumph of a world that has lost the capacity to hesitate (Stengers 2015, 119). Anticipatory practices are precisely techniques for reintroducing hesitation into a system that wants to run without alternatives.

In the end, the force of anticipatory practices lies in their quiet insistence that is not silence. They are rehearsals for a time that has not yet arrived and may never arrive in the form we imagine. But in the meantime, they make the present less unanimous, less airtight, less capable of convincing us that there is no outside. And that, in an age of closure, is already a form of power. To anticipate is not to hope. It is to begin living as if the worlds we need were already, somewhere, quietly breathing.

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