

## Book Review

# Beyond the Limits of Modernity Toward Enlivening Futures of Blessed Unrest and Complex Joy

*A Review of Routledge Handbook for Creative Futures, Edited by Gabrielle Donnelly and Alfonso Montuori Earthscan from Routledge Abingdon, Oxon, UK, 363 pages.*

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### **Abstract**

When the world is on fire - from wildfires induced by climate change to bombs fueled by fires of fear of “others”—how dare we dream of flourishing futures for all? As we reflect on the lessons of COVID19 that are indeed still unfolding, how can we spring forward into co-creative, life-affirming futures rather than bouncing back into business as usual? Confronted by apocalyptic atrocities, how can we move beyond the paralysis of [reasonable] despair into active, [unreasonable] hope? Co-creative, enlivening futures are possible, and the Routledge Handbook for Creative Futures (hereafter “Handbook”) equips us with a navigation guide to meet the polycrises of our times with grace, courage, and compassion. Tenderly curated and edited by Gabrielle Donnelly and Alfonso

Montuori, the *Handbook* assembles over 50 diverse voices across 37 chapters to provide principles, practices and processes that enable co-creative future-shaping. The *Handbook* asserts that humanity can reimagine “creative futures” beyond the limits of modernity toward futures of collective flourishing through pathways of blessed unrest and complex joy. The *Handbook*’s voices include “a mix of Indigenous, Black, Asian, and White/Caucasian contributors, including women, men, and trans people from around the world” (2022, p. 5). These contributors ground a diverse array of visions, theories, and frameworks in personal stories, case studies, and pragmatic practices that help readers like me responsibly engage the tensions of these times as we dream and enact alternative, life-affirming visions together, and move from an abstract Age of Enlightenment into an embodied Era of Enlivenment.

## Keywords

co-creation; awareness-based systems change; embodied wisdom; regenerative leadership; (r)evolutionary power; radical imagination

## Introduction

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Tenderly curated and edited by Gabrielle Donnelly and Alfonso Montuori, the *Handbook* assembles over 50 diverse voices across 37 chapters to provide principles, practices, and processes that enable co-creative future-shaping. The *Handbook* asserts that humanity can reimagine “creative futures” beyond the limits of modernity toward futures of collective flourishing through pathways of blessed unrest and complex joy. The *Handbook*’s voices include “a mix of Indigenous, Black, Asian, and White/Caucasian contributors, including women, men, and trans people from around the world” (2023, p. 5). These contributors ground a diverse array of visions and theories in personal stories, case studies, and pragmatic practices that help readers like me responsibly engage the tensions of these times as we dream and enact alternative, life-affirming visions

together, and move from an abstract Age of Enlightenment into an embodied Era of Enlivenment.<sup>1</sup>

## Personal Introduction

My name is Elizabeth Walsh and I am a scholar-practitioner of regenerative development with an academic and professional background in Community and Regional Planning. I am a commitment to<sup>2</sup> supporting just and enlivening transitions to futures of mutual flourishing where we all get to be alive, well, and free. I inhabit a white, cisgendered, female body on land traditionally governed by the Mohawk (Kanien'kehá:ka) people of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy in accordance with the Great Law of Peace and the Law of Regeneration in what is now the state of New York, in the United States of America.<sup>3</sup>

As a field, we planners wrestle with our relationship to progress and creative, utopian visions (Campbell, 2023; Sandercock, 2023). On one hand, we understand that our past pursuits of “progress”—hindered as they have been by paternalistic hubris and adherence with modernist, technocratic rationality—have left a host of “wicked problems” in their wake. On the other hand, we know we cannot afford to give up on possibilities of progress. How can we dream and enact alternative hopeful visions together, responsibly?

The 52 contributors to the *Handbook* ask similar questions. I offer this review to commend this valuable book, and hopefully further dialogue around the synergetic possibilities and creative tensions within its 37 chapters.

## Overview

The motivation and timing underlying the *Handbook* contributes to its practical and enduring value. The *Handbook* was generated over the course of a global pandemic (2019-2023) as a direct response not only to the possibilities opened up by this experience, but also as a response to the despair encountered by its editors through their work as educators and scholar-practitioners in creative, future-oriented fields. In their introduction to the *Handbook*, the editors express

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<sup>1</sup> Although neither the editors nor the other contributors directly used the words “Era of Enlivenment,” this moniker emerged for me spontaneously as I read this book and reflected on the shifts in thinking, being, seeing, relating, and acting that its diverse contributors encourage to create life-affirming futures beyond the limits of modernity.

<sup>2</sup> I thank generative somatics practitioner Haines (2019) for introducing this “I am a commitment to” approach for personal declarations as a pathway for embodying desired futures. I incorporate this declaration into my routine centering practice.

<sup>3</sup> Importantly, the Constitution of the United States of America was inspired by the checks and balances system of participatory democracy established by the Haudenosaunee’s Great Law of Peace (Akwesasne Notes, 2005).

that they conceived this book in 2019 through their “heartbreaking personal experiences speaking with many young people who see little hope for the future” (2023, p. 1). The more their students learned about limits to growth in the Anthropocene, the more the prospect of dreaming of a better future seemed to be an irrational and irresponsible luxury, weighed against more pressing demands of basic survival. The editors witnessed how their personal experiences mirrored larger societal patterns related to increasing suicide rates among young people, as well as intensifying polarization, proliferation of dystopian tales, and the “absence of political vision and alternative futures” (2023, p. 2).

In response to this personally and collectively experienced crisis of hope and imagination, they set out to co-create a “handbook,” aka, a practical guide for co-creating life-affirming futures for all. They extended open invitations to 85 potential contributors in 2019 to help readers go “beyond the current impasse to bring together new ways—or uplift and strengthen older ways of thinking and action” (2023, p.3) and to “find a sweet spot somewhere between despair and naive optimism, neither shying away from the massive socio-environmental planetary challenges currently facing humanity, nor offering feel-good solutions” (2023, p. i).

Quite remarkably, over the three-year, pandemic-spanning birthing process of the book (2019-2022), the editors and their 50 other fellow contributors co-created a *Handbook* that achieves all of these aims. Although the 37 chapters defy neat categorization and all contribute to bridging theory, ideas, frameworks, and practices for creative futures, the book is structured in five parts that help make it more digestible to readers.

Part I serves to broadly frame concepts of creative futures, distinguishing how this compendium holds “creative” and “futures” in contradistinction to the way modernity and settler colonialism have held them captive. Beyond instrumental and individual creativity and a linear, progressive view of time, this book centers every-day creativity practiced through ways of being, seeing, relating, and enacting compelling, co-creative futures through dialogue and collective action in living systems.

Part II builds on these theoretical distinctions with fresh framings and frameworks that help readers engage, lightly hold,<sup>4</sup> and harness the co-creative energies of generative tensions in “postnormal times” characterized by contradictions, complexity, and chaos. Consistent with the reality that generative tensions tend to be greatest at the margins of modernity, several contributors lift up contributions of queer studies, disability studies, decolonial studies, and intersectional liberatory social movements to meet this challenge.

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<sup>4</sup> By “lightly hold,” I refer to a common theme regarding the importance of both holding our stories, ideas, and commitments lightly with a self-transforming mind and creating “a light container to hold these difficult conversations without relationships falling apart” (Andreotti, 2023, p. 144).

Part III delves deeper into explorations of time and voices at the margins of modernity, as its contributors reveal how reparative and regenerative pathways for healing intergenerational traumas in living systems are essential for creative, life-affirming futures. Moreover, they share stories and practices to support social and ecological healing, “decolonial forms of sobriety, maturity, discernment, and accountability” (Andreotti, 2023, p. 143), and rematriation—from everyday actions and interactions to structural change.

Part IV’s contributors—19 voices in 11 chapters—share tangible frameworks, principles, approaches, and applications for creative futures, such as equitable and ecological civilization frameworks, universal basic income, scenario planning, the role of art in transformation, the uses of science fiction in future-shaping, the wisdom and power of youth as creative agents of change, and the work of intersectional movements for regenerative economics and climate justice.

Part V’s contributors delve into personal, relational, and collaborative practices for creative futures that we can apply at home—whether the home of our bodies, our organizations, or the places we live, love, work, and play. From somatic practices to awareness-based research processes, contributors offer resources that can help us metabolize guilt, grief, rage, and other forces of aliveness in ways that move us beyond encultured rigidities and fragilities toward co-creative futures of complex joy and mutual flourishing.

## Summary of Strengths and Limitations

*Routledge Handbook for Creative Futures* makes a remarkable and timely contribution to academic literatures, especially for future-oriented and practical fields committed to addressing wicked problems in the 21st century (e.g., community and regional planning and development, social work, public health, social innovation, environmental and sustainability studies, policy studies, organizational management, future studies, regenerative design, etc.).

Not only do the 37 chapters reflect an unusually diverse array of voices working in service of flourishing futures, contributors write in a relational, embodied voice that not only reflects their positionality within existing systems, but also relays practical wisdom developed through their efforts to co-create more life-affirming futures. This stylistic choice is more engaging to read, and disrupts an epistemological bias of many academic publications that privileges disembodied writing styles intended to contribute abstract, “objective,” generalizable knowledge, rather than contributing to contextualized, practical wisdom in diverse communities of reflective practice (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

Most significantly, this compendium is actively hopeful in troubling times. The *Handbook* goes beyond critique to offer hopeful pathways through practices that integrate scientific ways of knowing with the broader human and ecological intelligences required for collective flourishing. Many contributors show how the Enlightenment Era has been complicit in settler colonialism by privileging

production of disembodied, disembedded, and displaced approaches to knowledge creation, directly contributing to apocalyptic atrocities experienced today. Most offer pathways for transitioning from an Era of Enlightenment to one of Enlivenment by empowering creative catalysts of flourishing futures with an expanded navigation kit. Equipped with an abundant array of paradigms, practices, and processes, we are enabled to embody, embed, and emplace our diverse visions of mutual flourishing within the living systems we call home. This navigation kit includes everyday actions of individual, interpersonal, and organizational creativity, as well as transdisciplinary, awareness-based action research methodologies that support transformative systems change.

The *Handbook* further stands out from many academic volumes in that its diverse contributors uplift the wisdom and power of many intersectional movements for liberation and regeneration, both through direct experience and scholarly appreciation. That said, none of the *Handbook's* contributors wrote explicitly from the disability justice movement, despite the essential role this movement has played in supporting visions of mutual flourishing and transformative justice beyond the constraints of modernity's intersectional systems of oppression (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). In their introduction, the editors note that over the course of the pandemic more than half the people they originally invited were unable to contribute. I wonder which voices were lost in this process from a representation lens, especially given the health inequities amplified by the pandemic. Interestingly, at least two chapters emphasized the importance of contributions by the disability justice movement and the field of disability studies, yet "disability" cannot be found in the Index.

The primary limitations of the book have to do with making the exceptionally rich, relevant, and diverse content easily accessible to those who wish to use and peruse the book. The first concern relates to a paradox of accessibility involved with academic publishing; the second is the insufficiency of the Index.

The *Routledge Handbook for Creative Futures* embraces something of paradox related to accessibility. One of the things that excites me most about the *Handbook* is that it is an excellent academic textbook that integrates diverse voice and ways of knowing, relating, being, and becoming that tend to be marginalized by dominant academic institutions. Routledge's commitment to publishing this collective work affirms the value and credibility of these voices—thereby making these perspectives accessible to students, researchers, and professors in academic institutions. The flipside of this coin is that wider accessibility to this valuable compendium may be limited by its price-point. The book is currently available for order on Routledge's online store for \$250. There does appear to be a more affordable option for Kindle readers (between \$27 and \$43). The good news is that the publicly available table of contents identifies the *Handbook's* 52 brilliant contributors, most of whom have published works in a variety of accessible formats, including websites, podcasts, and communities of practice.

My second concern is that the *Handbook's* Index is insufficient to allow readers to easily peruse cross-cutting themes and practices in this rich volume. For example, as authors break free of the conventions of techno-rationality and paradigms of white supremacy culture and economic extraction, many explore important human feelings, experiences, practices, and sources of energy and wisdom. In the unfolding of the chapters, thematic words such as grief, anger, urgency, time, tension, paradox, wicked problem, privilege, failure, disability, humility, compassion, gratitude, play, humor, wonder, trust, celebration, ceremony/ritual, liberation, regeneration, death, reciprocity, fear, love, scarcity, and abundance surfaced and resurfaced, yet *none* of these words made it into the Index.<sup>5</sup> As such, it is difficult to find or compare the ways contributors explored these human phenomena typically obscured and suppressed by techno-rationality.

The Index also had some inaccuracies that were likely due to process breakdowns. For example, page 354 lists “Appreciative Inquiry (AI): 21, 23, 55, 213, 284.” At first glance, it was helpful to see that Appreciative Inquiry is being referenced as a collaborative practice in multiple chapters. However, when I visited these pages, I discovered that only two referenced Appreciative Inquiry (p.55 and p. 284), while the other three pages referenced Artificial Intelligence. Given the complex, interesting challenges that Artificial Intelligence poses to co-creation of life-affirming, regenerative futures, this form of AI deserves an entry of its own. As Ziauddin Sardar discussed in Chapter 2, AI is likely to further trap and colonize our imaginations, even while appearing to achieve breakthrough levels of innovation and creativity. However, there were no entries in the Index for Artificial Intelligence.

Most limitations associated with the Index will, thankfully, be eliminated for those with access to electronic versions of the book. Even so, because so many of the chapters throughout all five parts provide context, practice stories, and other guidance for helpful practices, I do hope the editors consider including an inventory of individual and collective practices in future versions of the *Handbook*—or better yet as a downloadable supplement—to support readers in drawing upon the breadth and depth of contributors’ practical wisdom as they bridge theory to practice.

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<sup>5</sup> In other instances, important themes or terms appeared in the Index but the listing included only a fraction of that theme’s references among contributors. Trauma is one example: this theme was common, but the Index only mentioned it in the context of “sustainable food.” Similarly, fractal corresponds with only one listing in the Index yet the concept was mentioned by several contributors. Additionally, adrienne maree brown’s work was mentioned in multiple chapters, but her name only has one listing in the Index (for the chapter she contributed.) These examples reflect general patterns limiting the utility of the Index.

## Moving Forward in Blessed Unrest

In summary, the primary limitations of the book are more a reflection of its strengths than weaknesses. Indeed, one of the most remarkable aspects of this compendium is the way that these 52 voices came together as they grappled with the core challenges of co-creating enlivening and regenerative futures of collective flourishing in a post-modern world.

While reading the entire volume twice through as well as delving deeper into many of its rich chapters, I felt fortunate to be in dialogue with these bright human beings, each engaged in the hopeful, necessary work of creative futures. I also experienced a sense of blessed unrest, as Paul Hawken (2008) described it in his eponymously named book about “how the largest social movement in history is restoring grace, justice, and beauty to the world.” The resonance of similarly inspired voices sharing diverse, complementary ideas and practices often contributed to a sense of inspiring co-emergence and synergy. And, just as importantly, the generative tensions between diverse contributors greatly contributed to my experience and practical insights.

Through my engagement with the synergies and tensions among the 52 contributors, I find that the *Routledge Handbook of Creative Futures*—as a whole more than the sum of its parts—invites us to grow:

- beyond the limits of modernity;
- toward reparative and regenerative economies of fractal flourishing;
- through enlivening transitions of blessed unrest and complex joy;
- emboldened by the renewable energies of (r)evolutionary love for people and place.<sup>6</sup>

These invitations to pathways of blessed unrest offer neither comfort nor enlightenment. Yet, they are guaranteed to afford us the delights of good trouble and being fully alive in our living world.<sup>7</sup> As Grace Lee Boggs expressed, “A revolution that is based on the people exercising their creativity in the midst of devastation is one of the great historical contributions of humankind”<sup>8</sup>—and this *Handbook* helps us embark on such a (r)evolutionary Era of Enlivenment.

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<sup>6</sup> If you are curious about these themes or how I arrived at them in the course of my journey with the *Handbook*, I offer my personal reflections as a supplementary, self-published essay: [bit.ly/CreativeFuturesReview](http://bit.ly/CreativeFuturesReview)

<sup>7</sup> I thank beloved community builders John Lewis (1940-2020) and Howard Thurman (1899-1981) for their leadership in embodying these possibilities.

<sup>8</sup> As quoted in the Detroit Free Press as Grace Lee Boggs embarked on her transition to hospice (Spratling, 2014).

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