Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination

Foundations

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We all—adults and children—have an obligation to daydream. We have an obligation to imagine. It is easy to pretend that nobody can change anything, that we are in a world in which society is huge and the individual is nothing: an atom in a wall, a grain of rice in a rice field. But the truth is individuals can change the world over and over. Individuals make the future, and they do it by imagining that things can be different. ... Political movements, personal movements, all begin with people imagining another way of existing.

—Neil Gaiman (2013, 8, 14–15)

In 2016–17, Broadway performer and composer Lin-Manuel Miranda emerged as a key spokesman for a more inclusive civic imagination. The success of his historical stage musical *Hamilton* increased his personal celebrity, and he used this visibility to call attention to various social justice struggles: he supported LGBTQ rights during his Tony Awards acceptance speech; he protested the Trump administration’s inadequate response to the devastating effects of Hurricane Maria on Puerto Rico, where Miranda’s family is from; he performed at the March for Our Lives; and he defended immigrants and their contributions to American society against President Donald Trump, who insists that “a nation without borders is not a nation.” *Hamilton*’s line “Immigrants, we get the job done” was often a showstopping moment, as audiences applauded and shouted comments to express their frustration with Trump’s policies rolling back the protections offered to Dreamers (undocumented
youths who arrived in the United States as children), blocking Muslims from entering the country, and proposing a wall to be built along the US-Mexico border.

For the 2016 *Hamilton Mixtape* album, Miranda collaborated with recording stars ranging from the Roots and John Legend to Kelly Clarkson to reimagine his songs from the musical. One cut, a remix of “Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)” was produced as a music video, with the proceeds supporting the Hispanic Federation and Miranda’s own Immigrants: We Get the Job Done Coalition. Here, Miranda joins forces with musicians K’naan (Somali-born), Residente (Puerto Rican), Riz MC (British-Pakistani), and Snow Tha Product (Mexican American). With roots in New York City’s black and Latino communities, global hip hop speaks for oppressed and marginalized groups, and thus the song can forge solidarities between immigrants with different national origins, each struggling with a hostile political climate. Each verse of the song, which is partially in English and partially in Spanish, describes immigrants’ struggles to overcome prejudice, to work underpaid and undervalued jobs, to escape violent situations, and to forge new identities. The song ends with the following refrain:

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Look how far I come
Look how far I come
Look how far I come
Immigrants, we get the job done
Not yet
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In the music video’s opening, a newscaster defines a core paradox: “It’s really astonishing that in a country founded by immigrants, ‘immigrant’ has somehow become a bad word.” The camera moves through a train full of the dispossessed, evoking the postapocalyptic 2013 film *Snowpiercer*. *Snowpiercer*—a Czech–South Korean coproduction based on a French graphic novel, performed in English with a multinational cast and directed by South Korean filmmaker Bong Joon-ho—itself used a coalition of diverse artists to call attention to class inequality and environmental degradation. *Snowpiercer*’s postapocalyptic story is set on board an endlessly traveling train that is a stratified microcosm of earth’s class structure. If each train car in the original film was occupied by a
particular class, each car in the music video represents refugees from different countries. Immigrants are shown performing low-wage jobs, such as stitching American flags, picking fruit, packing meat, washing dishes, sweeping floors, and constructing buildings. A final zoom out reveals an entire planet crisscrossed by railroads, each car containing huddled masses seeking a better life someplace else.

These trains constitute something like Michel Foucault’s (1967) “crisis heterotopia”—a space where different people are thrown together outside of their everyday space and time and, in Foucault’s account, freed from fixed roles. Such profound disruptions allow us to imagine alternative social arrangements—not utopias (which are about order and hierarchy, at least according to Foucault) but heterotopias as defined by diversity and inclusion. Foucault’s prime example is the boat, “a place that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself,” a resonant metaphor for many immigrants. He concludes, “In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates” (1967, 27).

What you do when “dreams dry up” is a question being raised by many of those confronting seemingly endless crises and catastrophes, disruptions, and displacements. There can be no politics without hope, and it is through imagination that our hopes are rekindled. Somewhere between hope and disappointment is ambivalence and precarity—words that describe what many feel at the current moment. This book assembles case studies of popular culture shaping the civic imagination of people involved in political struggles and social movements around the world. Stories have always been vehicles for people to pass along shared wisdom, question current actions, and direct attention to shared desires. Neil Gaiman reminds us that we have a civic obligation to daydream not only on behalf of ourselves but for others with whom we share this planet.

Miranda fits within a long tradition of progressive or radical artists doing what used to be called “culture work” (Denning 2011; Iton 2008; Mickenberg 2005)—using vernacular forms to express alternative perspectives to a broader public. In today’s struggles for immigrant rights, other change-making organizations are demonstrating how popular culture might be appropriated, remixed, and redeployed at the grassroots level.
When Jolt Texas, a Latinx advocacy group, organized their “Quinceañera at the Capitol” protest on July 19, 2017, they tapped the fifteenth-birthday rite of passage to create a “celebration . . . and call to action against SB4 [Senate Bill 4]” (Martinez 2017), a measure that empowered Texas law enforcement to demand immigration status information when investigating minor infractions. Jolt also encouraged supporters to upload their quinceañera photos through social media in solidarity with the protest. The quinceañera theme increased the protest’s visibility, as young women stood in front of the state capitol in their formal and often opulent dresses; it also imbued protesters and bystanders with hopes of a bright, youthful future. These protesters tapped a popular and well-known cultural tradition in ways that resonate with the participatory practices Arely Zimmerman and Liana Thompson (2016) identify in their discussion of Dreamer activists. Mock college graduation ceremonies—like those staged on “Dream for America: National DREAM Act Graduation Day” on June 23, 2009—similarly combined onsite and online protests, shaping public perceptions of the Dreamer movement via images broadly associated with youth, aspiration, and ultimately, success.

By contrast, Trump’s campaign to build a wall along the southern border depends on a divisive “us versus them” rhetoric, pitting immigrants’ dreams against “American” values. When the Trump administration announced plans in 2017 to terminate the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Act (DACA), which sought to protect the Dreamers from deportation, activist Eric Huerta (2017) blogged,

All these years later and now the day has come in which DACA “must be defended” because the program is going to be shut down by the current administration. Can’t say that I didn’t see this day coming, oh wait, yes I did. I watched the ’90s X-Men animated cartoon on Saturday mornings. I saw how the mutant registration program and Sentinels targeted mutants unjustly because they signed up for a program. I have analogies for days when it comes to making sense of what’s going on, it’s the reactions I’ve been seeing from those impacted, those in solidarity, and those who are new to this that has me doing double takes. Some of the rhetoric and narratives being used are by the books. Highlight that individuals with DACA are the best of the best, they contribute economically, are highly
educated, they are Americans without papers. They deserve to keep their temporary work permits because the country would lose X amount of money. Oh and let’s not forget that they’re all innocent kids who were brought here as children and they themselves are still children. We have to think of the children.

Huerta worries that such rhetoric differentiates “deserving” youths from “other” immigrants. He nods to the X-Men universe as informing his own more dystopian, and contested, civic imagination. Similarly, Miranda’s “We Get the Job Done” music video offers alternative visions of immigration—ones that do not rely on the us/them and desirable/unwanted immigrant frames. These examples scarcely encompass the available images. The focus on walls as a defense against zombie invasion in Game of Thrones led activists to create a mash-up between the HBO fantasy series and Trump’s campaign speeches (Jenkins, Billard et al. 2018). And Pixar’s film Coco depicts the dead having to show papers or risk an illegal crossing to reunite with loved ones.

**Defining the Civic Imagination**

Through the diverse cases represented in this collection, we model the different functions that the civic imagination performs. We define civic imagination as the capacity to imagine alternatives to current cultural, social, political, or economic conditions; one cannot change the world without imagining what a better world might look like. Beyond that, the civic imagination requires and is realized through the ability to imagine the process of change, to see oneself as a civic agent capable of making change, to feel solidarity with others whose perspectives and experiences are different than one’s own, to join a larger collective with shared interests, and to bring imaginative dimensions to real-world spaces and places. Research on the civic imagination explores the political consequences of cultural representations and the cultural roots of political participation. This definition consolidates ideas from various accounts of the public imagination, the political imagination, the radical imagination, the pragmatic imagination, creative insurgency, or public fantasy. In some cases, the civic imagination is grounded in beliefs about how the system actually works, but we have a more expansive understanding,
stressing the capacity to imagine alternatives even if those alternatives tap the fantastic. Too often, focusing on contemporary problems makes it impossible to see beyond immediate constraints. This tunnel vision perpetuates the status quo, and innovative voices—especially those from the margins—are shot down before they can be heard.

When the University of Southern California’s Media, Activism, and Participatory Politics (MAPP) research group interviewed more than two hundred young activists for our 2016 book *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism*, many felt that the language of American politics was broken: it was, on the one hand, exclusive in that policy-wonk rhetoric was opaque to first-time voters and, on the other hand, repulsive in that partisan bickering displaced problem solving and consensus building (Jenkins, Shresthova et al. 2016). The young leaders we interviewed wanted to address their generation on its own terms, and activists around the world were appropriating and remixing popular culture to fuel their social movements. This discovery informed our own thinking about the civic imagination. This collection’s three editors lead the Civic Imagination Project, funded by the MacArthur Foundation. Many contributors are members of our University of Southern California–based Civic Paths research group or our expanded research network. Our project conducts workshops across the United States and around the world designed to harness the power of the civic imagination as a tool for bridge building and problem solving. Our conceptual work here is coupled with efforts to test, strengthen, and expand these ideas through practice.

We need a robust civic imagination now more than ever. A 2015 CNN/ORC poll found that only three in ten Americans believe that their views are well represented in Washington, and many feel that the nation is as divided politically as it has been at any point since the Civil War and Reconstruction. The current plight of American politics has global counterparts, as witnessed, for example, by the Brexit vote outcome, the rise of right-wing populism across Europe, political unrest in Brazil, and the destabilizing violence and suffering perpetrated by the so-called Islamic State.

Like Peter Dahlgren (2009), we feel that the term *civic* carries “the implication of engagement in public life—a cornerstone of democracy.” The civic for Dahlgren always has an affective and imaginative
dimension: “The looseness, openendedness of everyday talk, its creativity, its potential for empathy and affective elements, are indispensable resources and preconditions for the vitality of democratic politics” (90). As Dahlgren further specifies, the term civic is also connected to the pursuit of a “public good” as a “precondition” for other forms of political engagement. Eric Gordon and Paul Mihailidis (2016) expand on Dahlgren's notion, observing that “while the concept of ‘common good’ is deeply subjective” (2), the term “invoke[s] the good of the commons, or action taken that benefit a public outside the actor's intimate sphere.” The civic supports community connections toward shared goals. Dahlgren's (2003, 139) civic culture circuit model is composed of six dimensions: shared values, affinity, knowledge and competencies, practices, identities, and discussion. Neta Kligler-Vilenchik's account of the Harry Potter Alliance illustrates how each of Dahlgren's dimensions are built into this oft-cited example of fan activism (Jenkins, Shresthova et al. 2016), exploring how the group mobilizes youths around a shared fan interest (affinity); taps fan skills to mobilize politically (knowledge and competencies); creates a shared identity around being imaginative, socially caring beings; builds in supports for engaged discussion of social issues; and translates this new civic knowledge into a shared set of practices. We are building here on what was perhaps her study's most controversial aspect—the idea that fantasies about wizards and magic might inspire real-world social action, seeing popular culture as a provocation for civic engagement rather than as escapism. Let's be clear that there is always a political dimension to culture, and our definition of the civic contains a heavy cultural component, but we are interested in the ways cultural practices and materials are deployed toward overtly political ends, whether by established institutions or grassroots movements.

Civic engagements with popular culture involve complex negotiations between oppositional world views with fraught relationships with commercial institutions. Consider, for example, how technological tools and platforms inform the civic imagination. We reject both the idea of technological determinism and the myth of total autonomy, seeing the individual as constantly negotiating with the culture around them, which includes the technologies that increasingly shape our contemporary environment. Read in that way, Twitter hashtags and rudimentary
virtual reality headsets, as discussed here, are potential vectors along which personal identity can be tested and political agency reimagined.

Many changemakers maintain a passionate relationship with popular culture, using that cultural vocabulary to broker relations across different political groups. Indigenous peoples are tapping *Avatar* to dramatize their struggles (Brough and Shresthova 2012). *The Hunger Games*’ three-finger salute is being deployed by resistance movements in Thailand and Hong Kong. Media makers in the Muslim world and Russia are developing their own superheroes to reflect their own social mission (Jenkins, forthcoming). In her report *Spoiler Alert: How Progressives Will Break through with Popular Culture*, Tracy Van Slyke (2014) sums up the logic: “Pop culture has power. We can either ignore it, letting dominant narratives as well as millions of people who interact and are influenced by popular culture slide by, or we can figure out how to double down and invest in the people, strategies, products, and experiences that will transport our stories and values into mainstream narratives” (15). Michael Saler (2012) has coined the phrase “public sphere of the imagination” to describe the communities that form around popular narratives, spaces where discussions about hopes and fears are staged, often outside of partisan frameworks, one step removed from real-world constraints. Not simply escapism, such discussions work through real-world issues that participants might not be able to confront through other means.

**The Politics of Popular Culture**

Our approach is informed by the cultural studies tradition. Cultural studies began with Raymond Williams’s ([1958] 1989) simple and poignant observation that “culture is ordinary,” which allowed him to reclaim rural working-class British culture as worthy of study and reflection. Stuart Hall (1981) further broke down the concept of popular culture. On the one hand, popular culture is often understood in terms of its commercial success, “the things that are said to be ‘popular’ because masses of people listen to them, buy them, read them, consume them, and seem to enjoy them to the full” (512). Sometimes a distinction is made between mass culture (culture mass produced, distributed, and consumed) and popular culture (which may also refer to niche, subcultural, and folk forms that may never achieve mass appeal). Some of this
book’s cases deal with the political impact of Hollywood blockbusters (*Star Wars*), best-selling young adult novels (*Harry Potter*), highly rated sitcoms (*All in the Family*), Oscar acceptance speeches, and brand icons (Smokey Bear). But others deal with grassroots projects (such as Chicano street murals or virtual reality and urban games initiatives) whose impact is felt mostly on the local level. Here, Hall’s second definition of the popular, as having to do with “the people,” comes into play. Forms of cultural expression—memes or hashtags, for example—that rely on vernacular forms are “popular” even if the works themselves do not reach mass attention. Social movements tap into imagery from commercial texts (Miranda’s music videos, *Coco*) but also into the vernacular modes of expression (graduations or quinceañeras). Hall does not believe we can simply inventory popular culture because of the dynamic nature of its relationships with high culture, prevailing ideologies, the marketplace, and other forces determining what culture “counts.” Rather, popular culture might be better understood in terms of how everyday symbols are assigned meanings within particular contexts.

Some activists dismiss mass culture as speaking only for corporate interests, serving dominant ideology, and thus manipulating the masses. Hall (1981), conversely, saw popular culture as “a battlefield where no once-for-all victories are obtained but where there are always strategic positions to be won and lost” (513). Hall is not alone in seeing popular culture as a space for fomenting social change. Here’s bell hooks (1990): “It’s exciting to think, write, talk about, and create art that reflects passionate engagement with popular culture, because this may well be the central future location of resistance struggle, a meeting place where new and radical happenings can occur” (394). Hooks celebrates a critical “engagement with popular culture” even if she sees mass media as saturated with white supremacist ideologies. In hooks’s account, black people in particular, but also all marginalized groups, “yearn” for alternative forms of popular culture that more fully express their fantasies of social change.

Writing about the “creative insurgency” of the Arab Spring movements, Marwan M. Kraidy (2016) demonstrates that popular culture—here understood as grassroots forms of expression—may be deployed toward revolutionary ends: “Creative insurgency celebrates heroes, commemorates martyrs, and sustains revolutionaries. . . . It triggers debate and contributes to a vast, crowd-sourced archive of revolutionary words,
images, and sounds” (17). “Creative insurgency” arises when people find their voice through practices that first take shape around popular media but are now deployed for more explicitly political purposes. Linda Herrara (2012) documents how Arab youths were drawn together through their recreational use of digital media—downloading popular music, trading Hollywood films, gaming, or engaging in social media practices—where they encountered unfamiliar ideas and forged solidarity with others. Many Arab youths, as Yomaa Elsayed and Sulafa Zidani remind us in their contribution, have returned to social media as tools for creative insurgency after new repressive regimes gained power.

Thinking of popular culture as offering resources for social change leads to several important observations. First, just as it matters whether you are making your purse from silk or a sow’s ear, the quality of the raw materials also matters: not every popular culture text speaks for all groups. Most acts of appropriation are not acts of resistance as traditionally understood. In many cases, these fan-activists feel ownership over these works and see congruence between the original texts and the causes to which they are being deployed. The Harry Potter Alliance can use J. K. Rowling’s fantasy world for human rights advocacy because of the author’s history of involvement with Amnesty International, and the Dreamers can use Superman’s story to tell of their own struggles to be accepted as Americans in part because the character was created by immigrants from another generation and ethnic background (Jenkins, Shresthova et al., 2017). This is not to say that such texts can speak only these truths—the construction of revolutionary politics in the Hunger Games series is deeply contradictory, as is the concept of a radical text marketed by a major media corporation. As Hall (1981) writes, “The danger arises because we tend to think of cultural forms as whole and coherent: either wholly corrupt or wholly authentic. Whereas they are deeply contradictory; they play on contradictions, especially when they function in the domain of the ‘popular’” (513).

Over the past few decades, popular culture—from the multicultural, multiracial, and multiplanetary communities of Star Trek to the depiction of an American Muslim superhero in Ms. Marvel—has increasingly offered resources people have drawn upon to spark the civic imagination. Many narratives address particular subcultural, niche, or generational cohorts, but these narratives are often hotly contested by others from
different political, spiritual, or ethnic backgrounds. Many minority groups struggle for inclusion and representation within popular media after decades of negative stereotyping or exclusion. In other parts of the world, American popular culture remains a dominant but not unquestioned influence alongside local alternatives (Bollywood, K-Pop, telenovelas). In part because of its pervasiveness, references to American popular culture are traded across different political movements, with superheroes or zombies widely used in debates and protests. Stuart Hall (1992) writes, “Popular culture, commodified and stereotyped as it often is, is not at all, as we sometimes think of it, an arena where we find who we really are, the truth of our experience. It is an arena that is profoundly mythic. It is a theatre of popular desires, a theatre of popular fantasies. It is where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time” (382). So cultural scholars work to identify which resources from which narratives speak to which communities with which meanings. We do not live in a semiotic democracy. Cultural resources are not evenly distributed. And some communities must work harder to bend those symbols to their will, face greater opposition to their proposed interpretations, and have a difficult time getting others to understand what they are trying to say.

The Utopian Imagination

Harry Potter series author J. K. Rowling evoked the power of fantasy as a tool for social change during a 2008 Harvard commencement speech: “Imagination is not only the uniquely human capacity to envision that which is not, and therefore the fount of all invention and innovation. In its arguably most transformative and revelatory capacity, it is the power that enables us to empathise with humans whose experiences we have never shared. . . . We do not need magic to change the world, we carry all the power we need inside ourselves already: we have the power to imagine better” (n.p.) By “imagine better,” Rowling advocates two closely related goals: that activist do a better job imagining alternatives to current social conditions and that they imagine better worlds that they then work to achieve. Rowling also expresses a third goal—that an
empathetic imagination may better understand and respond to others’ suffering.

Supporting and exercising the imagination is crucial to the community work the Civic Imagination Project performs; workshop participants repeatedly tell us that they rarely are invited to engage their imaginations, which are often perceived as separate from reason and rational thought, unless it directly relates to their professional or artistic practices. This separation leaves their civic lives mired in the what Stephen Duncombe (2012b) has called the “tyranny of the possible”—that is, the inner voice that says that change is not possible, that opposing forces are too strong, that we can never afford what would be ideal, that we are stuck with the status quo. Duncombe is one of several contemporary writers seeking to reclaim a utopian tradition: “For the revolutionary, utopia offers a goal to reach and a vision to be realized. For the reformer, it provides a compass point to determine what direction to move toward and a measuring stick to determine how far one has come. . . . Without a vision of an alternative future, we can only look backwards nostalgically to the past, or unthinkingly maintain what we have” (n.p.). Duncombe (2017) acknowledges why utopianism has gotten a bad name, given the number of utopian projects that became rigid and doctrinaire. Rather than seeing utopias as blueprints, he sees utopias as provocations: “By asking ‘What if?’ we can simultaneously criticize and imagine, imagine and criticize, and thereby begin to escape the binary politics of impotent critique on the one hand and closed imagination on the other” (12). In some cases, the utopian imagination envisions absurd, unworkable, unthinkable things precisely so that in shooting them down, we articulate shared values and visions: “The paramount question, I believe, is whether or not Utopia can be opened up—to criticism, to participation, to modification, and to re-creation” (Duncombe 2012b, n.p.). This is what he calls an “open utopia.”

Duncombe’s concept of the “open utopia” resonates with a broader literature on the role of imagination. Philosopher Mary Warnock sees the imagination as that “which enables us to see the world, whether present or absent as significant, and also to present this vision to others, for them to share or reject. . . . Its impetus comes from the emotions as much as from reason, from the heart as much as from the head” (196). According to Warnock, the imagination allows us to “detach” ourselves from the
reality to “think of certain objects in the world in a new way, as signifying something else” (197). In *Pragmatic Imagination*, Ann Pendleton-Jullian and John Seely Brown similarly reject the perceived dichotomy between reason and imagination to chart a related set of cognitive processes: perception (the ways imagination reconciles between a subject position and the world beyond us), forms of reasoning (deductive, inductive, and abductive), speculation (the ability to conceive of possible futures and related actions), experimentation (the willingness to tap existing skills toward something never tried), and free play (characterized through intentional disruption and boundary crossing; pp. 43–56). This collection’s cases explore how creative engagements with popular culture can support a journey along this continuum as people turn to the imaginary and even fantastical to reenergize their civic lives. The imagination gains civic power when it is no longer personal or private but rather can be translated into a form that can be shared intersubjectively. As participants at a 2013 ReConstitutional Convention hosted by the Institute for the Future concluded, “Any democracy requires a thriving public imagination, in order to make visible, sharable and understandable to all the people new ideas, new models, new potential policies. We cannot make any kind of collective decisions unless the collective can understand what is at stake, and envision where it may lead. . . . We must strive to understand the private imaginations of others, whose reality is defined by different lived experiences and assumptions” (n.p.).

Exploring links between social movements and superhero comics, Ramzi Fawaz (2016) argues that the civic imagination need not be grounded in realism in order to help us see the world from a new perspective: “Popular fantasy describes the variety of ways that the tropes and figures of literary fantasy (magic, superhuman ability, time travel, alternative universes, among others) come to organize real-world social and political relations. . . . [Such popular fantasies] embody and legitimate nascent cultural desires and modes of social belonging that appear impossible or simply out of reach within the terms of dominant political imagination” (27–28). Fawaz describes how The X-Men’s mutant narratives expand conceptions of the human, offering new recognition to “gender and sexual outlaws, racial minorities, and the disabled” (13). Eric Huerta’s use of the X-Men to talk about DACA is in this same spirit. Superheroes are culturally pervasive and thus handy for political
deployment. They offer a shared vocabulary for talking about personal and cultural identity. Different superheroes embody different conceptions of justice and the social good. The genre deals directly with issues of power and its responsible use. Superheroes never doubt their capacity to change the world. The superhero comic articulates who the good guys are, their mission, and also what they are fighting against. Across several essays, Civic Paths researchers have explored superheroes as an extended example of the civic imagination at work (Jenkins, Shresthova et al., 2017; Jenkins, forthcoming).

Fawaz references sociologist Deborah Gould (2009), who sees such “structures of feeling” as triggering and sustaining social movements that express the “desire for different forms of social relations, different ways of being, a different world. . . . In articulating and enacting what previously might have been unimaginable, a movement offers a scene and future possibilities that surprise, entice, exhilarate, and electrify” (as quoted in Fawaz 2016, 29).

Such popular narratives were neither designed to last nor intended to convince. Duncombe (2012a) discusses how Star Trek fans became activists: “Our political imagination was inspired by the presentation of Roddenberry and company’s SF [science fiction] scenarios. . . . Yet the sheer campiness of the series kept us from accepting the future it presented as a real possibility, or, rather, a valid fantasy” (n.p.). Fans may not want to board the Enterprise, but they may want to collaborate with a diverse community to achieve shared missions; they may not want to live in the Federation, but they may want to inhabit a world where making money is secondary to other goals; they may not want to travel into deep space, but they desire the discovery of difference and a sense of wonder. People yearn for the value these stories place on rationality and the pursuit of knowledge all the more in a culture that sometimes has declared war on science. Richard Dyer (1985) tells us that entertainment embodies “what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organised.” Entertainment captures a utopian sensibility; it offers a taste of a better world but leaves us unsatisfied. In Duncombe’s account, this dissatisfaction propels activism.

By now, we’ve identified multiple reasons why popular culture matters for social movements: because it is ordinary, because it can be appropriated and transformed so freely, because it constitutes the realm
where we might imagine alternatives, because it fosters shared desires that may fuel struggles for social justice, because it addresses feelings that might not be expressed in any other way, and because it may bridge cultural divides. Certainly, other stories—religious narratives, folk tales, historical epics—also perform some of these functions. But for many young people, popular narratives are particularly valued as resources for the civic imagination.

Counternarratives

We do not offer a civics grounded in popular culture as a panacea for all the challenges confronting contemporary democracy. Critics remind us that popular culture does not speak for everyone, that not everyone feels comfortable within its imaginary worlds or has access to the means of production and circulation, and that certain toxic elements in popular culture repel many whom social movements might seek to attract. Because popular culture is not the language most commonly spoken in the corridors of power, messages framed within its terms may be trivialized and dismissed by those who have the ability to act on the articulated concerns. Expressing real-world issues in fantastical language runs the risk of simplifying messages so that they may be circulated more easily, and some causes may be impossible to articulate within the limited range of fantasies currently on offer. And still others see such a mechanism as too gradual to address urgent problems.

Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) considers what is gained and lost as feminism becomes popularized, fearing that its vision of social change is being smoothed over to ensure that its ideas travel faster across a networked society. Popular feminism may have inspired a new generation, but it has also brought out the trolls as patriarchy defends its privilege: “Misogyny is popular in the contemporary moment for the same reasons feminism has become popular: it is expressed and practiced on multiple media platforms, it attracts other like-minded groups, and it manifests in a terrain of struggle, with competing demands for power. . . . The relationship between popular feminism and popular misogyny is deeply entwined: popular feminism and popular misogyny battle it out on the contemporary cultural landscape, living side-by-side as warring, constantly moving contexts in an economy of visibility” (n.p.). Banet-Weiser
asks what voices get silenced, what ideas get sidelined, as a political movement enters a new “economy of visibility.” If popular culture is a terrain of hegemonic struggles, as Hall suggests, then such resources may also form the basis for conflicting narratives or counternarratives. Such conflicts surface across this book—the different conceptions of the American Revolution that spawned Hamilton and the Tea Party, divergent definitions of the Indian American experience channeled through Bollywood, or alternative responses to Star Wars’s gender and racial diversity.

Naomi Klein (2017) compares her “shock” and “horror” over Donald Trump’s election to watching “dystopian fiction come to life.” She describes Trump as a “mirror” that reflects our worst aspects back at us. Klein encourages her readers to identify “the stories and systems that ineluctably produced him” and to ensure wider circulation of counternarratives: “The forces Trump represents have always had to suppress those other, older, and self-evidently true stories, so that theirs could dominate against so much intuition and evidence. . . . Which is why part of our work now—a key part—is not just resistance, not just saying no. . . . We also need to fiercely protect some space to dream and plan for a better world” (n.p.). Klein sees the creation, circulation, and promotion of alternative stories as the key means by which progressive groups may defeat “Trumpism.”

We share Klein’s desire to shatter entrenched narratives and renew the resources from which we may collectively construct our own futures. Too often, academic work overvalues critique at the expense of advocacy. Critical writers offer a clear sense of what they are fighting against but rarely commit to what they are fighting for. Critique is valuable as part of a larger political cycle, which includes an analysis and description of a current problem, a critique of the powerful forces that created these circumstances, and advocacy for ways power might be distributed differently. There is a tendency to shoot down alternatives before they have been fully explored and to assume that future struggles will necessarily follow the same logics as those that have come before. The result is academic fatalism, a posture that blunts the power of critique, because in the end (shrug), What are you gonna do?

The temptation is to see utopian fictions as pure advocacy and dystopian fictions as pure critique, but as Duncombe’s emphasis on
provocations may suggest, the reality is more complex. Most utopian writing contains at least an implicit critique of the current realities that its alternative hopes to displace. By the same token, most dystopian writing contains a utopian alternative—often, in the form of a resistance group struggling to transform the society. We can only wish that critical studies were equally committed to this contestation between rival visions.

**Nostalgia**

Just as science fiction debates alternative visions of the future, nostalgic conceptions of the past also offer a yardstick against which to identify flaws in the current system. Such nostalgia is no less utopian simply because it references the past. Svetlana Boym (2002) writes, “Nostalgia . . . is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy” (xiii). Boym argues that nostalgia is only partially about looking backward and can also speak to the future, as the Trumpian mantra “Make America Great Again” suggests. Boym distinguishes between two forms of nostalgic imagining: “Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells in the ambivalence of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflexive nostalgia calls it into doubt” (xviii). Restorative nostalgia has a fixed agenda, whereas reflexive nostalgia incorporates the dialogic process, the movement between critique and imagining that Duncombe locates within the “open utopia.” Both look to the past to better understand what might be desirable in the future, but only reflexive nostalgia sees the past as open to critique. Civil War epics, such as *Gone with the Wind* or *Birth of a Nation* represent restorative nostalgia at its most forceful, reproducing what people have described as the “Lost Cause” ideology. Such mythologies have fueled recent backlashes against the removal of Confederate monuments from public places. Yet there are also revisionist or reflexive narratives that revisit this same era—Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, for example—to imagine what alternative social orders might look like (McPherson 2003).
Boym’s restorative nostalgia is susceptible to decidedly uncivic, even violent applications. Propaganda for the Third Reich—a nostalgic yet transformative vision of the “perfect” racialized society—embodies this dark side of the civic imagination. According to Alon Confino (2014), the imagination that animated the Nazis included both a careful construction of a shared nostalgic past (a story of national origin that placed the Jews as villains at its center) and a radically aspirational future (“the dream of an empire,” “a world without Jews”; 12). The Nazis combined restorative nostalgia (a sense of restoring dignity to the “Heimat,” or motherland) with a utopian imagination of a more perfect Aryan culture, drawing on the vivid theatrics and iconography some have called “fascinating fascism.”

Significantly, the Nazi imagination was only one of several competing models for the past and future of Europe to emerge during this era. For example, a much more anarchistic and pluralistic vision of German society inspired the Edelweiss Piraten, a loose network of youth communities linked through a shared affinity for jazz, nature hikes, and free time, all things the Nazi regime despised. Others had visions of a more pluralistic German society that tapped a more reflective nostalgia. The student-led White Rose movement distributed flyers that drew on biblical and literary texts as they urged Germans to resist the Nazis. The White Rose’s first flyer included this quote from Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s The Awakening of Epimenides (act 2, scene 4):

Though he who has boldly risen from the abyss
Through an iron will and cunning
May conquer half the world,
Yet to the abyss he must return.
Already a terrible fear has seized him;
In vain he will resist!
And all who still stand with him
Must perish in his fall.
HOPE:
Now I find my good men
Are gathered in the night,
To wait in silence, not to sleep.
And the glorious word of liberty
They whisper and murmur,
Till in unaccustomed strangeness,
On the steps of our temple
Once again in delight they cry:
Freedom! Freedom!

In quoting Goethe, the White Rose not only evoked nostalgia for Germany’s past but also directly contested the Nazis’ claim on his works as exemplifying their ideal Aryan nation. The White Rose further supported their alternative vision through the white rose, a flower associated with purity and truth. The image of the rose subtly suggested an alternative, nonviolent, and extremely fragile German society. Tragically, the White Rose was crushed when its two key members, siblings Sophie and Hans Scholl, were arrested, tortured, tried, and executed after distributing flyers at the university in Munich in 1943.

Nazis used brutal violence to maintain their hold on Germans’ civic imagination. As Hannah Arendt (1966) reminds us, “In the totalitarian government, . . . terror becomes total when it becomes independent of all opposition; it rules supreme when nobody any longer stands in its way” (464). Terror represents an efficient mechanism for silencing dissent and isolating individuals. The resulting culture operates, in Arendt’s words, as “One Man of gigantic dimensions” (466). In this scenario, there is no room for contested or competing visions that might threaten the totalitarian state.

Czech playwright, dissident, and later president Václav Havel (1991) offers a useful continuation of Arendt’s formulations on power and totalitarianism. In the context of posttotalitarian (or late totalitarian Soviet-era) regimes, as Havel explains, Nazi terror is largely replaced with “manipulatory devices so refined, complex, and powerful that it no longer needs murderers and victims” (332). The real challenge to posttotalitarianism then comes from “fiery Utopia builders spreading discontent with dreams of a better future,” for they open the possibility of change and invite people to continue to dream rather than slide into apathy. People’s ability to sustain alternative visions empowers them to resist “creeping totalitarianism” (332).

In Cold War Czechoslovakia, Havel identifies a loose network that operated outside the political realm as a productive space of engagement
when real political change remains unrealistic. In January 1977, Charta 77, the protest document initiated after the arrest of Plastic People of the Universe band members, exemplifies such “antipolitical politics” (with real political repercussions for those who signed it). Havel explains, “Everyone understood that an attack on the Czech musical underground was an attack on the most elementary and important thing, something that in fact bound everyone together: it was an attack on the very notion of living in truth, on the real aims of life. The freedom to play rock music was understood as a human freedom and thus as essentially the same freedom to engage in philosophical and political reflection, the freedom to write, the freedom to express and defend various social and political interests in society” (119). Havel’s commitment to cultural dissidence is confirmed in this excerpt from the original document, viewable through the Freedom Collection at the George W. Bush Institute (translated by the authors): “Charta 77 is not an organization; it has no constitution, no permanent institutions, no formal membership. Charta 77 is not a fundamental oppositional movement.” Stressing its connection to popular culture (in this case, rock music), Charta 77 affirmed that fostering alternative civic imaginations is crucial to popular dissent in posttotalitarian regimes.

We take seriously the power of the civic imagination, for better and for worse, as scholars and as citizens (recognizing that we are among those with the privilege to take citizenship as given). As we write this, the Nazi- and Soviet-era efforts to shape and police the imagination weigh heavily on our minds. We need to diligently interrogate how the Nazis managed to construct, deploy, and maintain their vision and justify to themselves the atrocities committed by the so-called Third Reich. We need to remember the dangers of apathy and dearth of imagination that Havel articulated. Making a case for the value of the “public imagination” in the wake of Donald Trump’s rise to power, Drucilla Cornell and Stephen D. Seeley (2017) also identify the dangers of constraining the public’s ability to explore alternative futures:

[Democracy] allows us to be affected by as many people as possible, in all of their diversity, and this in turn promotes the maximal clarification of inadequate ideas. The more open we are to being affected by others who are different from what we currently imagine ourselves to be, the more
our imagination is enriched and the more we are empowered in both body and mind. In this light, what we are seeing now is the dearth of collective imagination. Trump and his supporters want us literally to be walled off from México, blocked off from the tragedy in Syria. He wants to keep us from interacting and creating new, enriched images of people in different religions through his grotesque Muslim ban. He wants to turn women into things whose impact on public life is as limited as possible, imagined instead as nothing other than their reproductive organs to be “grabbed” and controlled. These walls and barriers clearly block democracy . . . as the widest engagement with each other.

They cite the influence of Baruch Spinoza, but we see congruence also with the vision outlined and enacted by Havel—the desire to expand and diversify the contents of the imagination as a means of resisting and ultimately overturning any systems of power that curtail or criminalize the rights of all people to imagine and work toward a world that allows them to thrive in happiness, security, and humanity. We recognize grave threats within the rhetorics and actions of contemporary politics. We recognize that this moment is but one in a larger cycle of struggle; we see the need to continually bolster, refine, and adapt our tools for collective progress. In the end, it is imagination, more than information, that wants to be free.

Our Guiding Questions

This book assembles a diverse set of cases exploring the civic imagination at work in contemporary social movements. Each essay offers critical insights at a time when once again there are threats of authoritarianism and a need for resistance movements. These cases come from many parts of the world; they reflect contemporary struggles by people of diverse ethnic, cultural, and economic backgrounds; they deploy many cultural materials and political tactics; and they address a range of issues (environmentalism, wealth inequality, gender and sexual politics, and systemic racism, to cite a few). Often, they represent conflicting or clashing imaginations as people struggle over what constitutes a better world. We have organized the essays around the functions of the civic imagination, adding new layers to our understanding of this core
concept with references to a broader range of theoretical perspectives (as will be discussed in the introductions to the sections).

We will break down the key questions here using the example of *Black Panther*, a Marvel-Disney film that many have described as movement building. If we want to take these claims seriously and on their own terms, we can use the functions of the civic imagination to identify what imaginative resources *Black Panther* offers the diverse publics who have gathered around it. The idea that such a franchise movie might become a tool for social change is not farfetched: Define American and Fandom Forward developed a study guide around the film that organizations could use to foster discussions about refugees, immigrants, and borders; the Electoral Justice Project organized voter registration drives around film screenings, urging supporters to “Wakanda the vote.” Let’s consider how *Black Panther* maps onto the functions of the civic imagination that organize this book.

### How Do We Imagine a Better World?

*Black Panther*’s fictional Wakanda provides a vivid contrast to the poverty and hopelessness depicted in Oakland in the film’s opening and closing scenes. Oakland was the setting of director Ryan Coogler’s first film, *Fruitvale Station*, and the birthplace for the Black Panther Party (no direct relation). Interestingly, the conclusion’s agenda for social reform through community schools and health clinics owes much to the Black Panther Party’s original platform. *Black Panther* envisions an imaginary African nation where black peoples exercise self-determination, having no history of colonization; where Africans develop advanced technologies while controlling their natural resources; where traditions persist despite modernization; and where warring tribes have developed practices for resolving conflicts.

### How Do We Imagine the Process of Change?

Killmonger—the American-born terrorist who seeks to take over Wakanda—is not a villain in a traditional sense: the film has sympathy for his goals but differs over means. Killmonger’s advocacy for the export of arms to help rebels overturn oppressors inspires T’Challa’s
move from isolationism toward diplomacy and social services. Some of the most intense debates around the film have centered on these competing visions of the process of social change.

How Do We Imagine Ourselves as Civic Agents?

T’Challa—the Black Panther—undertakes the classic hero’s journey, moving from the young prince to the ruler of his country following the death of his father, taking on new responsibilities, embracing an expanded mission, and learning to make a difference on both a local and a global scale. It is this acceptance of social responsibility that makes the character such a great model for young activists. When, at the end of the film, T’Challa steps up at the United Nations in the face of sniggers and skepticism from other world leaders, he models what it means to demand respect that has not been granted before, a key theme in the black radical imagination literature. As Gabonese filmmaker Manouchka Labouba explained during an interview for Henry Jenkins and Colin Maclay’s *How Do You Like It So Far?* podcast: “I remember . . . being a kid and female in Africa [that] the superhero that I imagined was a white male . . . because all of the superheroes that I watched back then were white. Superman, Batman, Spiderman, all of them were white. . . . It is important to have a character [like Black Panther] because it gives an opportunity for kids nowadays to imagine their superhero in a different way.” And even though the film’s producer, Walt Disney Studios, may be seen as a corporate “colonizer” by many critics, the story can nevertheless be appropriated and reconfigured on the ground as a resource that speaks to young people across Africa and around the world.

How Do We Imagine Our Social Connections with a Larger Community?

A striking aspect of *Black Panther* is the range of different conceptions of power, courage, responsibility, wisdom, and knowledge within the Wakandan community. Unlike most superhero sagas, success rests on collective rather than individual action. Consider, for example, the film’s different representations of black women: Nakia, who is on a mission to rescue captive women in Nigeria; Okoye, who experiences conflicting loyalties but remains true to her principles as leader of the royal guard,
the Dora Milaje; Shuri, who embodies her society’s technological and scientific advancement; and Ramonda, who carries regal dignity and deep-rooted traditions. These women clash but rally as their country turns outward and becomes a superpower dedicated to a more just distribution of resources.

How Do We Forge Solidarity with Others with Different Experiences Than Our Own?

Having developed a stronger Wakandan community, Black Panther joins the Avengers, directing his newly claimed leadership against the villain Thanos and his allies in *Infinity War*. Here, he fights alongside a Norse god (Thor), a Russian assassin (Black Widow), two World War II veterans (Captain America and Winter Soldier), and a scrawny kid from Queens (Spider-Man), to cite just a few. Each defends a different community, but they join forces against threats so big that they put everything they love at risk.

How Do We Bring an Imaginative Dimension to Our Real-World Places and Spaces?

Many *Black Panther* fans have expressed a desire to visit or even live in Wakanda because the film’s Afrofuturist fantasy is that powerful. Here, they are seeking not simply the imagined versions of Hogwarts or Pandora being offered by contemporary amusement parks but a reconfiguration of social relations animated by the shared vision of a better life. University of Southern California PhD candidate Karl Bauman partnered with artist/organizer Ben R. Caldwell to run a community-building project that used elements of Afrofuturism to reimagine Los Angeles’s Leimert Park as it might take shape over the next few decades (Jenkins 2017). The project, Sankofa City, “worked with community participants to define their preferable futures, often tied to local African-American cultural norms and social practices.” Participants deployed practices of world-building and transmedia storytelling to create a vision for their future that could be shared intersubjectively both within and beyond their community.
Ta-Nehisi Coates, the black sociologist whom Marvel hired to reconstruct the Black Panther comic book series in anticipation of the film’s release, spoke for many when he said, “I didn’t realize how much I needed the film, a hunger for a myth that [addressed] feeling separated and feeling reconnected” to Africa (Beta 2018). This response connects *Black Panther* to a much longer history of what Robin G. Kelly (2002) calls “freedom dreams,” which he describes as “many different cognitive maps of the future” that through the years have allowed African Americans to maintain hope in the face of oppressive conditions and continue to struggle for something better: “The most radical art is not protest art, but works that take us to another place, envision a different way of seeing, perhaps a different way of feeling” (25). “Freedom dreams,” in Kelly’s particular formulation of the black radical imagination, “produce a vision that allows us to see beyond our immediate ordeals” (12), “Mother Africa,” Kelly suggests, occupies a central role in those dreams as a place from which African Americans have been separated against their wills and as a place with which they hope to be spiritually and culturally reunited. The desire to reimagine Africa as a source of strength for the black community has only intensified in recent years. *Black Panther* fits within a larger strand of Afrofuturist art, music, and literature: for example, a generation of science fiction and fantasy writers, many of them with cultural ties to Nigeria—Nnedi Okorafor and Tomi Adeyemi, among others—are reclaiming African mythology and culture as the inspiration for groundbreaking works of speculative fiction.

In his piece for the *Atlantic*, “The Provocation and Power of *Black Panther*,” Van R. Newkirk II (2018) explores the ways the film might fuel the black radical imagination:

Blackness invites speculation. The very idea of a global African diaspora creates the most fertile of grounds for a field of *what-ifs*. What if European enslavers and colonizers had never ventured into the African continent? More intriguing yet: What if African nations and peoples had successfully rebuffed generations of plunder and theft? What if the Zulu had won the wars against the Voortrekkers and the British, and a confederation of Bantu people had risen up and smashed Belgian rule? What if the Transatlantic children of the mother continent had been allowed
to remain, building their empires with the bounties of the cradle of civilization? (22)

Here, Newkirk suggests that young black creators and fans are retracing their roots in order to forge a path forward into the future. In doing so, Newkirk addresses a question Kelly raises early in his book: “What are today’s young activists dreaming about? We know what they are fighting against, but what are they fighting for?”

No wonder *Black Panther* captured the imagination of so many people in spring 2018, offering a shared myth desperately needed in the age of Trump: the film inspired many different forms of participatory culture (memes, fan fiction, cosplay) as people fused its iconography with their personal and social identities. As this example suggests, any given case is apt to tap multiple functions of the civic imagination, and thus the placement of essays within this book may sometimes feel arbitrary. But in flagging these questions, we encourage you to think about how these functions work together to constitute a model of social change, one that also shapes our own community-building practices. And it goes without saying that this book does not exhaust the possible range of examples. For every case we included, there are many more we were not able to include. We hope this book will inspire students and faculty researchers alike to develop their own case studies, exploring different aspects of popular culture and the civic imagination that they recognize as playing out within their own communities.

**Our Mission in Practice**

The link between theory and practice is an integral part of our process. We believe that democracy works best when we can bring together diverse perspectives, encouraging people to share their memories, dreams, and hopes with each other. Such diverse perspectives provide the social foundation for civic life, especially when coupled with supports for people to find their voice and talk across their differences. Such are the primary goals of our practice-based community work. Our team is based in Los Angeles at the University of Southern California, and we are keenly aware of the role that place plays in our own work; we actively endeavor to build bridges from the university to the outside world. Our collaborations
and interventions attempt to harness the active imagination of disparate groups and create opportunities for creativity and network building. The six core concepts introduced above have grown out of and informed the work we have been doing with communities since 2013.

Our community engagements have included the design and implementation of civic imagination workshops in Europe and the Middle East, with teachers in Missouri, economic development professionals in Kentucky, water agencies in California, and faith-based communities in Arkansas. Accounts of this work can be found online and in our book *Practicing Futures: A Civic Imagination Action Handbook* (Peter Lang, forthcoming), which is both an analysis of our activities and a manual for those wanting to run workshops with their own communities. Here we will focus on a single three-week engagement in Salzburg, Austria, in the summer of 2016 as a way of further illustrating these six core concepts of the civic imagination.

In 2016, the three editors taught at the Salzburg Global Seminar’s Academy on Media and Global Change. We worked with educators, scholars, and approximately seventy college-aged students from around the world. The Salzburg Global Seminar is a nonprofit organization that organizes events and dialogs on global issues such as health care, justice, economics, and human rights. Since 1947, the seminar has been housed at an eighteenth-century palace, its neighboring farmhouse, and its grounds. That year, the focus of the academy was on immigration and the global refugee crisis. One of our team’s goals was to design a series of civic imagination workshops that would help the attending students form a productive community founded on mutual respect, understanding, and empathy. This foundational work provided a strong basis from which the participants then worked toward engaging with the difficult issues of immigration and refugees.

1. How Do We Imagine a Better World?

In many of our community engagements, we imagine a better world by starting with a wide-ranging brainstorming session based on the ideas of world building. In Salzburg, this meant bringing all the participants together in a space, setting up whiteboards, and asking them to imagine a future world in the year 2066 where anything is possible. We
asked them to set aside what they thought might actually occur in the future and open themselves to the full potentials of their imaginations. Our approach here is informed by the work of production designer and University of Southern California professor Alex McDowell and his Worldbuilding Institute. The idea is to identify key characteristics of the future world within categories such as education, transportation, economics, and so on. As the process gains steam, participants riff off and inspire each other to explore alternative possibilities. The Salzburg participants imagined a world where battles are relegated to outer space, women lead the world, teleportation is a telepathic action, and the people are united by an apocalyptic depletion of natural resources. We asked participants to craft specific narratives to explain how the world came to be this way, and then in a surprise twist, we asked them to perform their stories for the whole group of almost seventy. This exercise kindled a great deal of energy, laughter, embodied creativity, and wide-open imagination.

2. How Do We Imagine the Process of Change?

In the second part of our work, we asked the students to surface and share inspiring stories from their lives. These narratives could come from any source and fit within any genre—family stories, folk tales, popular culture, and so on. We were looking for something that had resonated with people over time. We asked participants to explore what within a story inspired them and consider how that narrative kernel could be leveraged to inspire collective action. The goal was to make a link between personal inspiration and change making. Movements arise from the connections and bonds of individuals who find engagement and purpose by identifying common ground. We asked participants to consider specific communities and circumstances in which they thought their stories could inspire change and to identify how a successful social movement campaign might build on those foundations.

3. How Do We Imagine Ourselves as Civic Agents?

Participants composed brief write-ups of their inspiring stories and uploaded them to a central location online along with geographical
information about where their stories came from. We then assembled the stories in a navigable Atlas of the Civic Imagination using the Scalar platform, which rendered each participant’s work viewable, shareable, searchable, and navigable. Participants then worked in small groups to get to know each other’s stories. They shared with us that they experienced a deep sense of connection within a small timeframe by sharing stories that mattered in their own lives. They also enjoyed a sense of satisfaction when they were able to share new perspectives with their collaborators, introducing them to new ideas, histories, or communities. Creating a context in which personal voices and values can be heard and acted upon is a valuable step in helping young people recognize their civic agency. As students began to see themselves as storytellers, they saw how similar creative processes could be channeled into civic action and global change.

4. How Do We Imagine Our Social Connections with a Larger Community?

Next, we brought participants together in groups of three to create new stories by combining elements from each of the sources. We suggested that they employ several strategies for these story migrations, including but not limited to moving a character from one story into another; creating a new character by combining aspects of several characters; adapting a key moment, event, or theme from one story to another; or moving a story from one location to another. Participants spoke of the initial challenges of finding common ground among their seemingly very different stories. Through negotiating the imaginative terms of a new narrative, they each gained a deeper understanding of the potentials for bridging between the national cultures from which these stories originated. Storytelling again provided a vehicle and framework through which to connect individual experience with a collective and emergent identity. The act of unearthing, exploring, and playing with the values and ideas that excite and sustain us is a powerful mechanism for strengthening our connections with larger communities.
5. How Do We Forge Solidarity with Others with Different Experiences Than Our Own?

Empathy, recognition, and a sense of community all arise through the process of shared narrative creation and the migration of stories. Solidarity comes when that sense of connection translates into real action. When participants become invested in the stories of their peers and when they create new work together, they are building foundations for future solidarity. They recognize the humanity in other stories, asking how they might join forces with the people behind those stories. We saw this in the Media Academy when participants met with refugee families living in Austria. Stories became people; journalism became real life. And students learned how to be more effective advocates for their own interests and the needs of others.

6. How Do We Bring an Imaginative Dimension to Our Real-World Places and Spaces?

The Schloss Leopoldskron, where the Media Academy takes place, was a filming location for the immensely popular American musical film *The Sound of Music*. This connection to such a touchstone of pop-cultural history was somewhat neglected within the course of the academy. Upon reflection, our team has seen that perhaps there was a missed opportunity to be explored, considering how history is always re-created and reimagined. *The Sound of Music* is, after all, about a family who must navigate uncertain times and identify the right moment and means by which to flee their home amid encroaching violence. Places have stories. We should be on the lookout for ways to engage with, learn from, and contribute to those local narratives.

Imagining is a process, not a panacea. Imagining can be powerful and enriching, challenging and surprising, light and dark, sublime or overwhelming depending on where it takes us. Across the examples in this casebook, readers are encouraged to search for opportunities to enhance civic imagination in their own lives, work, and communities. Imagining, of course, is never enough if it does not inspire action. We all need to imagine better and imagine bigger.