

Fabulation Editorial

Dwelling in Other Possibilities

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This issue of *PARSE Journal* emerges from a curiosity to deepen an understanding of the affordances of fabulation across a range of artistic practices, in an attempt to trace convergences and divergences, dilemmas and possibilities, approaches and methods.

Given the substantial body of scholarly and artistic work on fabulation that already exists, it is worth asking what this issue might contribute. Our interest is rooted in the desire to tease out the situated, ethical and methodological dilemmas that emerge when fabulation is practised rather than merely theorised. We have found ourselves drawn to complex, unresolved questions whose generative force lies precisely in their resistance to neat answers and their capacity to open up new avenues for artistic practices. How is fabulation distinct from fiction, and does that distinction rest on method, intention, political force or something else entirely? What are the points of convergence and slippage between speculative and critical fabulation, and what might emerge from bringing these different approaches into relation with one another? For those of us committed to the evidentiary and attentive to the political stakes of documentation and testimony, how might we rigorously engage the affordances of fabulation without relinquishing the ethical commitments that make evidence matter? And is fabulation primarily a method for attending to archival gaps and historical absence, or does it carry a broader temporal charge, encompassing the present and future as equally urgent foci of fabulative practice?

The opportunity to host a two-day, in-person workshop in Gothenburg in early 2024, brought together through an Open Call, was formative with many of the participants eventually contributing to this issue. More broadly, this iteration of *PARSE Journal* seeks to take stock of the breadth and wealth of the use of fabulation in the field, to map its contours across different artistic practices and to explore what can be learned through bringing a range of practices into conversation with one another. In doing so, we hope to identify not only shared concerns and productive tensions, but also the potential for new cross-conversations between disciplines, methods and geo-political contexts. Rather than treating fabulation as a settled concept or singular method, we have been invested in approaching it as a site of experimentation, exploration and contestation, a mode of engaging with absence, opacity and silenced histories, while remaining attentive to the responsibilities such engagements entail. This issue is an attempt to think conscientiously about what fabulation makes possible, what it risks and what it demands of those who mobilise it in the pursuit of knowledge, memory and justice and, perhaps most crucially in the imagining of alternative futures.

The term *fabulation* itself is deceptively familiar. In common parlance, it refers to the telling of fables: stories drawing on the fantastical, the mythical and the allegorical to convey moral or philosophical truths. M.H. Abrams describes it as encompassing “experiments with subject matter, form, style, temporal sequence, and fusions of

the everyday, the fantastic, the mythical, and the nightmarish, in renderings that blur traditional distinctions between what is serious or trivial, horrible or ludicrous, tragic or comic.” For José de Piérola, fabulation is about straddling “history and fiction, fact and imagination to tell stories.” These definitions capture something of the term’s range, but they do not account for the particular critical and political charge it has accumulated over the past two to three decades, nor for the reasons it has become so generative, and so contested, across scholarly and artistic fields.

An important delineation in our thinking as editors concerns the relationship between fiction and fabulation, and why it matters to hold the two apart. What is significant for us is not fabulation understood as a genre, but as a method: a way of arriving at stories, critical reflection or other worlds, rather than simply a narrative approach in which stories, observations and the interrogation of history or political conditions are shared. Fiction, broadly understood, is any invented narrative a descriptive category capacious enough to accommodate the realist and the fantastical, the critical and the escapist. Fabulation shares fiction’s investment in the imaginative but goes considerably further. It can foreground the very act of constructing a story and its own artifice, while insisting that this artifice is socially, politically and epistemologically meaningful. As Tavia Nyong’o elaborates:

differs from the acts of imaginative “let’s pretend” that we ordinarily associate with fictional genres. Fabulation is instead the immanent potential within storytelling to redirect us with the glancing force of the relatively opaque. Fabulation thus also partakes of the Lacanian concept of the Real, thought of here as that unrepresentable strand or stain within representation; the motivating impulse that enables figuration and gives it its productive, empowering lie.

This notion of the “real” is itself particularly complicated. As Toby Lee reminds us, “the ‘real’ has itself long been a battleground, or worse yet, a weapon or tool of oppression.” Building on this further, Lee argues that the real is not a neutral or universally shared category but one that has long been implicated in histories of exclusion and domination. For those who have been marginalised, colonised or enslaved, reality itself has often been structured by unequal distributions of power, such that the alignment between inner experience and socially recognised reality cannot be taken for granted. This necessitates understanding that the real is itself variegated, produced by specific historical and political circumstances in which subject formation is conditioned by an ambiguous relation to the real that may be neither stable nor universally agreed upon.

To return to Nyong’o’s insistence, this is perhaps why fabulation allows novelty to emerge beyond “an otherwise deadlocked symbolic order”. Fabulation’s significance lies not simply in its departure from the real, but in its capacity to unsettle the terms through which the real has been constituted and maintained. It creates the conditions for imagining otherwise. This critical insistence is what makes fabulation more than fiction. What ultimately separates the two, for us, is not a formal distinction but a deliberate one. Fabulation, as we understand it, is a deeply political, transformative and emancipatory project. Not all fiction shares this commitment, but it is specifically this commitment – to reworking the limits of the real and opening up space for new social, political and imaginative possibilities that distinguishes fabulation from fiction.

Yet this raises a dilemma that we do not wish to resolve too quickly. If the real has long been implicated in structures of domination, what are the consequences of abandoning it? While we are drawn to critiques that challenge the real, we are also attentive to what such gestures might foreclose. The real may be a site of violence and exclusion, but it can also provide grounds for political claims, shared understanding and forms of

accountability. Rather than treating this as a binary, we are interested in remaining with the productive tension it generates. One of the intentions behind the call for this issue was precisely to foreground this question: how can fabulation exceed the limits of what is accepted as real without abandoning the need to engage critically with evidence, history and material conditions? These questions do not admit easy artistic responses or settled answers but form an important point of departure for this issue.

A further dimension of fabulation, and one central to its critical purchase, is its intimate alignment with questions of the archive. No scholar has elaborated this terrain more rigorously or with greater consequence than Saidiya Hartman. Her starting point is an acknowledgement that work on the lives of the dispossessed and enslaved must not only grapple with the absences of the archive but also with its authority. The archive structures what can be known, whose perspectives count as evidence and who is granted recognition as a historical subject in the first place. Yet rather than treating this condition as a reason for abandonment or despair, Hartman develops it into a method she terms “critical fabulation”. This method for her is not about “anything as miraculous as recovering the lives of the enslaved or redeeming the dead, but rather laboring to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible.” Rather than seeking complete recovery, Hartman works at the limits of what the archive permits, attempting to write a cultural history of the captive while simultaneously acknowledging the impossibility of fully representing that history. The archive’s inadequacies are therefore not obstacles to be overcome but constitutive conditions of the work itself. This sense of impossibility is central to Hartman’s conception of critical fabulation and has been a recurrent reference across several contributions to this issue. Like Hartman, the contributors here are not invested in claims to full recovery, complete representation or historical closure. Rather, what emerges across their practices is a shared attentiveness to archival gaps and an ethical and methodological commitment to remaining with the impossibility that shadows such efforts. Indeed, it is this tension between absence and imagination, between what can be known and what remains irrecoverable, that gives critical fabulation its distinctive force.

Where Hartman presses against the limits of the historical record, Haraway reaches towards deploying fabulation as a generative tool for challenging dominant ontologies and forging new forms of knowledge and co-existence. Drawing on feminist and post-humanist thought, Haraway frames speculative fabulation as a “mode of attention, a theory of history and a practice of worlding” and mobilises it to trouble the boundaries between the human, the non-human and the machine, and to question and unsettle the hierarchies that have long organised Western knowledge. In *Staying with the Trouble* (2008), this takes the form of an engagement with multispecies entanglements, ecological precarity and the possibilities of what she calls “making kin” across difference. In our reading, speculative fabulation in this register is less a method for addressing historical injustice than a practice of reconfiguring the conditions of the present and cultivating new possibilities for collective life.

It would be a misreading, however, to present Hartman and Haraway as simply complementary, as two faces of the same project. We hold the view that their respective interventions emerge from different sites of urgency, different theoretical genealogies and different conceptions of what is most pressing. Haraway’s insistence on the entanglement and interconnectedness of human and non-human worlds is driven by the need to rethink forms of relation and responsibility in the face of contemporary ecological and planetary crises. Yet, one might ask how the history of fungible human life is to be reconciled with the project of making kin across difference. More explicitly, how are the imaginative, ethical and methodological resources required for thinking with the non-human or more-than-human to be mobilised when questions such as who counts as fully human, whose lives are recognised as liveable, and whose histories are acknowledged, remain so urgent for so many? Additionally, how might the real be reimaged through worldmaking when any liveable world seems increasingly foreclosed for

those inhabiting the furthest margins of dispossession?

We do not, however, wish to overstate the distance between them. Both Hartman and Haraway are committed to feminist ways of knowing, both treat fabulation as an ethically and politically charged practice, and both are animated by a refusal to accept the given terms of what counts as real, possible or thinkable. These commonalities are substantial enough to place them along a shared intellectual horizon, provided we remain attentive to the different contexts, locations and concerns from which each emerges, and resist the temptation to dissolve those differences into a false synthesis.

While the work of scholars such as Hartman and Haraway has been central to contemporary discussions of fabulation, the histories and practices to which the term now refers extend far beyond any single theoretical lineage. Over the past decades, fabulation has been taken up and reworked across a range of intellectual, artistic and political traditions from feminist fabulation and Afro-fabulation to Afrofuturism and other speculative modes of cultural production. Each has mobilised fabulation differently, adapting it to distinct histories, political struggles, epistemologies and aesthetic concerns. Yet even these named traditions tell only part of the story.

It is important to note that social and cultural formations differ markedly in their construction of both the real and the fabulative, and that ideas of worldmaking are anchored in onto-epistemological conditions that render certain stories plausible, where elsewhere those same stories might appear fantastical. Propositions in both critical and speculative fabulation therefore require caution: they cannot simply be grafted onto the historical palimpsest of the Global South, with its multi-dimensional cultural inscriptions and competing political conditions.

Across different cultural contexts, artistic traditions and knowledge systems, there are long-standing practices of storytelling that work at the limits of what can be known, engage with forms of absence and opacity and imagine lives, worlds and futures beyond what is immediately given. The evolving figure of the griot in West African storytelling, for instance, functions to direct listeners and spectators towards other worlds in which the residue of traditional belief systems is entangled with colonial legacies and liberation histories, where ritual serves to fragment and reconstitute community among the living and the dead. In such contexts, fabulation is not primarily deployed to attend to archival gaps or to forge interspecies relations. Rather, it drives the sense-making of a world fractured by historical violence and political unrest, one in which subjectivity is constantly negotiated across place and context, and in which any claim to futurity rests not only on historical and political redress but on the demand for economic freedom and global mobility. This is a reminder that an equally important task would be to attend more fully to practices that operate in ways analogous to fabulation without ever being designated as such and this deeper consideration falls beyond the scope of this particular issue.

The contributions gathered here engage a range of perspectives and artistic and disciplinary positions. The following contextualisation offers brief glimpses into the distinct concerns, methods and interventions that each contribution brings to this ongoing and expanding field.

Nnenna Onuoha, Joseph Steele and Hope Strickland come together in a roundtable conversation that reflects on their respective films – *Memory Guardians* (2024), *Untitled Essay Film* (2024) and *I'll Be Back* (2022 – and the role fabulation plays within each practice. The exchange moves across personal, political and philosophical interpretations of what fabulation can do. For Onuoha, fabulation operates as both a creative strategy and a form of epistemological redress; for Strickland, it is crucial to explore the relationship between fabulation as a

poetic strategy and marronage as a mode of real-world political refusal; and Steele turns to jurisprudence as a generative framework for thinking through fabulation. Together, they navigate the formal and political stakes of working across temporalities and materialities, while remaining candid about the risks of fabulation: the possibility of slipping from real-world political action into a conceptual turn that unintentionally dilutes the importance of lived events into something otherwise.

Situating memory as a contested arena shaped by competing narratives, Andrea Ancira's essay examines how official discourses of peace and humanitarian reconciliation have displaced the revolutionary and collective aspirations that informed Guatemala's civil war. Drawing on a family archive connected to the country's armed resistance, the essay proposes "walking backwards" as a fabulative methodology that destabilises linear temporality, archival neutrality and reconciliatory closure and foregrounds absence, opacity and relationality. Through affective, speculative and embodied engagements with archival traces, it reimagines the archive as a context in which personal and collective histories are continually rehearsed, contested and negotiated.

Mafalda Gamboa's essay takes the collective poster-making of the Nordic Fabulations Workshop as an anchoring point for rethinking what fabulation might do and mean. By tracing the ephemera of the workshop, she reframes fabulation not simply as a speculative tool oriented towards imagined futures, but as a situated practice of embodied and shared care that composes worlds in the present tense. Drawing on feminist technoscience and craft, Gamboa introduces the notion of pre-figurative making "in the small", a mode of storytelling in which thought is folded into matter and matter into relation.

Gabriela Sá's essay unfolds through an interplay between fragments of a performance-lecture and theoretical reflection on archive, narrative-making and fabulation. This formal choice is itself constitutive of the argument, as the piece simultaneously enacts and examines the performance-lecture as a medium for fabulative work. Situating the enquiry within the echoes of Brazil's "gold fever", Sá attends to the archival gaps and erasures that structure both personal and collective memory. Proposing the performance-lecture as a *dispositif* for critical fabulation, Sá's contribution offers a practice-based and theoretically grounded account of how narrative, imagination and archival research can be woven together.

Pierre-Antoine Vettorello's photographic essay draws on a family archive to fabulate the life of Raby Diop, a Wolof woman from Rufisque who travelled to Paris in January 1939. Raby's insistence on wearing her Senegalese garments rather than assimilating into European dress becomes the essay's central thread. Fabulating the twenty days before Raby's departure from Dakar, while collaborating with Atelier Tess's Binta Gaye and Maï Diop in Saint-Louis to reproduce the garment she proudly wore during her layover in Casablanca, Vettorello mobilises textile practice both as a form of historical enquiry and potential histories.

Building on Donna Haraway's concept of worlding, Nicky Coutts mobilises fabulation to explore interspecies relation, ecological precarity and the limits of language. Central to this exploration is an encounter with the gorilla Koko, whose use of American Sign Language opens up broader questions about translation, authorship and the possibilities of communication across species. Coutts's drawing series *Traumatic Objects* serves as the primary focus of this enquiry, foregrounding iterative process, mimicry, durational engagement and material attentiveness as key tenets of her fabulative practice. Coutts advances drawing as a mode of thinking-through-making, a practice in which meaning is generated through relation rather than secured through representation. The broader contention, here, is that fabulation makes possible forms of relation that resist possession, fixed identity and epistemological closure.

Drawing from the impetus of the exhibition “Enargeia”, Edith Marie Pasquier provides a transcription of her performance at the Fabulation workshop to connect human experiences of loss, grief and death by proposing a fabulation of feeling – a sense of belonging and oneness with experiences in and from nature. This intervention immediately brings us to an interspecies connection that seeks to ground feeling through soil, earth and acts of digging.

Regina Dürig and Wiebke Leister’s contribution takes the medieval myth of Mélusine as an example for feminist fabulation and experimental textual practice. The essay develops a series of scores: instructional, fragmentary and performative approaches that treat the text not as a vehicle for transmitting information but as an abstract gesture open to interpretation. Dürig and Leister ask how we might retell the myth of Mélusine with her hyphenated and multi-creatured body in mind and how that retelling contributes to a layered lineage of feminist fabulation.

Emily Orley’s contribution is as much a formal experiment as it is a critical argument. Fabulating around the Greek myth of Echo, the piece consists of nineteen fragments that appear in a random sequence each time they are read, enacting a deliberately rhizomatic, disjunctive and repetitive arrangement in which form and content are inseparable. Drawing on creative criticism, *écriture féminine* and diffractive reading, Orley’s text opens onto a story of possibilities rather than conclusions. Crucially, the piece does not approach its mythological source uncritically, acknowledging that classical mythology has historically been constructed in the service of white supremacy and empire. Orley complicates this inheritance by bringing feminist and postcolonial voices into conversation with Echo’s story, transforming it into a critical and speculative reopening.

Taken together, the contributions resist any singular or settled account of what fabulation is or does. Rather than adjudicating its definition, the contributors explain the specificities of their positions and locations, outline the demands of their chosen artistic medium, and describe distinct methodological, aesthetic and ethical commitments. The range is considerable: from critical and speculative fabulation to feminist fabulation; from marronage to interspecies relations; from the performance-lecture to the photographic essay and film practice. What orients these contributions collectively is less a shared theory than a shared commitment to artistic practice as an area where the possibilities and limits of fabulation are worked through, negotiated and, at times, refused. In this sense, the issue makes no claim to exhaust the term. Rather, it offers a series of situated engagements – partial, contested and productively inconclusive that demonstrate the continued generative force of fabulation precisely through their differences. What these contributions collectively highlight is that fabulation’s possibilities and risks are always context-dependent: geography, social and political formation as well as temporality set the boundaries of what fabulation can do and what it must be held accountable to.

Footnotes

1. Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle. 1999. p. 196.
2. De Piérola, José. *Fabulations*. Hamilton: Kernpunkt Press. 2022.
3. Nyong’o, Tavia. “Wildness: A Fabulation”. *The Scholar & Feminist Online*/. vol. 12. nos. 1–2. fall 2013/spring 2014. Available at <https://sfoonline.barnard.edu/wildness-a-fabulation/> [accessed 2026-06-04].
4. Lee, Toby. “The Radical Unreal”. *Film Quarterly*. vol. 74. no. 4. 2021. p. 17.

5. Ibid.
6. Nyong'o, "Wildness: A Fabulation".
7. Hartman, Saidiya. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. New York: W.W. Norton. 2019.
8. Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts". *Small Axe*. vol. 12. no. 2. 2008. p. 11.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2016. p. 213.
12. Ibid.
13. The notion of fungible human life derives from Hartman's work on slavery and its afterlives. Fungible, meaning interchangeable or replaceable, is the term Hartman uses to draw attention to the violent process by which enslaved people were rendered interchangeable within the economies of slavery and racial capitalism, a process through which their unique identities, individualities and social relations were systematically subordinated and denied. See Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1997.
14. For feminist fabulation see Barr, Marleen S. *Feminist Fabulation: Space/Postmodern Fiction*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press. 1992. For Afrofuturism see Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose". In *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 1994. pp. 179–222; and Nelson, Alondra. ed. "Afrofuturism". *Social Text*. vol. 20. no. 2. 2002. pp. 1–146. For Afro-fabulation see Nyong'o, Tavia. *Afro-fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life*. New York: NYU Press. 2019.