



STUDIES IN MOBILITIES,
LITERATURE, AND CULTURE

Neuro-Futurism and
Re-Imagining Leadership
An A-Z Towards
Collective Liberation

Kai Syng Tan

**For Dare-Devils,
Dreamers and Do-ers**

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Studies in Mobilities, Literature, and Culture

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ISSN 2946-4838 ISSN 2946-4846 (electronic)
Studies in Mobilities, Literature, and Culture
ISBN 978-3-031-55376-9 ISBN 978-3-031-55377-6 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-55377-6>

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This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

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*For Dare-devil dreamers and do-ers. Bally fishes out of water, under-dogs
and scape-goats. Impatient workers of culture, tired-of-fakers, risk-takers.
Hopeful makers of art, trouble, meaning, change, and futures.*

Praise for *Neuro-Futurism and Re-Imagining Leadership*

Neuro-Futurism tackles the myriad of concerns around injustices, mobility, creativity and community, with a spotlight on what neurodiversity brings to the table. The book is a commentary on neurodiversity, the foregrounding of the neglect of scholarship that takes neurodiversity seriously as a mode of interacting with the world, and the potential for neurodiverse creatives, scholars and activists, and their communities, to contribute to the growth of research on artistic methods, community engagement, resistance, and mobility justice projects.

The book takes the reader on a whirlwind tour around these issues, through an alphabetically structured series of chapters that lead readers through the relations across seemingly disparate phenomena. This is carefully and thoughtfully done. It forces the reader to upend their assumptions and allows Kai to build momentum and unravel this self-described ‘manifesto’ for the reader. This ‘unconventional’ structure is part of the book’s clever manoeuvre—it urges the reader to consider their own assumptions and prejudices and carefully encourages a re-learning and call-to-action for creative, innovative and diverse practices to have space to breathe in the academy and beyond. It will ruffle feathers of (perhaps mostly neurotypical) scholars due to its structure and tone of writing, but that is, I think, part of the point. It is meant to disrupt and energise—asking for change and urging us to question assumptions and poor habits we find ourselves easily dismissing under excuses of institutional frameworks. It questions academic agency and integrity, urging to confront difference and diversity, and using the artistic and creative as one mechanism to push for better leadership in this space. This is bold and inspiring—and I cannot wait to use this as an exemplar in my own methods and teaching—which, I hope, is exactly the kind of inspiration and action that the author has strived for.

The book draws on contemporary issues and recent worldly events, but is also attentive to foundational texts and theories. Engagement with literature across disciplines and topics is ambitious and impressive, and there are plenty of avenues for further readings in the footnote-commentary too. By mid-way through the book, the reflection and examples drawn from her own work really start to shine through as illustrative of some of the concepts and resistances that are set up earlier in the book.

The book will appeal to a broad audience. Kai is a well-connected and respected scholar across mobilities, creative arts, social sciences, and more—with an international network of colleagues who I know will engage with the book in their

research and teaching. It will also feed out into other disciplines that are engaged with disability studies, neurodiversity, postcolonial/decolonial scholarship, and more.

—Dr Kaya Barry, Artist-Geographer

Astonishing, daring, pioneering, and much, much needed, Kai Syng Tan's *Neuro-Futurism* is a remarkable achievement both in form and in content. Through a journey of 26 powerful reflections and calls to action, it shows how leadership has become enmeshed with inequality, injustice, consumerism, and exploitation of people and the planet. It reveals that, more often than not, leaders act in the service of maintaining vested systems of interest and the legacies of colonialism. With a style that is at once inspirational, creative, subversive, and at times hilarious, Kai Syng Tan gives us multiple strategies to disrupt and reclaim ideas and spaces. In her unique vision for the future, by 2050 neurodivergence and, more generally, difference become the grounds for new ways to think about and *do* leadership that can move the world in an equitable and sustainable fashion.

—Dr Mohammed Abouelleil Rashed, Philosopher-Psychiatrist

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The endurance, courage and creativity of marginalised body-minds who are on the move, who have moved us and who are moving the world have kept many going, especially during our troubled times. Why we haven't discussed many of these movers and shakers in leadership terms, and why we continue to canonise individuals and systems that trip, trick, maim or murder puzzled me. My curiosity has driven my endeavour since at least 2016 to find out more about the conceptual and imaginative possibilities of leadership as a critical and creative study and practice. *Neuro-Futurism and Re-Imagining Leadership: An A-Z Towards Collective Liberation* is my collage at this juncture.

This book maps together exemplars of what I consider as *better* definitions and models of leadership, and *better* role models, and proposes a new way to think about and do leadership. It critically appropriates, elevates and celebrates the Dirty, Demeaning and Dangerous labour of those in the margins as a leadership discourse. After all, having survived and even *thrived* within hostile systems, aren't the resource-poor often already resource-ful and leader-ful by nature and design?

This book expresses my solidarity with larger efforts of abolition, emancipation, transformation and liberation. I'm particularly grateful to many teachers, mentors, collaborators and students who have guided and pushed me.

I am not able to feature or thank every-body in this book. I put my hands up with regard to my biases and blind-spots and welcome feedback and learnings. Furthermore, I acknowledge the privilege, luxury and luck

I've been afforded to be able to put my musings, sketches and speculations down and for them to be shared. If your teacher, colleague, institution or other frameworks you function within require proof or precedence for the anti-oppression labour you are engaged in, please cite book-books like this one. Instead of having to apologise or explain again and again, I hope that you can get on with what it is that you care about.

Last but not least, I thank my critics, trolls and detractors. You've made it clear why efforts like *Neuro-Futurism* are necessary.

Attention: All views expressed here, when not that of others referenced, are that of the author's alone and not that of any institution or individual they are affiliated with.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Power imbalance. Prisons. Police brutality. Pogrom of Palestinians. Plutocracy. Pollution. Public service that ignores ‘public’ and ‘servitude’. Practices that Persecute the Poor or Peculiar. Policies that execute non-white body-mind-worlds. Performative allies. The Popular Pre-occupation in autistic cartoon tycoons. Pipe-line Problems, not just for oil—thanks Putin—but for fresh Prototypes of Power. Poverty—of imagination. Have pale/stale approaches to ‘leadership’ Produced and Perpetuated our world of problems with a capital P? If standard approaches to ‘leadership’ suck, can the creative, ‘non-standard’ animate new Path-ways forward, beyond the Perma- and Poly-crises?

Neuro-Futurism and Re-Imagining Leadership: An A-Z Towards Collective Liberation is a rip-roaring manifesto that re-claims ways to think about and do ‘leadership’ in more equitable and energising ways. Colliding mobilities, social justice, neuro-queering, critical leadership studies, futurity and creative research for the first time, the book proposes ‘neuro-futurism’ as a beyond-colonial, heuristic change-making practice for individuals and institutions. Across 26 short chapters and 39 images, and celebrating the Dirty, Demeaning and Dangerous labour of marginalised culture workers, movers and shakers otherwise side-lined in (leadership) scholarship, *Neuro-Futurism* outlines a repertoire of riotous strategies towards dismantling and liberating from white-supremacist cis-het-neuro-normative-capitalist-patriarchal approaches to power. Punching up, punchy and pulling no punches, this sweaty hand-book is a call to arms,

feet, sole and soul for body-minds of all ilk and from all walks, to re-imagine a world where diverse beings can thrive alongside other humans, nature and more-than-humans, including one Octo-Pussy. The deadline is 2050 so we're running out of time. Are you ready for an awesome adventure?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kai Syng Tan, PhD PFHEA (she/they) is an award-winning artist-academic-agitator known for her trademark ‘eclectic style & cheeky attitude’ (*Sydney Morning Herald*). Tan’s unique vision of leadership draws on her portfolio as a sought-after hyper-active mover and shaker, as well as background as a neuro-divergent migrant from a working-class upbringing. Tan is a change-maker (as Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival juror, awarding the top award to an anonymous filmmaker formerly imprisoned by the Myanmar military junta; as trustee of a charity for detained asylum-seekers, drove its radical transformation by embedding co-creation and anti-oppression practices, leading to the appointment of its first, Black neuro-divergent female Artistic Director), curator and creative director (leading programmes ranging from £0 to £4.8m, including a Black History Month celebration that reached 18.2 million worldwide, and the opening and closing ceremonies of Asia’s Paralympics praised as ‘game-changing’ by disability groups), trans-disciplinary innovator (first artist on a Royal College of Psychiatrist’s editorial board), artist (San Francisco International Film Festival Golden Gate Film Award; National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement Culture Change Award; Young Artist Award conferred by the president of Singapore; showcases in Museum of Modern Art (New York) (MoMA), Guangzhou Triennial and Royal Geographical Society), provocateur (regularly delivering keynote lectures; expert advisor for UK and Singapore government bodies, international research councils and even a ministry of defence), research instigator (acknowledged as ‘absolutely instrumental’ in re-framing running as creative discourse, through her curated RUN! RUN!

RUN! Biennale, as well as Running Cultures and Running Artful Networks; founded and/or (co-)led six global research networks, including the 420-member Neurodiversity In/& Creative Research Network), creative theorist/writer (publications include BBC, Guggenheim, *Frontiers Psychology* and *The Manila Times*), and mentor, teacher and academic developer (awarded Principal Fellowship; taught in 200 universities worldwide; regularly delivers masterclasses, such as for Royal Society of Arts, and 870 brain and mind experts from 17 countries, 14th International Conference on ADHD in Berlin). Tan is Associate Professor of Arts and Cultural Leadership at Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton. *Neuro-Futurism* is her first—and certainly not last—book.

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T: Turn the Table of Dis-Contents

Tired of how the world is moving—or not moving? Had enough of being taken for a ride by those in power? Join me, in my movement, to become movers and shakers for 2050 and beyond. Instead of quaking in fear, let's shake things up, and co-curate ways to think about and do 'leadership' together.

BAT-SHIT

Hi, I'm Kai. I'm a chimera. I'm a tentacular, part AI-run-octopus-slash-pussy-cat-slash-hair-less-chimp: an *Octo-Pussy*.¹ I've been chewing over leadership, the future, and the future of leadership ever since I felt peculiar.

Was it long Covid?

Unlikely, as I've been queasy long before humans ate bat soup.

Could the revolting turn of events cause my motion-sickness?

Probably. If the world is 'on the move' and is an 'oyster' for the mobile, as sociologist John Urry argues,² the ~~motion~~ *commotion* has become frenetic, and the oyster rancid for many.³

That's if plebs can afford oysters—or oyster-mushrooms—to begin with.

MINDING OUR PS

Power-imbalance underpins how ‘leadership’ works—or *doesn’t*. Think ‘leadership’, and you picture the precious few exercising control over creatures and cosmoses with rules and structures that they sit above. Those with resources occupy and guard the top of the food-chain as ‘leaders’, and manipulate the story, practice and knowledge of ‘leadership’—and everything else—at the expense of everybody else. To pump-up its status and to up-hold the status quo, the ruling elite starve others of access, autonomy and agency. In the name of ‘progress’, they invent imperialism, agriculture, war, slavery, mining, zoos, capitalism and other blood-sports and systems that im-prison us, from the personal to planetary.

No wonder we’re Plied with Problems with a capital P:

- Protectionism and Plutocracy. Public service that turns its back to ‘Public’ and ‘servitude’. Poshos Peddling Policies to Paralyse the Precariat. Peppa Pigs, Party-gate and the sunken billionaire’s toy Ocean-gate. Push-backs—including literally—of boats of refugees. Titanic unremitting taunts of the Passengers and Progeny of HMT *Empire Windrush*. Provide, Polarise, rule and ridicule.
- Police brutality. Procedures criminalising difference. People who’re queer, of the wrong colour/class/conduct Penalised. Despite being a colourful, critical mass, the global majority being marginalised and *minoritised* by the ruling minority. Post-George Floyd’s murder, a Proliferation of Public Pledges of diversity, equity and inclusion (EDI or DEI), which are Performative and pre-maturely DIE.⁴ We Protest—and face back-lash, including by those playing Poundshop versions of their oppressors. In their desperation for approval, they become more extreme and evangelical Parodies of former masters, double down and Punch-down harder.⁵ Sponsorship of the holocaust of Palestinians via tax-payers’ money. The exclusion of Rohingyas—the world’s largest stateless Population⁶—from our mind and land.
- Those with queer, neuro-divergent bodies—or body-minds-worlds, since they’re entangled—are fetishised as ‘competitive advantage’,⁷ the next talent opportunity,⁸ and drivers of Progress for 70,000 years,⁹ with autistic cartoon-tycoons as Poster-Boys. Weird but Pale or Prosperous? Charming! All other oddballs remain

Pathologised, demonised, infantilised, ventriloquised, silenced and out-cast.¹⁰

- It gets weirder: The Perpetuation of normative Play-books within Purportedly Pro-diversity communities. Many Prohibit those from the Global South, or those not ‘high-functioning’ (sic) to join the Party and ignore calls for decolonisation.¹¹ The queerness of how one thought-leader of neuro-diversity—the co-existence of many minds—can’t grasp gender-diversity, or that many transgender people are also autistic,¹² and aired trans-exclusionary views *during Pride Month*, while continually recentring their own victimhood.¹³
- Hungry for more crying-wolf and gas-lighting? Let’s have the carbon-hungry ‘kinetic elites’ monopolise ‘shared’ resources¹⁴ and cover up predictions of climate disaster in the 1970s.¹⁵ Want more shitty magic? Potable water becomes diarrhoea when firms dump sewage into seas and canals. Let’s escalate (fecal) matters: Apart from lording over (social) media, supply chains,¹⁶ the cloud and governments,¹⁷ or openly maiming and murdering the Poor,¹⁸ the hyper-mobile ‘Fauxlanthropists’¹⁹ are colonising the low earth orbit, mars, moon and more, although there’s already ‘no more space’.²⁰
- Despite consulting or inventing theories, we find no respite. Plot twists and turns Pervade—neuro, spatial, (new) mobilities, creative—but many turn out to be Pontifications un-fit for Purpose. Even the boffins agree that leadership remains one of the ‘least understood phenomena on earth’ such that ‘one of the most universal cravings of our time’ is the ‘hunger for compelling and creative leadership,²¹ and that ‘moving leadership forward’ demands ‘multidisciplinary and inter-disciplinary collaboration’ and a ‘broad lens’.²²
- Pre-Pandemic, the Promotion of creativity and cross-Partisan collaboration to solve wicked global challenges, particularly for the AI-governed era of ‘Industry 4.0’.²³ Still, we revert to nostalgia, walls, silos and segregation. We ~~Plunder~~ Protect barbarians’ arts and artefacts, mock minoritised scholars for being ‘niche’—even, or *especially* by areas Pre-fixed with ‘critical’ or purport to be ‘constructivist’ which often Prioritise their struggles on single issues and blindsides others—and report them to the Prevent anti-terrorism hotline, then re-Package their ideas as ‘Post-’ this or that. We spend billions²⁴ on courses on ‘Personal growth’, but find no re-course, only finger-Pointing at individuals for not being ‘resilient’²⁵ or ‘responsible’.²⁶

Meanwhile, Pipeline issues Persist, not just for oil—thanks Putin—
but for fresh Prototypes of Power, and new Paradigms and Paragons
of leadership.

- Poverty—of imagination.

What a loopy loop.

A NON-CONSENSUAL HALLUCINATION

Why should ‘leadership’ be about throwing the weaker under moving
buses? Why are Porsche SUVs speeding on the Pavement, running over
Pedestrians with wooden Prosthetics, then extorting ‘compensation’ from
the grieving relatives for their PTSD? Isn’t it bat-shit if being a ‘leader’ is
about fixing systems to put others in a fix, while you make yourself fixed,
fixated with power, un-movable and un-moving, making others (feel) un-
fit, including for leadership, and Peddling Placebos to fix us?

I feel ill. Did I consent to this? I don’t think I was even asked. Didn’t I
squeal in Protest when excreted from another Primate’s birth canal,
drenched in fetal/fecal jelly?

Then why did I pop up one month Pre-maturely?

Also, although ill-fitted to much of the established order, I haven’t
Purged myself from it.

Aren’t I as guilty for Pooing into Uranus, and my own?

It’s Pants. I’m Panting. I’m going to Puke. (Fig. 1.1²⁷)



Fig. 1.1 Motion-Sickness (Self-Portrait)



CHAPTER 2

P: Pivot. Play Havoc

Are you throwing up too? But don't throw in the towel. Here's mine to wipe our sick.

MINDING OUR QS

First, the bad news: There are no quick fixes for our Plight.

The good news, however, is that we *can believe* that we can make things *better*, and share *better* news.

I'm an artist. It's my job to think that.

Buddha hit the nail on its head by saying that we live in an illusion. So did bell hooks (1952–2021). The poet-slash-teacher clarifies that the value of art isn't to 'tell it like it is', but to 'imagine what is possible'.²⁸

We'll spurn nihilism and nirvanas. Instead, we'll Play a Part in Proposing Pathways to the Possibility of *better*, im-Perfect and hole-y as our Plans must be.

That we can Pose *better* questions, like:

- How have Pale, stale Practices of and thinking around leadership Produced and Perpetuated our Perma- and Poly-crises?
- How to knock, mock, unlock and dismantle or abolish harmful monuments and master (sic) narratives around leadership?

- As ‘leadership’ has been in hot soup, what could it be(-come)? Since the ‘norm’ has been sub-standard, what could the ‘non-standard’ or ‘ab-normal’ reveal for the ‘new normal’?²⁹ In a world in motion and commotion, how to activate body-minds in motion as modes of creative intervention?³⁰

TENTACLES AND TRAILS, TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS

These lines of inquiry run through this book. The lines are squiggly, more like tentacles. *Neuro-Futurism and Re-Imagining Leadership: An A-Z Towards Collective Liberation* is a manifesto of my motions and moves, to re-imagine leadership as a (co-)creative (ad-)venture. I’m corralling fellow odd-balls, creatures, collectives, classrooms, (under-)classes, communities, composites and cosmoses, to con-join forces and curate change together—and here’s hoping that you adore words starting not just with ‘P’, but ‘C’, as there’re more to come. Being critical friends, we’ll comfort and challenge one another, and celebrate wins of any scale. We’ll lock hand-in-hand, and with heads, hearts with horns, and soul with sole, and Perform *better* Possibilities of leadership, and shape a *better* future, together.

Am I punching above my weight?

Definitely. I have many blind spots and biases. I’ve also made more mis-steps than hits than I can count. I am as responsible as others of my generation and upbringing for the systemic damages committed.

That’s also why I must now clean up after myself and others.

Having been a teacher for three decades, I also believe that humans—myself included—can un-learn and re-learn. And nope, I didn’t see teaching as my grand vocation. Being poor, giving tuition allowed me to make a living from the age of 17.

Furthermore, as a former endurance runner, I’m also a die-hard optimist fuelled by long-range vision.³¹ I’d begun imagining futures—one generation away in 2050—when I got sick and tired of feeling sick and tired. I want to not be part of the Problem, and instead contribute to efforts to take us towards spaces with less struggle, danger or pain, and more creativity, love and joy, where we can thrive.

Being hyper-active, I don’t sit still. Nor do I take things lying down. I’m animated and always wandering/wondering by default/design (Fig. 2.1³²). Therefore, we’ll run through spectra of courses and dis-courses, sprinting across time, space and our imagination.

To *Pivot*—like this book, and like many businesses during the Covid pandemic—and generate systemic change, we can't Pussy-foot around. After all, the Chinese and Latin root words of 'discourse'—'dao' and '*discursus*'—con-joins the head and thinking, with feet that are moving—specifically *running*—from place to place.³³ In fact, the Old English and Old Dutch origins of 'leadership'—'*loedan*' and '*lithan*'—refer to travelling, endurance and guidance.³⁴

We'll run with this grounding of leadership because it evokes the toil, blood, sweat and tears of those working towards change. Framing leadership as the action or process of 'travelling' rather than destinations or individuals also runs with how those in 'Critical Leadership Studies' (CLS) broadly understand leadership. Instead of something fixed, in-born, or centred on individuals. CLS approaches leadership as a socially constructed process constituted by meaning-making and embedded in context and culture.³⁵ Power is confronted, to highlight the 'dependent, messy, paradoxical and partial ways of the relational and contextual dynamics of leadership'.³⁶ That said, nuanced discussions about difference, resistance and emancipation still often remain side-lined.

FOOTINGS FOR OUR GROUND-CLEARING EXERCISE

Thus, we'll seek *guidance* by fearless forerunners and fugitives who've *endured* hardship to out-play dominant, oppressive systems. Like other body-minds on the move, their ground-clearing work have often epitomised the infamous 3D's: Dirty, Demeaning and Dangerous. These Deviant, Defiant Dare-Devils have Paved the way for others like myself to now run our own expeditions.

Two such guides are Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Chijioke Obasi. Smith, of Māori heritage, warns that Western imperialism still destroys, and is reforming itself constantly, such as positioning itself as the source of 'civilised' knowledge, and judges what counts as knowledge.³⁷ To decolonise knowledge and our mind, we must interrogate *what, how* and *why* knowledge is produced, advises Obasi, who proposes 'Africanist sista-hood' in her own research to critique (white) feminism.³⁸

That's why *Neuro-Futurism* clears the murky air and ground, re-returns to the drawing board. We'll collage building blocks to propose new forms—and knowledge-formations—of leadership. This book is a mapping of our tools *in progress*. We'll invent magical and messy entanglements across diverse and divergent body-minds, and bodies of knowledge

and Practices. We'll collide leadership studies with fields it hardly rubs shoulders with.

This includes the study of how humans, ideas and things move (or not)³⁹—which is the field of ‘mobilities studies’. The future seems ‘murky’, announces mobilities co-founder John Urry.⁴⁰ That’s also why this Project is urgent, and why leadership must be about Projecting *ahead*.

Since making art is often about making futures through visualisation⁴¹—seen not least in movements like Afrofuturism—the arts, culture and creativity will Propel our voyage. Even leadership scholars admit that any meaningful scrutiny of the field of leadership cannot run away from the arts and humanities, since leadership is a ‘creation of our imaginations—forged from human relationships that encompass the hopes, fears, dreams, passions, wants, and needs of our individual and collective experiences’⁴². We’ve also learnt that to fight novel viruses and crises, creative, novel approaches are key.⁴³ Thus, we’ll entangle creativity with mobilities, which will Permit us to be ‘Promiscuous’, ‘experimental’, and flirt with scale,⁴⁴ con-joining the planetary⁴⁵ with the parasitic.⁴⁶

Besides taking inspiration from artistic outputs like fiction and film, we’ll explore what I have termed ‘artfulness’.⁴⁷ This involves *artistry* and craftiness as a-typical interventions into the wider world beyond that of ‘art’. In particular, we’ll highlight artworks and artful approaches by those in the margins. After all, having survived and even *thrived* within hostile systems, aren’t the resource-Poor often already resource-*ful* and leader-*ful* by nature and design⁴⁸? The extra-ordinary impact and legacies of the many Black feminist culture workers who will guide us in our journey—bell hooks for instance—exemplify the potential of what I term ‘artful leadership’.

This runs with hooks’ invitation to re-claim the ‘margin’ as an ‘inclusive space’ of ‘radical openness’ and ‘resistance’, ‘creativity and power’.⁴⁹ Those in the margin ‘see things differently’, and can battle the ‘interlocking systems’ of ‘white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy’.⁵⁰ Making those in the Periphery call the shots for our future hits back at ‘victors’ who’d white-washed history. It also contests Perspectives that are far from ‘universal’ as claimed,⁵¹ but are steeped in Patriarchal, First world Problems, like the Probable, Plausible, Possible and Preferable⁵² framework favoured by those in design.

In particular, we’ll shine a spotlight on the neuro-divergent, who’re incidentally over-represented in the arts⁵³—hence the prefix ‘neuro-’ in the ‘neuro-futurism’ of this book’s title. My arguments are doubly a-typical