

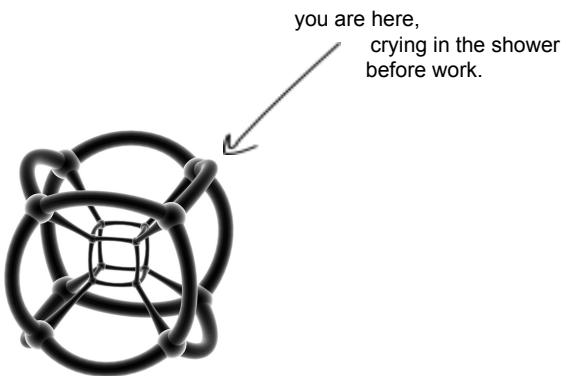
Tesseract Feminism: Mapping the Fifth “Wave” with Hyper-Geometry

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2025–2026



“‘Well, then, someone just tell me how we got here!’ Calvin’s voice was still angry and his freckles seemed to stand out on his face. ‘Even traveling at the speed of light it would take us years and years to get here.’

‘Oh, we don’t travel at the speed of anything,’ Mrs. Whatsit explained earnestly. ‘We tesser. Or you might say, we wrinkle.’”

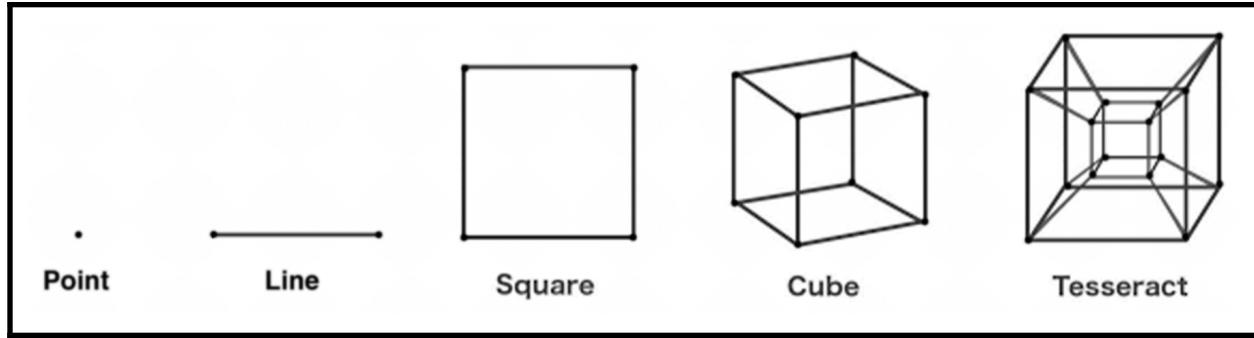
Madeline L’Engle, 1962, A Wrinkle in Time, page 70

At any given moment, the messy, complex amplitudes of the surface of the ocean can be summarized by a precise, real-world visualization of the mathematically “perfect” sine and cosine functions that underlie them.¹ This snapshot summation method works for oceanographers; it doesn’t translate as elegantly to the evolution of epistemology. For artists, organizers, and educators, mathematics can provide expansive metaphorical frameworks which create effective correlations to real world systems. The trick is choosing the right analogue.

The current mode of understanding the evolution of a Feminist politic as “waves” is counterintuitive to the creation of a flexible, dialectic Feminism that can continue to evolve and be passed down (Hemmings, 2005). The idea of subsequent waves crashing over one another, erasing the registration marks of what came before, feels white, linear, and colonial. It treats Feminist history like a shoreline that’s wiped clean every generation, as if theory should start from scratch as the same struggle persists. This blank-slate logic of forgetting how we got here is a colonial bad habit. When we write off the past as a separate wave, the Feminisms that were never centered in the first place are quickest to disappear. Black abolitionist Feminism, anti-imperialist and transnational Feminisms, and Queer and Trans survival work are forgotten by the mainstream and rediscovered every few movements (Mohanty, 1988). Durable movements must be responsive and accountable to their histories; how else could they evolve? A solution must be imminent; never has there been a greater need than in the present undertow of the fifth wave. The next major paradigm shift in Feminism involves a massive expansion in the classification of who Feminism is “for,” and what it demands. These “new” Feminist imperatives, such as abolition, climate justice, and Queer and Trans liberation, are still under the Feminist umbrella, because they determine the conditions under which gender is derived, lived, and policed.

In Madeline L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time*, the tesseract is mentioned, in slight disambiguation, to conceptualize of an omnitemporal fourth dimension. As a mathematical concept, the true nature of the tesseract is “the four-dimensional equivalent of the three-dimensional cube... often approximated as a cube within a cube” (Baugh, 2024). Though it’s impossible to fully visualize in three-dimensional space, a tesseract is the four-dimensional analogue of a cube. Just as a cube is a square extruded into a new direction (the third dimension), a tesseract is a cube, with each face extruded into a fourth direction, giving it eight cubic cells rather than six square faces.

¹ Fourier analysis is a way of breaking a complicated, irregular signal into a sum of simple sine and cosine waves. I reference it here to underline how a chaotic sea surface can be summarized with mathematical precision.



Above, ascending dimensionality of space through the first known five dimensions, courtesy of the author

I would argue that this overlapping, hyper-dimensional positionality is better equipped for conceptualizing a Feminism that is future-facing as well as aware of its history. Begone linear, presentist narratives of liberatory organizing.² Cast off the waves that crash, erase, and recede. Feminism deserves a container which honors simultaneity, recursion, and inheritance as organizing principles. This paper argues that naming the structure of feminist history is itself a political act, because the “wave” metaphor trains us to discard our inheritance. I propose the tesseract as a model for feminist time that holds simultaneity and coalition without replacement logic. Read this way, the fifth wave is not a new crest, but a re-centering of Black abolitionist feminist thought that has been present all along, even when mainstream feminist narratives sidelined it while borrowing its language and labor (Davis, 1981; Combahee River Collective, 2017; Zakaria, 2021).

Hyper-geometry gives us a way to model movement history as co-present rather than sequential, where what came before is not “outdated,” but structurally adjacent and prescient. The vessel of the tesseract will re-center the purpose of Feminist evolution away from the ideation of new, novel waves. This format will more fully realize the original demands of the Black abolitionist women who were some of modern Feminism’s first stewards. Demands which have been repeatedly sidelined by mainstream narratives, even while appropriating their labor, language, and vision (Davis, 1981; hooks, 1984; Jones, 2007).

The wave metaphor has stuck, likely in part because it's so teachable. In Mary Retta's piece, *the fifth wave; on white feminism & electoral politics* (2020), she writes “The ‘waves’ are a mnemonic,” constituted by “...a surge of activity at the beginning of a particular Feminist phase, which then reaches its peak in the form of a concrete accomplishment. Afterwards, the wave

² This presentism shows up when each wave is treated like it replaces the last, instead of inheriting it. For example, you can see this flattening in how #MeToo is often narrated as starting in 2017, even though Tarana Burke began “Me Too” as survivor-centered organizing in 2006, long before it went viral. (National Women’s Law Center, 2019) This need to assert #MeToo as a crown achievement of specifically the fourth wave is threatened by the fact of the ongoing triage Feminists have always been doing in the workplace.

crashes, and there's a lull until a new wave forms." But the expression's authority is newer than it seems. The "second wave" entered print with journalist Martha Weinman Lear, in her 1968 article "What Do These Women Want? The Second Feminist Wave." What began as colloquial shorthand later hardened into a rigid framework for moving forward. In practice, teaching waves through fixed eras with "correct" issues, a default subject, and "most-important" victories trains readers to sort struggles into different decades like fashion trends. The overlap and ongoing work is *intentionally* omitted to create a cleaner narrative. When we confuse an issue that affects us in the present, with an issue that is omnipresent across history, we exclude ourselves from benefitting from our ancestors' wisdom (Hemmings, 2005; Reger, 2017).

With or without the tesseract, Feminism is blazing forth into the fifth wave.

In her essay, Mary Retta writes, the "fifth wave" is not a new aesthetic for the same old representational goals. It is a structural Feminism that turns toward anti-work politics and treats capitalism as a Feminist problem, not a separate issue that Feminism can politely "ally" with. Retta names this directly, describing this wave as "anti-work and anti-capitalist," and she ties it to abolitionist horizons that are "entirely antithetical to the priorities of the US government," including defunding police and prison abolition. The point is not that Feminism has "outgrown" gender; the point is that gender has never been separable from the material systems that distribute safety, time, and life itself. Renaming this expansion as a generalized "humanism" risks turning Feminism into a vague universal where the neutrality of "human" acts as a disguise. Under this cover, a "default, median subject" smooths over the specific, gendered distribution of care labor, economic dependence, bodily discipline, and punishment. Fifth wave Feminism expands, but from an explicitly Feminist diagnosis of how power is organized in everyday life.

Feminism for the 99% (2019), by Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, clarifies why projects like anti-work, abolition, climate survival, anti-imperialism, and Queer and Trans liberation belong at Feminism's center. Their premise is structural, "We need an anticapitalist feminism, a feminism for the 99 percent" (13), which shifts the struggle from representation within oppressive institutions to the material systems that dictate safety, mobility, and agency. That shift reframes "women's issues" as infrastructural issues, which are also organized around gender. The discriminate assignment of care, dependency, and survival labor becomes a political question, hence the demand for "generous public support for social reproduction" (22). The demand to end gendered violence cannot be routed through punishment when "laws criminalizing gender violence are a cruel hoax" under conditions where policing and incarceration remain intact (15). Far from a secondary concern, climate crisis acts as a

reorganization of survival itself, intensifying gendered vulnerability through channels of forced displacement and reproduction control. Imperial war and border regimes deploy technologies of gendered and racialized control. The struggle of Queer and Trans individuals highlights how gender itself is policed, pulling back the curtain of the enforcement and exclusion that produce the category of a “legitimate subject.” This is why the authors insist Feminism “does not limit itself to ‘women’s issues’ as they are traditionally defined” (14), and why they make coalition structural, insisting Feminism must “join forces” across movements rather than treating them as adjacent (15).

Taken together, these demands require a model that can hold simultaneity. **Anti-work, abolition, climate survival, anti-imperialism, and Queer and Trans liberation are not add-ons after “gender equality.” They describe the conditions through which gender is produced, enforced, and lived.** This is why the container matters. A structurally intergenerational, coalitionist Feminism cannot be narrated as a linear sequence of replacements, wherein each new surge overwrites what came before. This is where the wave metaphor fails. To move forward, we need a totally different geometry of Feminist timespace to hold the complexity of Feminist history and futures.

To explain why the wave is so incongruent with Feminism’s future, I turn to Franca van den Broek’s *Fractured Currents: A Critical Reading of the Wave Metaphor in A Black Feminist Statement and the Riot Grrrl Manifesto* (2025). Van den Broek’s meta-analysis of Feminist epistemology explains that this metaphor has gotten away from us, “rather than functioning as a neutral or descriptive model, the wave framework acted prescriptively” (43). The “common sense” nature of the wave engenders a replacement logic. Each moment is pressured to distinguish itself by disavowing what came before. This pressure also flattens what Feminist movements actually do across generations. By van den Broek’s account, the wave “oversimplifies the complexity of feminist movements” and “imposes rigid boundaries that encourage unhelpful dichotomies” (43). The result is a split between theory and activism. It encourages readers to treat shared concepts, persistent demands, and tactical inheritance as anachronisms. Iris van der Tuin warns that, “what waves have in common fades to the background when waves are primarily seen in generational terms” (14). When Feminism is narrated as successive cohorts, valuable inheritance could be received as uncomfortable reminders of the problematic past, and not the wisdom it truly is.

A replacement-driven narrative is counter-intuitive to an explicitly coalitionist Feminism, co-constituted across anti-work struggle, abolition, climate survival, anti-imperialism, and Queer and Trans liberation. A presentist timeline mis-teaches the movement’s own history. The wave

metaphor is too flat for the demands we have just defined. Feminism has hit a dimensional threshold, the wave structure is collapsing, and we need new geometry to move forward.

A better suited, more long-lasting, flexible vessel, would build in simultaneity, honoring our ancestors' fight, keeping it alive today, and pushing towards the future. This approach should acknowledge the distinct, yet interconnected dimensions of identity, and how they impact different individuals, over time and across generations. Gender is never "just gender." It is lived through race, class, nation, sexuality, ability, through familial lineage, and all the other coordinates that dictate the ability to self-determine. A constant, usable form would hold these elements together, without implying seniority or legitimacy.

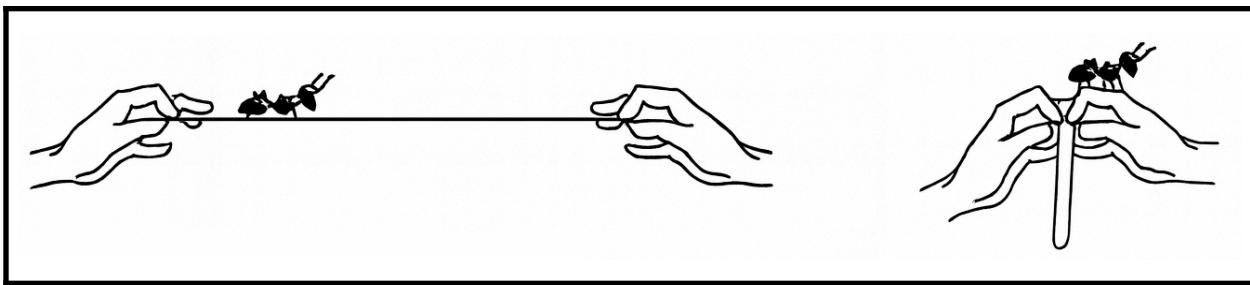
We can do all of this without leaving our seats, by acknowledging the element of time. Enter the tesseract.

Mrs. Who, Mrs. Whatsit, and Mrs. Which, of Madeline L'Engle's *A Wrinkle In Time* (1962), have their own use for the tesseract. They explain it to young geniuses, Meg, Calvin, and Charles Wallace, in a flowery, starlit field.

"...if a very small insect were to move from the section of skirt in Mrs. Who's right hand to that in her left, it would be quite a long walk for him if he had to walk straight across.'

Swiftly Mrs. Who brought her hands, still holding the skirt, together.

'Now you see,' Mrs. Whatsit said, 'he would be there, without that long trip. That is how we travel.'



Above, from A Wrinkle In Time, by Madeline L'Engle, page 86

'We travel in the fifth dimension. Did your mother ever explain a tesseract to you? ...going beyond the fourth dimension to the fifth. Did your mother ever explain it to you Charles?'

'Well, yes.' Charles looked a little embarrassed...

'Well, What is the first dimension?'

'Well— a line.'

‘Okay. And the second dimension?’

‘Well, you’d square the line. A flat square would be in the second dimension.’

‘And the third?’

‘Well, you’d square the second dimension. Then the square wouldn’t be flat anymore. It would have a bottom, and sides, and a top.’

‘And the fourth?’

‘Well, I guess if you want to put it into mathematical terms you’d square the square. But you can’t take a pencil and draw it the way you can the first three. I know it’s got something to do with Einstein and time. I guess maybe you could call the fourth dimension time.’

‘That’s right... Okay then, for the fifth dimension you’d square the fourth, wouldn’t you?’

‘I guess so.’

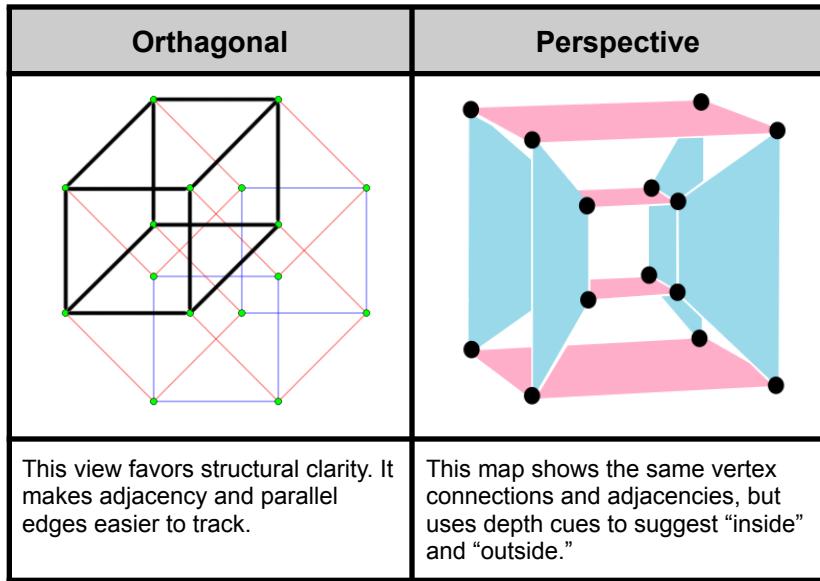
‘Well, the fifth dimension’s a tesseract.³ You add that to the other four dimensions and you can travel through space without having to go the long way around. In other words, to put it into Euclid, or old-fashioned plane geometry, a straight line is *not* the shortest distance between two points.’’’ (85-88)

Mrs. Who, Mrs. Whatsit, and Mrs. Which have an intimate, special way with the tesseract, much more intimate than I fear we could ever become. However, we too can observe its inherent traits, and seek inspiration for how we might also travel through space and time, all without moving from our seats. In this excerpt, L’Engle is broaching the titular “wrinkle” in time itself. The tesseract becomes a fixed object whose coordinates are in flux. The ant, without moving, found itself in contact with another time and space. Should it then take one, humble step forward, it would have traveled the equivalent of maybe half a yard of fabric, maybe more, in just one step. Monumental for an ant.

However, the tesseract is not merely two points on a single axis, perpetually growing nearer and farther apart. What makes it such a potent analogue for our purposes is its ultra-facetedness. The wrinkle illustrates adjacency, but the tesseract as a structure formalizes adjacency at scale. It’s a structure of many simultaneous contacts. Now bear with me here while we establish some baseline concepts of hyper-geometry.

³ L’Engle’s use of “dimension” treats time as the “fourth dimension,” so an additional direction that enables the Mrs.’s shortcut can be described as a “fifth.” In mathematics, a tesseract is the four-dimensional analogue of the cube, a 4D hypercube. L’Engle’s dialogue blends these frameworks, which is useful here because my argument is about what the metaphor teaches, and how time and history can be treated as active dimensions, rather than about strict technical nomenclature in plane geometry.

Philip Claude Caplan of MIT gives us all we need to know about the tesseract in his dissertation, *Four-Dimensional Anisotropic Mesh Adaptation for Spacetime Numerical Simulations* (2019). The hypercube, also called a tesseract, is bound by eight cubes, twenty-four squares, thirty-two edges, and sixteen vertices (29). It is (basically) a cube, with each of its faces extruded into a cube extending perpendicular into a new dimension.



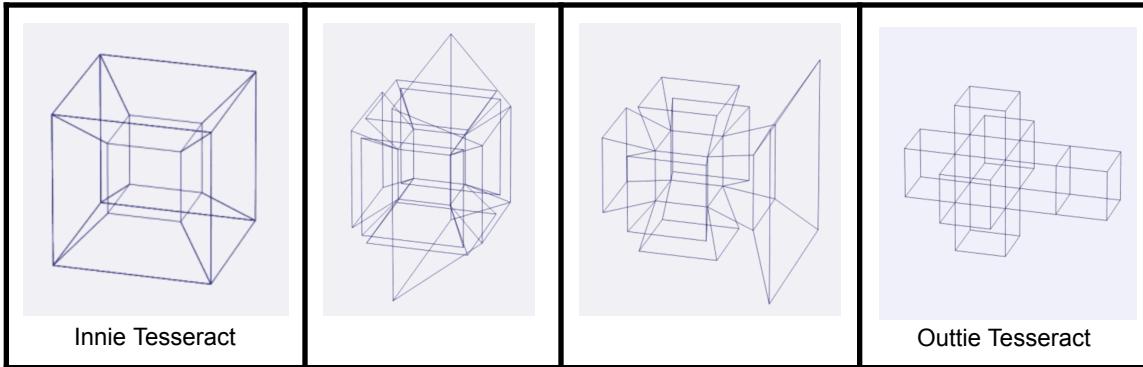
Above, different ways to map the tesseract, adapted from Wikipedia

As a four dimensional object, we cannot directly observe it in our three dimensional world,⁴ we can articulate the structure through simple arithmetic. Fortunately, others have done this part of the work. Caplan gives the general face-counting rule for an n-cube⁵, where the number of j-dimensional cube $f_{n,j} = 2^{n-j} \binom{n}{j}$ “faces” is , using a value from 0 up to calculate vertices, faces, etc. (29). A tesseract specifically would be represented as n = 4 (the fourth dimension), and this yields a tally of the shape's facets without relying on sight counting. When j = 0 the rule gives us 16 vertices. When j = 1 it produces 32 edges. When j = 2 it produces 24 square faces. When j = 3 it produces 8 cubic cells.

⁴ In Edwin A. Abbott's *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (1884), main character A. Square is literally a two-dimensional square living in a perfectly flat world. His sight is effectively one-dimensional. He can only perceive a thin horizon line, the edge of whatever shape faces him, never the whole figure at once. A triangle or square appears as a line segment whose length and brightness shift as it turns. When a Sphere visits Flatland, A. Square perceives a point that becomes a widening line segment, then narrows and vanishes again. He is witnessing successive cross-sections of a three-dimensional body intersecting his plane. It may be helpful to think of our own inability to visualize four-dimensional forms through this lens.

⁵ An n-cube is the terminology for shapes formed by raising a shape to the nth power. Just as a square is a line segment repeated across two directions and a cube is a square repeated into a new direction, each added direction is another copy of the same unit length, all at right angles to the others. N-cube refers to a cube, to the nth degree.

Though visual depictions of a tesseract are necessarily partial, its structure can still be made legible. Different depictions translate different adjacencies of the same fixed object. For our purposes, the net is the most useful. It does not claim to show what the tesseract “looks like.” It lays out the eight cubic cells so shared faces are readable at once. I think of the net as an “innie,” while the familiar cube-within-a-cube projection reads as an “innie” (see below).



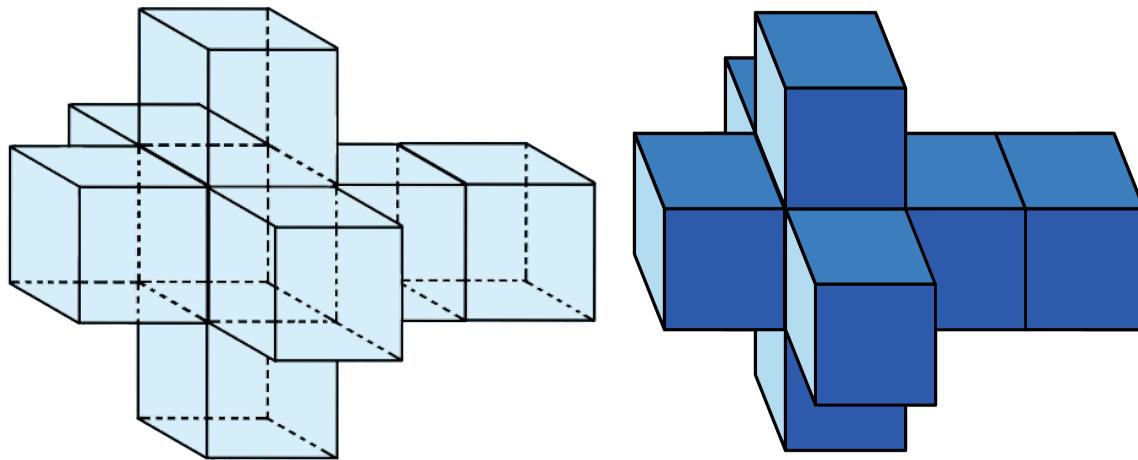
Above, 超立方體的展開, (Hypercube net (an unfolded hypercube)), by Wiki Contributor A2569875

Looking at this example, the conceptual leap to L’Engle’s “tessering” through time becomes more tangible. The net exposes adjacency at scale. It shows, repeatedly, that each cube is defined by what it shares; faces, edges, vertices, even their planes are co-occupied by multiple three dimensional forms in the same theoretical space. This is the specific pedagogical affordance the wave lacks. Waves are measured in surges, peaks, and recessions. That distinction is afforded to each wave through separation. A net does the opposite.

The tesseract can do two things at once in a way the wave cannot. Its structure remains fixed, yet the relations it makes legible shift depending on how it is projected or sliced. The object privileges relationality over separation. The mismatch between L’Engle’s “fifth dimension” and mathematical convention helps clarify what is at stake here. Popular writing often counts time as a “fourth dimension,” especially in Einsteinian registers (think a three-dimensional cube, tracked sitting in place as time passes), while mathematics typically reserves “dimension” for spatial extension. That dissonance actually exposes how perfectly the tesseract meets Feminism’s needs. Feminist time is not simply a neutral timeline. Time is a precious resource that is organized, distributed, withheld, and foreclosed. How Feminism narrates time determines what is visible, and what gets misrecognized as “past.”

Read this way, the breakdown of the wave metaphor can be understood as pressure on dimensionality. Early liberal Feminism centered a single-axis politics of gender, frequently marginalizing the experiences and concerns of women of color and other oppressed women. As

Feminist movements developed, they insisted on additional coordinates, including labor and social reproduction, then race and the simultaneity of oppressions that Black Feminists such as the Combahee River Collective and Audre Lorde articulate. The fourth wave is often associated with online organizing that foregrounded sexual harassment and rape culture, and the circulation of personal testimony. Many of the commitments now gathered under the fifth wave were never marginal to Feminist thought or practice. Long before they were legible as a coherent “wave,” abolitionist, anti-imperialist, and Queer and Trans struggles were already articulated within Feminism. Practice precedes theory. Each wave introduced crucial coordinates for Feminist organizing, but it is a mistake to assume each generation simply discovers an additional “dimension” of oppression. The fifth wave does not add another issue to an existing list. It treats abolition, climate justice, anti-imperialism, anti-work politics, and Queer and Trans liberation as co-constitutive. In that sense, the fifth wave is not another crest. It is one of many folds.



Above, Tesseract net maps, intransparent (left) and opaque (right). Adapted from Wikipedia

To chart fifth wave Feminism onto the tesseract, I'll treat the net as an analytic diagram rather than a snapshot. The eight cubic cells are not a final taxonomy, nor are they meant to convey the most central issues or ideas, or enforce any specific relationalities. Those relationalities are already present and enacted in each of our lives, no matter how we chart them with pen and paper. The purpose of this exercise is merely to furnish this framework with an example of how we might inhabit this structure. Through this habitation, we create opportunities to read alliances in shared edges, identify mutual sites of struggle on overlapping planes, and notice how previous waves represent slices within the larger structure. For clarity's

sake, I'll refrain from labeling each and every cell with all its interiority, to focus on exemplifying the positionalities shared by select neighboring cells, their faces, edges, and vertices.

Let's walk through Cell D, the cube mapping anti-work politics and social reproduction. Its interior holds time, exhaustion, unpaid domestic labor, wages, and dependency. Its faces are the structures that make "work" Feminist. Where D meets Cell E, healthcare and bodily autonomy, the shared face is governance of bodies through access, denial, and debt, which determines who can work and who must provide care. Where D meets Cell B, dispossession and housing, the common face is rent and property as time extraction, intensified by credit scoring, climate, disaster, and eviction, since precarity disciplines labor and limits capacity for refusal. Where D meets Cell C, abolition, the shared face is punishment as labor management,

Cell A: Anti-Imperialism

Cell B: Dispossession & Housing

Cell C: Abolition

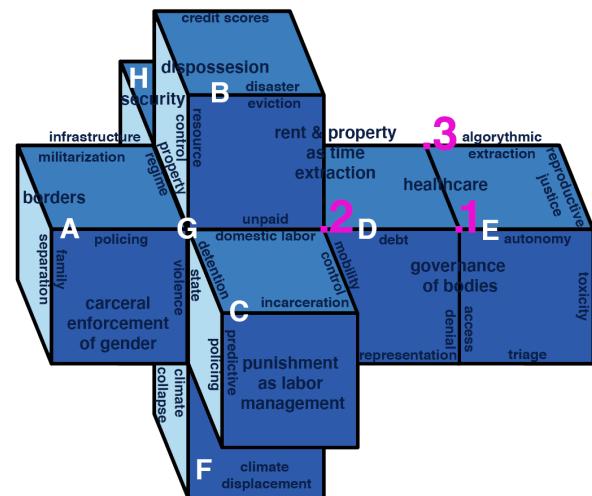
Cell D: Anti-work

Cell F: Bodily Autonomy

Cell F: Climate Justice

Cell G: Queer & Trans Liberation

Cell H: Surveillance



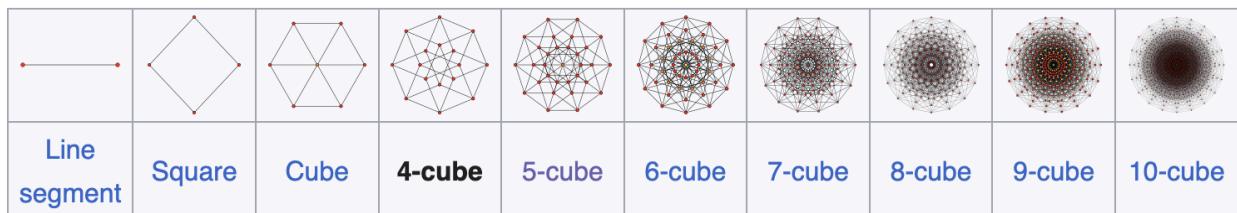
where incarceration and mobility control enforce gendered and racialized work regimes by controlling movement. Point 1 could represent employer-provided health insurance tied to employment, so losing a job means losing care. Point 2 might represent eviction court and criminal court cycling people into jail time, fines, and unstable work, with mobility controlled through probation, warrants, and policing. Point 3 highlights the overlap between credit-score and background-check screening for apartments and jobs, which blocks housing and income while debt and medical bills compound. Time is present across each axis, and we could chart the progression of different struggles through the three dimensional space within each cell. Even when two cells look far apart on the net, the assembled tesseract folds them back into adjacency through shared edges and vertices.

If we must circle back to waves, I want to note that the ocean has always been an infinitely-dimensional body. Waves are only the visible surface of the powerful forces undulating beneath. We should take note when these forces break the surface, making waves— but critical

consciousness doesn't end with that observation. Abolition, climate justice, anti-imperialism, anti-work politics, and Queer and Trans liberation are not new "issues" that arrive after we solve for gender. These are the ways gender is experienced and enforced, even when mainstream wave narratives could not or would not name them. If anything, fifth wave Feminism is the moment the undertow becomes undeniable, and we are forced to remodel Feminism as an organizing structure rather than a sequence. Naming that structure matters politically. It is a recognition that Black abolitionist Feminist thought has been doing the intellectual and organizing labor all along, even when subsequent waves treated it as marginal (Davis, 1981; Combahee River Collective, 2017; Zakaria, 2021).

The tesseract is, critically, still not the terminal state of Feminism. Ideally, Feminism should never stagnate, regardless of how we conceive of its shape. However, hyper-geometry expands opportunities for Feminism to fully occupy its outsized and wide-ranging transformative potential. There are names for these structures, and after the hyper-cube, there are hyper-pentagons, also known as the penteract, or just the 5-cube. There is no limit to the number of facets and terminal points hyper-geometric shapes can have, as pictured below. However, concluding that the substitution of shapes for waves is a purely rhetorical exercise would be a big mistake, huge!

This is not just a shift from counting five waves to five cubes, or even five hyper cubes. The shift is in releasing the expectation that our Feminism rises and falls, releasing the bias that present knowledge is more valuable than past, that current thought is most evolved. This shift acknowledges the way wisdom is folded in, leaving infinite room for growth, and reminding us of the history we are building on. Fixed, but flexible.



Above, Petrie Polygon Orthographic Projections, Courtesy of Wikipedia

This is how we need to think about our Feminism; not as passive waves lapping at the artificially sandy coastlines of patriarchy, but as the ocean itself. Expansive water undulating and shifting, its consummate parts inseparable and in constant flux. Waves are merely the visible surface of mass consciousness; Black eco-Feminism and abolitionism have always been the undercurrents.

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