

Generating Curriculum Visions for Global Citizenship: Collective Stories and Creative Imagination

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Abstract

Defensible curriculum decision-making requires that there be available to practical deliberation the greatest possible number and fresh diversity of alternative solutions to problems. Visions of alternative futures arise from many sources, and in this essay I focus on two such sources that tend to be under-represented in both school and higher education curricula, namely, (i) collective stories that reflect some degree of cultural (or sub-cultural) consensus about desirable futures; and (ii) speculative futures imagined by creative artists in various media. I describe selected examples of these approaches to generating alternative futures with particular reference to the implications of a global knowledge economy for contemporary understandings of notions such as citizenship.

Keywords: curriculum, globalisation, futures, consensus, storytelling, speculative fiction (SF), imagination.

Curriculum Decision-making in a Global Knowledge Economy

A current imperative for education in many nations – perhaps especially those that (like all Southern African nations) form part of the majority world – concerns the implications of a global knowledge economy for the ways in which curriculum decision-makers in education institutions and bureaucracies understand notions such as citizenship, identity, community, inclusion and exclusion, and the transformations of curriculum that they

impel us to consider¹. Whenever such questions arise, I am disposed to reconsider Alasdair MacIntyre's (1984: 216) approach to practical reasoning and ethical thinking:

I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?' ... Mythology, in its original sense, is at the heart of things.

Thinking about curriculum decision-making in terms of storytelling practices has been a key theme in the Anglophone reconceptualisation of curriculum studies, encapsulated by Madeleine Grumet's (1981: 115) characterisation of curriculum as 'the collective story we tell our children about our past, our present, and our future'. I always add to Grumet's formulation that curriculum is also a *selective* story that we tell our children about our past, our present, and our future, and that we should therefore attempt to be open-minded about expanding the range and variety of stories from which we select examples to tell and retell.

As Joseph Schwab (1969: 17-18) noted in his influential work on 'the practical' as a language for curriculum, one facet of effective curriculum deliberation is 'the anticipatory generation of alternatives', that is, effective decision-making requires that there be available to practical deliberation the greatest possible number and fresh diversity of alternative solutions to problems. Visions of alternative futures usually arise from four major sources and can be elucidated by corresponding methods and procedures:

- *extrapolation*: perceived consequences of present trends and events can be elucidated by trend analysis and extrapolation

¹ I prefer the term 'majority world' to the largely inaccurate, outdated and/or non-descriptive terms 'developing' nations, 'Third World' and global 'South'. Since the early 1990s the communications cooperative New Internationalist (www.newint.org) has used 'majority world' to describe this global community by reference to what it is, rather than what it lacks, and also to draw attention to the disproportionate impact that the Group of Eight countries – which represent a relatively small fraction of humankind – have on the majority of the world's peoples.

- *consensus*: opinions about what might or ought to happen can be elucidated by monitoring cultural and sub-cultural consensus using polls, commissions of ‘experts’, search conferences (Emery & Purser 1996) and variations on Delphi techniques.
- *creative imagination*: the speculative imagination of creative artists in various media produces images of alternative futures that can be further elucidated by their critique and, to some extent, by emulating their creative practices (for example, scenario-building frequently emulates science fiction)
- *combining* images from extrapolation, consensus and creative speculation produces further images of alternative futures. Combinatory techniques (such as cross-impact matrices, relevance trees, futures wheels, etc.) are among the most characteristic tools of professional futurists.

In this essay I focus on the collective and consensual stories through which we selectively produce visions of curriculum that *should* happen, and on the speculations of creative artists from which we can generate visions of curriculum that *might* happen.

Consensus: Visions of Curriculum that *Should* Happen

To date, the anticipation of futures in education has depended to a large extent on extrapolation from present trends or on a limited consensus among ‘experts’ and culturally dominant elites. For example, Jim Scheurich and Michelle Young (1997: 8) argue persuasively that ‘all of the epistemologies currently legitimated in [Euro-American] education arise exclusively out of the social history of the dominant White race’. This restricts the range of possible epistemologies and methodologies available to us, and makes non-dominant constructions of knowledge suspect, pathological, sensational, or simply illegitimate. Thus, the extension of consensus techniques to broader and more culturally inclusive publics might be one way to generate multiple alternative futures in educational inquiry.

Walter Parker, Akira Ninomiya and John Cogan (1999) describe an exemplary multinational curriculum development project that enacts a

consensual vision of global education. 26 researchers from nine nations in four regions² worked over a four-year period to plan and conduct a study that would result in a set of curriculum recommendations focused on education for citizenship. The team adapted the Delphi method³ to interview and then survey iteratively a panel of 182 scholars, practitioners and policy leaders in various fields (science and technology; health and education; politics and government; business, industry and labour; the arts) in these nations. The researchers sought the panel's agreement on major global trends over the next 25 years, the desirable citizen characteristics needed to deal with these changes, and the educational strategies likely to develop these characteristics. Delphi techniques aim to produce deep rather than superficial consensus and the strongest joint recommendation on educational strategies produced by this multinational panel of scholars and practitioners, *a minority of whom were professional educators*, was for 'critical thinking with different others' on 'ethical questions' arising from the global trends. They recommended 'a question-driven (not answer-driven) curriculum with deliberation (not transmission) the pedagogy of choice' and with an 'emphasis on multinational contacts and cooperation' (Parker *et al.* 1999: 125).

The subject matter of the curriculum devised by this multinational approach is a set of six ethical questions derived from the consensus trends, characteristics and strategies:

² The regions and nations were: East Asia (Japan), Southeast Asia (Thailand), Europe (UK, The Netherlands, Hungary, Germany, Greece) and North America (Canada, USA).

³ The underlying rationale of the Delphi method is to establish as objectively as possible a consensus on a complex problem, in circumstances where accurate information does not exist (or is too difficult or too costly to obtain), or the politics of conventional decision-making (e.g. a face-to-face committee meeting) may suppress individuals' critical judgements. Delphi is a family of techniques, rather than a single clearly defined procedure, but its typical features include: an expert panel; a series of rounds in which information is collected from panellists, analysed and fed back to them as the basis for subsequent rounds; an opportunity for individuals to revise their judgments on the basis of this feedback; and some degree of anonymity for their individual contributions (see Linstone & Turoff 1975).

1. What should be done in order to promote equity and fairness within and among societies?
2. What should be the balance between the right to privacy and free and open access to information in information-based societies?
3. What should be the balance between protecting the environment and meeting human needs?
4. What should be done to cope with population growth, genetic engineering, and children in poverty?
5. What should be done to develop shared (universal, global) values while respecting local values?
6. What should be done to secure an ethically based distribution of power for deciding policy and action on the above issues? (Parker *et al.* 1999: 129).

These questions are augmented by a set of more familiar curriculum components – concepts, skills and attitudes related to the questions – but these are seen as ancillary to the curriculum’s key attributes: *ethical questions* and *deliberation*:

The research team understands that goals are transformed right within the process of public discourse. For this reason, deliberation is not only an instructional means but a curriculum outcome itself, for it creates a particular kind of democratic public culture among the deliberators: listening as well as talking, sharing resources, forging decisions together rather than only advocating positions taken earlier, and coming to disagreement. Because the issues being deliberated in the curriculum are multinational issues, and because students are conjoining in some way (e.g. face-to-face, electronic) on these common problems, this curriculum has the potential to contribute to the development of what Elise Boulding (1988) called a ‘global civic culture’ or what today might be called a transnational civil society (Parker *et al.* 1999: 130).

There is much more to Parker *et al.*’s study than I can recount here, and the details of their research make it clear that they are not starry-eyed internationalists. Rather, they represent a team of curriculum makers working

purposely towards a multinational perspective on citizenship and citizenship education that loosens the grip of shared national identity on the meaning of ‘citizen’ and raises the more cosmopolitan concept of a ‘world citizen ... for whom the commonwealth is not only a local or national political community’ (130). Their conceptions of deliberation are informed by Deweyan scholars like Schwab (1969), but they also recognise that deliberation ‘is hugely problematic in actually existing societies where power and status control participation in deliberation as well as the topics considered appropriate for deliberation’ (Parker *et al.* 1999: 133)⁴. They therefore acknowledge that expanding the array of forums for deliberation, and expanding access to them, is central to their project.

Creative Imagination: Visions of Curriculum that *Might* Happen

I will begin with a brief quotation from one of my favourite speculative storytellers. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a critically acclaimed novel by Ursula Le Guin (1969), often referred to as one of the first major works of feminist science fiction – or of SF⁵, to use a term I prefer. The novel’s first-person narrator is an envoi from a galactic federation to the planet Gethen, and his first sentences are:

⁴ I also appreciate Parker *et al.*’s (1999: 142) reflexive awareness of the difficulties created by referencing mainly North American literature in deference to the presumed readership of the *American Educational Research Journal*: ‘This creates the confounding problem of casting the project further in North American terms and viewpoints (further than is already the case with two of the three authors being steeped in this milieu). For present purposes, we accept this trade-off’.

⁵ As Donna Haraway (1989: 5) explains, SF designates ‘a complex emerging narrative field in which the boundaries between science fiction (conventionally, sf) and fantasy became highly permeable in confusing ways, commercially and linguistically’; SF also signifies ‘an increasingly heterodox array of writing, reading, and marketing practices indicated by a proliferation of “sf” phrases: speculative fiction, science fiction, science fantasy, speculative futures, speculative fabulation’.

I'll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child that Truth is a matter of the imagination. The soundest fact may fail or prevail in the style of its telling' (Le Guin 1969: 9).

These two short sentences capture some of the key ideas that have informed and guided my practice as a curriculum scholar and educational researcher for more than three decades, namely, *story*, *imagination*, and *fiction* (with particular reference to science fiction and the ambiguous relations of 'fact', 'truth' and fiction). I suggest that much of what we understand by the term *global education* is 'a matter of the imagination', and that it might also 'fail or prevail in the style of its telling'. If this is the case, then the work of curriculum innovation in global education will require that we attend to the modes, genres and qualities of the stories we choose to tell and privilege. I will attempt to perform this work here, chiefly through a positioned reading of Le Guin's (2000) novel, *The Telling*.

The Telling anticipates some of the ways in which humans might respond to the forced homogenisation of culture on a planetary scale, and it can thus be read as a thought experiment that offers alternative representations of present circumstances and uncertainties, and anticipates and critiques possible futures. *The Telling* dramatises social transformation on a global scale, driven by the lure of an intergalactic (rather than merely global) 'common market'. In this sense, *The Telling* depicts a material world with which we are now very familiar and demonstrates the defensibility of Donna Haraway's (1985: 65) assertion that 'the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion'. I argue that critical readings of stories like *The Telling* might therefore help educators to produce anticipatory critiques of the possible ways in which drivers of large-scale social change (such as globalisation, digitalisation and cultural diversification) are transforming societies and conceptions of civic life and citizenship in the contemporary world.

Note that I am not simply arguing that university and school teachers with an interest in global education should be using novels such as *The Telling* as teaching resources, although this might be appropriate in some circumstances. Rather, I am arguing that educators should deliberately and self-consciously cultivate a disposition to think about university and/or school curricula in ways that are consistent with Richard Rorty's (1979: 203)

conceptualisation of the continuities between the social sciences and literature:

If we get rid of traditional notions of ‘objectivity’ and ‘scientific method’ we shall be able to see the social sciences as continuous with literature – as interpreting other people to us, and thus enlarging and deepening our sense of community.

I would supplement Rorty’s position by interpreting ‘literature’ figuratively rather than literally so as to include speculative fictions in any medium, including print, movies, video games and simulations, and popular media of all kinds.

I read fiction of all kinds not only for personal satisfaction but also because I respect the embodied and embedded cultural knowledge that novelists and other storytellers bring to my professional attention. Like Grumet (1999: 233), I understand culture to be ‘a system of meanings available to actors situated in shared space, time, history, and possibility’ and, since curriculum is both a product and a (re)producer of culture, a nation’s literature constitutes a significant discourse for curriculum inquiry. Thus, my preparation for beginning to work in South Africa in 1998 included familiarising myself with the writings of authors such as Breyten Breytenbach, André Brink, J.M. Coetzee, Michael Cope, Athol Fugard, Nadine Gordimer, Bessie Head, Christopher Hope, Alex La Guma, Anne Landsman, Miriam Tlali, Etienne Van Heerden, and many others. As a non-resident curriculum scholar, a novel such as J.M. Coetzee’s (1999) *Disgrace* provided me with an invaluable way to learn more about the ‘system of meanings’ available to my South African colleagues on an everyday basis (see also Gough 2001). When I arrived in South Africa and began to peruse bookshops and libraries I noticed the complete absence of SF by local authors. This was not entirely surprising, since I was aware of the cultural censorship that prevailed during the apartheid era, an early example of which Coetzee (1997: 70) recalls from his boyhood:

He has not forgotten Dr Malan’s first act in 1948: to ban all Captain Marvel and Superman comics, allowing only comics with

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animal characters, comics intended to keep one a baby, to pass through the Customs.

I was thus pleased to read Brink's (1998: 27) suggestions regarding new possibilities for South African writers since the dismantling of apartheid, in which he urged them

not simply to escape from the inhibitions of apartheid but to construct and deconstruct new possibilities; to activate the imagination in its exploration of those silences previously inaccessible; to play with the future on that needlepoint where it meets past and present; and to be willing to risk everything in the leaping flame of the word as it turns into world.

SF is one of the genres in which South African writers have begun to construct and deconstruct such new possibilities, exemplified recently by the internationally acclaimed novels by Lauren Beukes, *Moxyland* (2008) and *Zoo City* (2010), and Neill Blomkamp's film *District 9* (2009).

Science Fiction and Education

Karen Anijar, John Weaver and Toby Daspit (2004: 1) introduce their edited volume, *Science Fiction Curriculum, Cyborg Teachers, and Youth Culture(s)* with the following words:

Science fiction can and does provide a medium through which the future of education is visualized, through which educators and students can contemplate and reflect on the consequences of their actions in this world. Science fiction provides a genre, a medium through which the future can be speculatively visualized in the present. Science fiction can also open up students'/teachers' minds to previously unforeseen possibilities while concurrently empowering people to become curricular creators and cocreators as well as theorists (after all it is impossible to think speculatively without theorizing).

Anijar *et al.* (2004: 3-4) provide a compelling rationale for including SF as a

legitimate ‘genre of thought’ within the discourses and discursive practices of education. Although the scope of this essay does not permit me to summarise all of their arguments here, I believe it is worth noting their response to a criticism that they anticipate from some readers: daily lives

We recognize, in part, that there are those who may see our endeavors as a project which retreats from ‘reality.’ However, what is accepted as real is deplorably deranged. The (il)logics that have emerged from at least three centuries of modernist thinking have constructed violent and vile illusions – stock typifications that seem to guide our lives, but which are not created out of our lives, from our lives, or with consideration for our lives. If ever there has been a frightening dystopia, this may well be it.

The editors of, and contributors to, *Science Fiction Curriculum* are clearly aware that some SF has helped to shape these ‘violent and vile illusions’. For example, in an earlier work Anijar (2000) demonstrates that *Star Trek* constitutes a social curriculum that many teachers (at least in the USA) have embraced enthusiastically. Her critique of this curriculum is crafted from extensive interviews with Trekker teachers and raises important questions about identity politics, gender, race, ethnicity, class and language policy in education (see also Appelbaum & Gough 2002). In addition to the evidence, arguments and examples assembled in *Science Fiction Curriculum*, I suggest that there are at least three further reasons for educators to look more closely at the generative potential of SF to enhance their pedagogical practices and their own professional development.

First, many of the most popular video games⁶ are ‘storied’ in the genre of SF (in a broad sense that includes fantasy and alternative history) and educators who ignore their cultural and pedagogical significance risk irrelevance. This is part of the argument mounted by James Gee (2003) in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, in which

⁶ I use ‘video games’ to encompass all games played using digital visual interfaces including computer games, web-based role-playing games and simulations, and platform games played with digital consoles or hand held devices.

he demonstrates that many video games incorporate learning principles that are strongly supported by contemporary research in cognitive science and that they can – and should – be used in schools:

Beyond using the learning principles that good games incorporate, I also argue that schools, workplaces, and families can use games and game technologies to enhance learning. Further, I believe that use of games and game technologies for learning content in schools and skills in workplaces will become pervasive. Many parents, by getting their sometimes quite young children to play games while actively thinking about the game's connections to other games, media, texts, and the world are already doing so. In field studies we are conducting at the University of Wisconsin, we have watched seven-year-olds play *Age of Mythology*, read about mythology inside and outside the game on web sites, borrow books on mythology from the library, and draw pictures and write stories connected to the game and other mythological themes. They think about the connections between *Age of Mythology* and *Age of Empires*, between mythological figures and popular culture superheroes, and the connections of all of them to history and society. This is education at its best, and it is happening at home, outside of school (Gee 2003: 2-3).

Online gaming has particular relevance to the formation of a global citizenry:

[W]hen players play in massive multiplayer games, they often collaborate in teams, each using a different, but overlapping, set of skills, and share knowledge, skills, and values with others both inside the game and on various Internet sites. In the process, they create distributed and dispersed knowledge within a community in ways that would please any contemporary high-tech, cross-functional-team-centered workplace. In this respect, games may be better sites for preparing workers for modern workplaces than traditional schools (Gee 2003a: 3).

Although Gee's work is situated in Western cultural practices, I suggest that

his principles are relevant to any place in which digitalisation is a driver of educational change. For example, mainland China has an enormous home-grown gaming industry, despite its government's infamous Golden Shield Project (also known as the Great Firewall of China), which attempts to restrict its citizens' access to non-Chinese websites. The total number of China's Internet users reached 338 million in June 2009⁷, about two-thirds of whom play MMORPGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games), such as NetEase's *Westward Journey Online II* which in 2005 had 56 million registered users and 460,000 peak concurrent users⁸.

In societies such as Japan and China, which place great value on cultural continuity and tradition, the internet provides new opportunities to build what Tom Abeles (2000: 84) calls 'time-bridges' – digital bridges between generations where the wisdom from the past can be used to link the future with the present, and young people with adults – so that adult screenagers can better understand younger screenagers and vice versa. For example, *Westward Journey Online II* is based on Wu Cheng En's classic 16th-century novel *Journey to the West*.

A second reason for considering SF in relation to global education is that it offers imaginative resources that might help teachers and learners to generate new ways of thinking about, and acting upon, ideas such as 'democracy' and 'citizenship'. Many nations embrace the rhetoric of participatory democracy, but education and other social practices in these nations do not necessarily enact or encourage active citizenship. For example, Noam Chomsky (1997) argues that throughout the 20th century US media commentators and other elites have promoted 'spectator democracy' rather than participatory democracy. Similarly, Wayne Ross (2000: 241) argues that social education in the US continues to promote spectator democracy by reproducing proceduralist conceptions of democracy in which 'exercising your right to vote' is the primary manifestation of good citizenship: 'Democracy based on proceduralism leaves little room for individuals or groups to exercise direct political action; this is a function left

⁷ 'China's Internet population hits 338 million', *Wall Street Journal Digital Network* <http://tiny.cc/r79k2> (accessed 17 November 2011).

⁸ NetEase http://corp.163.com/eng/games/westward_journey.html (accessed 17 November 2011).

to a specialized class of people such as elected representatives and experts who advise them'. In relation to my own country, I agree with Lindy Edwards (2002: 39) that social and educational policy is now a function of Australia's position in a global marketplace understood as 'a grand democracy of consumption'.

This leads to my third reason for critically appraising and appreciating speculative fictions that relate to understandings of democracy, citizenship and global education. As globalisation blurs nation-state boundaries and undermines national authority, the grounding of public education systems in national democracies is destabilised. Carlos Alberto Torres (2002: 364) notes that the purposes of public education have typically included preparing future labour for the nation's economy and preparing citizens for the nation's polity, but that globalisation 'shifts solidarities both within and outside the national state'. He thus argues that alternative futures for democratic education under globalisation must address the questions raised by the globalisation of the two traditional bases of formal education systems, namely, governance and economies:

These questions are very straightforward: Will globalization make human rights and democratic participation more universal, or will globalization redefine human enterprise as market exchanges invulnerable to traditional civic forms of governance? Whether education as a publicly shared invention, contributing to civic life and human rights, can thrive depends on the future of globalization – a future that may offer the internationalization of the ideals of a democratic education or may reduce education, and civic participation, to narrow instruments of remote and seemingly ungovernable market forces (Torres 2002: 364).

Torres (2002: 376) therefore calls for a reexamination of democratic education in the light of transformations of individual and collective identities into both more privatised and more globalised forms and concludes that 'to ask how educational policies could contribute to a democratic multicultural citizenship poses a formidable challenge to the theoretical imagination'. I suggest that part of this challenge involves questioning taken-for-granted assumptions about the types of cultural materials and media that

constitute appropriate resources for the ‘theoretical imagination’. We need to pay particular attention to the different qualities of texts drawn from different genres that deal with similar ‘big ideas’ in particular times and places, and to be cautious of investing all or most of our interpretive efforts in those that come with labels such as ‘non-fiction’, ‘documentary’ or ‘educational’ rather than those which are categorised as ‘fiction’ or ‘entertainment’. Katherine Hayles (1990) makes an important point about the relationships between texts from different cultural sites that deal with similar issues in her archaeology of textual representations of chaos theory in literature and science:

... different disciplines, sufficiently distant from one another so that direct influence seems unlikely ... nevertheless focus on similar kinds of problems [at] about the same time and base their formulations on isomorphic assumptions Different disciplines are drawn to similar problems because the concerns underlying them are highly charged within a prevailing cultural context. Moreover, different disciplines base the theories they construct on similar presuppositions because these are the assumptions that guide the constitution of knowledge in a given episteme. This position implies, of course, that scientific theories and models are culturally conditioned, partaking of and rooted in assumptions that can be found at multiple sites throughout the culture (Hayles 1990: xi).

Clearly, globalisation is a contemporary example of an ‘underlying concern’ that is ‘highly charged within a prevailing cultural context’. We can reasonably expect that ‘theories and models’ of globalisation *are* ‘culturally conditioned, partaking of and rooted in assumptions that can be found at multiple sites throughout the culture’. To understand the cultural work performed under the sign of globalisation we need to consider how different disciplines represent globalisation as a focus for inquiry and speculation and how they resolve the questions, problems and issues that arise from these foci.

Representations of globalisation in school and university curricula, and its conceptualisation as an object of academic inquiry, tend to privilege

texts from a relatively limited range of disciplines and sites of cultural production. For example, books that explicitly link globalisation and education (e.g. Burbules & Torres 2000; Stromquist 2002; Stromquist & Monkman 2000) tend to rely on the economics, politics and sociology of education, comparative education, and policy studies. Scholars from other disciplines whose work is drawn upon by teachers and education researchers again tend to emphasise economics, politics and sociology (e.g. Appadurai 1996; Bauman 1998; Beck 2000; Brown & Lauder 2001; Giddens 2000; Jameson & Miyoshi 1998; Waters 1995). These works rarely refer in any detail or depth to the arts and popular culture as sites for the production of meanings about globalisation, global education, and so on.

Scholars who relate globalisation to issues such as multiculturalism, postcolonialism and identity politics (including cultural identities associated with diasporas) seem more likely to refer to examples from literature and the arts (e.g. Coombes & Brah 2000; Grant & Lei 2001; Hage 1998; Phillips 2001; Sardar & Cubitt 2002; Wilson & Dissanayake 1996). Few educators are likely to question the relevance of Salman Rushdie's (1981) *Midnight's Children*, or Zadie Smith's (2001) *White Teeth*, to an understanding of the cultural identity politics of globalisation, but novels such as these come with relatively 'high culture' credentials. I suggest that many works of popular genre fiction might be equally rich sites for exploring the wider cultural meanings and manifestations of globalisation, as well as many 'low' cultural artefacts, including advertising, blogs and jokes.

For example, an email joke circulating a few years ago alleged that the following was a 'High Distinction answer from ECO101 tutorial, first year, School of Economics and Commerce, Faculty of Arts, Australian National University':

Q: How do you define globalisation?

A: Princess Diana's death.

Q: Why?

A: An English Princess with an Egyptian boyfriend crashes in a French tunnel, driving a German car with a Dutch engine, driven by a Belgian affected by Scotch whisky, followed closely by Italian paparazzi, on Japanese motorcycles, treated by an American doctor, using Brazilian medicine. (Sent to you by an Australian, using

American technology, which Bill Gates stole from the Taiwanese.)

Even the best teaching resources on the theme of globalisation – among which I would include, for example, Bill Bigelow and Bob Peterson’s (2002) *Rethinking Globalization: Teaching for Justice in an Unjust World* – tend to be constrained by the conventions of school textbooks that privilege instructive (and conclusive) rhetorical modes and foreground ‘what is...?’ questions. By way of contrast, much SF is speculative, inconclusive, and foregrounds ‘what if...?’ questions. In *Frankenstein* Mary Shelley ([1818] 1992) asks: what if a young doctor creates a human being in his laboratory...? In *Jurassic Park* Michael Crichton (1993) asks: what if scientists could recover dinosaur DNA from mosquitoes trapped in fossilised amber...? As Le Guin (1979: 156) writes:

The purpose of a thought-experiment, as the term was used by Schrödinger and other physicists, is not to predict the future – indeed Schrödinger’s most famous thought-experiment goes to show that the ‘future’, on the quantum level, *cannot* be predicted – but to describe reality, the present world.

Science fiction is not *predictive*; it is *descriptive* (e.i.o.).

Which brings me to Le Guin’s *The Telling* (2000), a novel that I believe exemplifies the capacity for SF stories to function as texts for global education. I repeat, however, that I have not chosen *The Telling* because I think that it would necessarily be useful as a teaching resource but, rather, because I believe that it might appeal to many teachers and academics, perhaps especially those whose expectations of science fiction have been shaped by its stereotypic association with violent high-tech futures and/or space operas. As is the case with many of Le Guin’s stories, I am confident that readers who presume that they ‘don’t like science fiction’ will enjoy *The Telling*.

The Telling: A Thought Experiment in Social Change

The Telling is a recent contribution to Le Guin’s series of ‘Hainish’ novels and short stories. The common background for this series supposes that, at least half a million years ago, intelligent humanoids from the planet Hain

spread across the galaxy and settled on nearly a hundred habitable worlds, including Terra (Earth), which were then left alone for many millennia. Le Guin's stories imagine that communication and travel between these worlds has resumed and that a loose interplanetary federation, the Ekumen, coordinates the exchange of goods and knowledge among the diverse cultures, religions, philosophies, sciences and forms of governance that have evolved separately on the various planets. Representatives of the Ekumen travel to each planet when it is rediscovered and invite peoples of Hainish descent to participate in the federation.

Sutty is a Terran Observer for the Ekumen, a language and literature specialist who travels to the planet Aka to continue studies initiated by the Observers who first made contact with the Akan people some seventy years earlier. When she arrives she finds little to study because, while she has been travelling to Aka,⁹ the traditional culture has been brutally suppressed and almost completely replaced by a technophilic ruling class that has enthusiastically embraced the 'March to the Stars'. Differing local spiritual practices and dialects, and the ideographic writing and literature she had studied, are now deemed subversive, and Sutty finds that she might be the only person on Aka who can still read texts that were written only a generation ago. The Corporation that governs Aka normally forbids Observers from travelling outside the new cities, which have been constructed and settled since the first contact with the Ekumen.

Sutty unexpectedly receives permission to travel to an old provincial town where she gradually finds her way into the unofficial, traditional culture of Aka, which survives in the locations and activities of daily life that are most difficult to police. She learns of the yearlong and lifelong cycles and patterns of feasts, fasts, indulgences, abstinences, passages, and festivals – observances that resemble the practices of most of the religions with which she is familiar. These are now unobtrusively interwoven into the fabric of ordinary life so that the Monitors of the Sociocultural Office find it difficult to identify any particular act as forbidden.

Sutty's problem (and, as I read it, the novel's) is how she and her

⁹ A period of many years – the technology exists to transmit information instantaneously across any distance, but physical travel through space still takes a long time.

fellow Observers might help to ‘save’ this culture from the destruction that the Ekumen’s arrival on Aka inadvertently precipitated. Suttu initially is hostile towards the leaders of the Corporation but she also recognises that her hostility is self-destructive and self-defeating. Suttu grew up in a period of severe religious repression on Earth, and realises that she must learn to deal with her own tragic experiences of religious warfare and terrorism if she is to deal fairly with the Akans. The complexity of Suttu’s background and its influence upon her development as an Observer offers a convincing vision of the difficulties and opportunities of contact between different cultures for the people whose identities are constituted by those cultures.

Suttu begins to resolve her dilemmas when she leaves the capital city and listens to her fellow travellers talk about their daily lives:

She heard about them, their cousins, their families, their jobs, their opinions, their houses, their hernias... These dull and fragmentary relations of ordinary lives could not bore her. Everything she had missed in [the capital city], everything the official literature, the heroic propaganda left out, they told. If she had to choose between heroes and hernias, it was no contest (Le Guin 2000: 34-35).

Part of what makes *The Telling* so compelling is its sustained focus on the lives of ordinary people and the subtlety and sensitivity with which it renders everyday life. The stakes in *The Telling* are high – the survival of an entire world’s traditional knowledge and culture – but the struggle for survival it depicts take place primarily within the registers of daily life, because it is the very richness of ‘ordinary’ life that Aka’s totalitarian ‘March to the Stars’ threatens. Cultural destruction on Aka proceeds by grand and hideous macropolitical gestures, but its traditional culture survives and flourishes in small acts – choices about what to eat, what words to use, what stories to tell. In this sense, *The Telling’s* title can be understood as a call to witness and celebrate culture as the *telling of stories* that give form and meaning to everyday life. I see the politics that Le Guin dramatises here as being consistent with Nancy Fraser’s (1993: 22) feminist view of a ‘global solidarity’ that is ‘rooted in a concrete sense of human interdependence in everyday life, a vivid sense of the forms of emotional and practical support people require from one another in daily life, not only when they are very

young, very old, or sick but also when they are healthy adults’.

Thus, one reading of *The Telling* is as a thought experiment in rehabilitating democratic ideals in the wake of their destabilisation by global corporatism. As such, it addresses Torres’s (2002) questions about globalisation’s effects on solidarities within and outside the nation-state by imagining in rich and plausible detail how we might *perform* a citizenship premised on shared responsibility for each other’s everyday existence. Although Fraser (1993: 22) theorises this mode of solidarity as ‘feminist’ she emphasises that it does not require shared identity but, rather, a shared understanding of ‘those upon whom we feel entitled to make claims for help and those whom we feel obliged to help in turn’. Fraser’s political principle clearly meets Torres’s (2002) ‘challenge to the theoretical imagination’, but Le Guin delivers a similar challenge (and represents a similar principle) without the abstractions of *theoretical* labels. *The Telling* is a work of *practical* imagination, a rehearsal of the concrete choices, decisions and actions that men, women and children can make to protect civic life and human rights (and resist their erosion) at a local, micropolitical level.

Another reading of *The Telling* is to interpret its defence of daily life as an allegory of Tibet’s plight under (mainland) Chinese occupation. The ways of Akan telling resemble traditional Tibetan Buddhist practices and the modes of its suppression resemble Mao’s Cultural Revolution. Le Guin confirms this interpretation in an interview with Mark Wilson (n.d.):

I was really just trying to work out in fictional terms what something like the Cultural Revolution in China or the rise of fundamentalism in Arabic countries does to the people involved in it – whether it’s the suppression of a religion, which is what happened in China, or the dominance of a religion and the suppression of politics, which is happening in a lot of the Arab world. These are terrifying phenomena – this stuff’s going on right now, all around us. And it is something obviously that human beings are likely to behave this way given the right circumstances. So I sort of had to write a book about it¹⁰.

¹⁰ <http://www.scifi.com/sfw/issue189/interview.html> (Accessed 27 November 2002).

Nevertheless, the Akan government is called the Corporation and the novel's vision is as applicable to the homogenisation of culture under corporate capitalism as it is to (mainland) China's cultural wars. Le Guin's thought experiment gives us detailed historicised and contextualised visions of possible and plausible futures that are rooted in the choices we face in the present moment.

These two readings do not exhaust the many possible interpretations of *The Telling* but they should be sufficient to indicate that Le Guin's fiction shares what Hayles (1990), as quoted above, calls 'isomorphic assumptions' with the more self-consciously 'academic' literature of globalisation, governance and social transformation. Many of its interpretive (and thus, I believe, educative) possibilities lie in what at first seem like minor details. For example, Aka is a world with only one continent, so that all of its peoples live on just one landmass. Sutty's reflections on the significance of this difference from Terra (Earth) – and its implications for the politics of identity – are intriguing, especially in relation to her conviction that traditional Akan spirituality is not a 'religion':

... religion as an institution demanding belief and claiming authority, religion as a community shaped by a knowledge of foreign deities or competing institutions, had never existed on Aka.

Until, perhaps, the present time.

Aka's habitable lands were a single huge continent with an immensely long archipelago of its eastern coast... Undivided by oceans, the Akans were physically all of one type with slight local variations. All the Observers had remarked on this, all had pointed out the ethnic homogeneity... but none of them had quite realised that among Akans there *were no foreigners*. There had never been any foreigners, until the ships from the Ekumen landed.

It was a simple fact, but one remarkably difficult for the Terran mind to comprehend. No aliens. No others, in the deadly sense of otherness that existed on Terra, the implacable division between tribes, the arbitrary and impassable borders, the ethnic hatreds cherished over centuries and millennia. 'The people' here meant not *my* people, but people – everybody, humanity. 'Barbarian' didn't mean an incomprehensible outlander, but an uneducated

person. On Aka, all competition was familial. All wars were civil wars (Le Guin 2000: 98f).

We hardly need to be reminded of just how deadly our sense of otherness can be. The breadth of antiterrorist legislation in nations such as Australia and the US – coupled with paranoid approaches to ‘border protection’ and treatment of asylum seekers and refugees that amounts to institutionalised racism – has eroded the foundations of respect for human rights in these countries and worldwide. *The Telling* provides us with empirical evidence of the *possibility* of thinking what to many humans is unthinkable, such as imagining a world without ‘foreigners’. What would educational policy, curriculum innovation and global education look like if we assumed that ‘the people’ meant ‘everybody, humanity’? Le Guin reminds us that it is possible to think differently about identity and community, and questions of inclusion and exclusion, without ever underestimating the remarkable difficulty of doing so.

***Avatar* and *District 9*: Provoking Postcolonialist Critique of Globalisation**

I will conclude by referring briefly to two SF stories that are likely to be more accessible to South African colleagues than *The Telling*, namely, James Cameron’s (2009) *Avatar* and Neill Blomkamp’s (2009) *District 9*. *Avatar* grossed R20.7-million in the first 19 days of its South African release in late December 2009, making it one of the most successful movies in South Africa to date.¹¹ Because of its popularity, it has sparked much discussion and debate, which can be monitored on blogs, online discussion forums, and fan sites.

Many reviews and discussions of *Avatar* focus on its treatment of colonialism. For example, Lisa Wade (2009) refers to *Avatar* as ‘a moral re-evaluation of colonization’:

In the movie, humans go about killing and displacing the indige-

¹¹ See ‘Avatar brings home the goods in SA’ at <http://tiny.cc/jb1cs> (Accessed 14 September 2011).

nous population of another planet, the Na'vi, in order to extract a valuable mineral.

The Na'vi are a fantastical version of indigenous populations encountered by Europeans during colonization. They wear feathers, bones, and skins; they have a deep spirituality and a ritual-filled life; they are accomplished and principled warriors; they hunt and fight with bows and arrows; and they have an intense connection to nature. They are, in short, the stereotypical 'noble savage'....

Avatar is a fantasy in which the history of colonization is rewritten, but it is a fantasy specifically for white people living with a heavy dose of liberal guilt. And it is one that, ultimately, marginalizes indigenous peoples and affirms white supremacy.

Leslie Butterfield (2010), via the International Campaign for Tibet's (ICT) website, quotes the *Wall Street Journal's* report that in late January 2009 mainland Chinese authorities removed the 2D version of *Avatar* from all 4,500 theatres then playing the blockbuster movie (the 3D version was allowed to keep running). Butterfield speculates that Chinese officials did not care for the 'subversive' political message featured in the film. In *Avatar*, the Na'vi people struggle to protect their land from greedy colonisers, and some Chinese bloggers see a connection between the Na'vi and the many Chinese who have been expelled from their homes by property developers. Butterfield also sees parallels between the plight of the Na'vi and the current cultural and environmental crises facing Tibetans. Although the Beijing government's methods do not employ giant robot men and enormous bomb-dropping spaceships against Tibetans, their exploitative policies have fuelled deep resentment among Tibetans. After half a century of mineral extraction, heavy logging, damming and nomad resettlement in Tibet, not to mention cultural repression and assimilation, Butterfield is not surprised that *Avatar* might touch a nerve.

Annalee Newitz (2009) sees parallels between *Avatar* and American history: '*Avatar* imaginatively revisits the crime scene of white America's foundational act of genocide, in which entire native tribes and civilizations were wiped out by European immigrants to the American continent'. Newitz also sees similarities between *Avatar* and *District 9*, both of which she interprets as 'white fantasies about race': In these *movies*, 'humans are the

cause of alien oppression and distress. Then, a white man who was one of the oppressors switches sides... , assimilating into the alien culture and becoming its savior'. However, a significant difference between *Avatar* and *District 9* – and part of what makes the latter, in my view, a superior film – is that the aliens and their lives are not romanticised or ennobled. In *Avatar* Jake loves his life as a Na'vi warrior far more than he ever did his life as a human marine and he not only assimilates into the Na'vi culture, but also becomes its leader. But in *District 9* Wikus discovers that becoming a member of an oppressed and stigmatised group is not awesome and liberating but that it is really horrible and he hates it.

New York Times columnist David Brooks' (2010) also criticises *Avatar* as a 'racial fantasy':

[*Avatar*] rests on the stereotype that white people are rationalist and technocratic while colonial victims are spiritual and athletic. It rests on the assumption that nonwhites need the White Messiah to lead their crusades. It rests on the assumption that illiteracy is the path to grace. It also creates a sort of two-edged cultural imperialism. Natives can either have their history shaped by cruel imperialists or benevolent ones, but either way, they are going to be supporting actors in our journey to self-admiration.

As these brief examples demonstrate, *Avatar* and *District 9* have provoked both academic and popular debates about their representations of colonisation, and are therefore providing rich raw material for exploring global education in schools and universities. Comparing the different ways that descendants of both colonisers and those colonised are interpreting these movies in different postcolonial locations is itself a fascinating issue for inquiry in global cultural studies.

An important point on which I will conclude is to emphasise that neither *The Telling* nor *Avatar* nor *District 9* can stand alone as textual resources for global education. All need to be 'read' *intertextually* if they are to generate interpretations that are relevant to understandings of global citizenship. Reading *Avatar* and *District 9* as intertexts of various histories of colonisation produces interpretations, such as those of Newitz and Brooks, who see it as reproducing stereotypical assumptions about race and cultural

imperialism. Reading *The Telling* as an intertext of similar histories, and of contemporary studies of globalisation, produces interpretations such as I provide above, which produces alternative understandings of identity, community, inclusion and exclusion that might assist us in realising new curriculum visions for global citizenship.

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Generating Curriculum Visions for Global Citizenship

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