Curriculum visions for global citizenship

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As Joseph Schwab (1969) 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 can arise from many sources, but in this presentation I will focus on two:

- **Consensus**: opinions about what might or ought to happen can be elucidated by monitoring cultural and sub-cultural consensus using techniques such as opinion polls, commissions of ‘experts’, and variations on these, e.g., Delphi techniques.
- **Creative imagination**: the speculative imagination of creative artists in various media produces visions of alternative futures that can be further elucidated by their critique and, to some extent, by emulating their creative practices (e.g., scenario-building frequently emulates science fiction).

I will provide examples of these methods of generating alternative futures with particular reference to a current imperative for higher education in many nations, namely, the implications of a global knowledge economy for the ways we understand notions such as citizenship, identity, community, inclusion and exclusion, and the transformations of curriculum that they impel us to consider.

**Consensus: visions of curriculum that should happen**

Walter Parker, Akira Ninomiya and John Cogan (1999) describe an exemplary multinational curriculum development project that enacts a consensual vision of global education. A multinational team of 26 researchers from nine nations in four regions 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 futures research methodology 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)

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1 The regions and nations were: East Asia (Japan), Southeast Asia (Thailand), Europe (UK, The Netherlands, Hungary, Germany, Greece) and North America (Canada, USA).
The curriculum with deliberation (not transmission) the pedagogy of choice’ and with an ‘emphasis on multinational contacts and cooperation’ (p. 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:

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? (p. 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 (p. 130).

There is much more to Parker, Ninomiya and Cogan’s (1999) 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 that is working purposively 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’ (p. 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’ (p. 133).² They therefore recognise that expanding the array of forums for deliberation, and expanding access to them, is central to their project.

² I also appreciate Parker, Ninomiya and Cogan’s (1999) 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’ (p. 142).
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 SF³, 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:

> 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’ (p. 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). Understanding curriculum work as a storytelling practice has also been a key theme in the Anglophone reconceptualisation of curriculum studies, encapsulated by Madeleine Grumet’s (1981) characterisation of curriculum as ‘the collective story we tell our children about our past, our present, and our future’ (p. 115). I would 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.

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 Haraway’s (1985) assertion that ‘the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion’ (p.65). I argue that critical readings of stories like *The Telling* might thus 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

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³ As Donna Haraway (1989) 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’ (p. 5).
school curricula in ways that are consistent with Richard Rorty’s (1979) 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 (p. 203).

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.

**Science fiction and education**

Karen Anijar, John Weaver and Toby Daspit (2004) 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) (p. 1).

Anijar, Weaver and Daspit (2004) provide a compelling rationale for including SF as a legitimate ‘genre of thought’ (p. 3) within the discourses and discursive practices of education. Although the scope of this presentation 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:

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 neither 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 (pp. 3-4).

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 (in the USA at least) 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. 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.

4 See also Appelbaum and Gough (2002).
First, many of the most popular video games 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 (2003a) in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, in which 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, 2003b, pp. 2-3).

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

…when 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, 2003b, p. 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, although the mainland Chinese government uses its infamous Golden Shield Project (also known as the Great Firewall of China) to restrict its citizens’ access to non-Chinese websites, it has an enormous home grown gaming industry. During a visit to Shanghai in 2005 I read in a local airline magazine that:

- MMORPGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games), e.g. Shanda Interactive’s *World of Legend* had up to 2 million simultaneous users.
- NetEase’s *Westward Journey Online II* had 56 million registered users and 460,000 peak concurrent users.
- China Internet Network Information Centre estimated that the average mainland China user was then spending 10.9 hours per week gaming online.

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5 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.
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) calls ‘time-bridges’ (p. 84) – 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, a very popular game in China, *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, Naom 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) 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 to a specialized class of people such as elected representatives and experts who advise them’ (p. 241). In my own country, I would argue that social and educational policy is now a function of Australia’s position in a global marketplace understood as ‘a grand democracy of consumption’ (Edwards, 2002, p. 39).

This leads to my third reason for appraising 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) 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’ (p. 364). 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 (p. 364).

Torres thus 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’ (p. 376). 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’.
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 nonlinear dynamics (‘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 (p. 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.

I think it would be fair to say that when we (curriculum scholars, teacher educators and other academics) represent globalisation in school or university curricula (such as teacher education programs), or conceptualise it as an object of educational inquiry, we 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 (1992/1818) 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) 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.
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> Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive (p. 156; emphasis in original).

Which brings me to *The Telling*, a novel that I believe exemplifies the capacity for science fiction 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 think 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 so-called ‘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 governance⁶ 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, if they wish. Worlds have much to gain from joining the Ekumen, but also risk losing their distinctive identities.

Sutty is a Terran Observer for the Ekumen, a language and literature specialist who travels to the planet Aka⁷ 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,⁸ 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 upriver from the capital city to an old provincial town where she gradually finds her way into the unofficial, traditional culture of Aka, which still survives and to some extent thrives 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 fellow Observers might help to ‘save’ this culture from the destruction that the Ekumen’s arrival on Aka inadvertently precipitated. Sutty initially is hostile towards the leaders of the Corporation – personified by a Monitor who tracks her activities – but she also recognises that her hostility is self-destructive and self-defeating. Her struggles with her own hatreds and self-doubts are in part located in the personal and historical baggage she brings from Terra to her work on Aka. Sutty 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 Sutty’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.

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

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⁶ An earlier novel in Le Guin’s Hainish series, The Dispossessed (1975/1974), is a thought experiment in governance. In some editions The Dispossessed carries a subtitle, An Ambiguous Utopia, which signals its questioning of conventional utopian writing in Western literature. The central character of The Dispossessed is a theoretical physicist located in a century-old anarchist society at a time when it is becoming more structured. Not to be confused with nihilism or libertarianism, philosophical anarchism is based on a belief that moral responsibility rests with individuals and views cooperation (solidarity, mutual aid) rather than competition as the key to evolutionary survival.

⁷ Le Guin places great importance on naming things in both her fiction (see, for example, Ursula K. Le Guin, 1987) and literary essays (see, for example, Le Guin, 1989), so it seems very likely that she intends the name of the planet Aka to invoke the Anglophone abbreviation ‘aka’ (also known as).

⁸ 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.
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 (pp. 34-5).

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) 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’ (p. 22).  

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) 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’ (p. 22). 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.):

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9 Fraser (1993) outlines three other ways of formulating an ‘inclusive, universalist, global view of solidarity as shared responsibility which does not require shared identity’, namely: a socialist view ‘based on… our interdependence in a common global political economy… where wealth is the common creation of all people’s labor’; an environmentalist view ‘based on our… interdependence as inhabitants of a common biosphere’; and a radical-democratic view ‘rooted in the fact that we inhabit an increasingly global public space of discourse and representation… that might be redefined as a space in which all people deliberate together to decide our common fate’ (p. 22). Traces of the latter view can be discerned in *The Telling* (and a variation on it is particularly apparent in *The Dispossessed*, see n. 8, above).

10 Le Guin’s non-fiction essays on SF and fantasy demonstrate a persistent engagement with feminist politics (see, e.g., ‘Is gender necessary? Redux’ and other essays in Le Guin 1989); much of her recent fiction challenges the gendered conventions of these genres.
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 it.\footnote{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, almost every significant event in the book is reported to Sutty, who witnesses almost nothing directly (a little like the way many of us get our news of world events via CNN and its affiliates). Also, 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 (pp. 98-9).

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 that amounts to institutionalised racism – is eroding 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: provoking postcolonialist critique of globalisation**

I will conclude by referring briefly to a science fiction story that is likely to be more accessible to South African colleagues than The Telling, namely, James Cameron’s (2009) film, Avatar, which 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. 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 indigenous 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 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.

In late January 2010, Leslie Butterfield, writing on the International Campaign for Tibet’s (ICT) website, quoted the Wall Street Journal’s report that [mainland] Chinese authorities had 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 speculated 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.

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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’.\textsuperscript{15} Newitz also sees similarities between Avatar and Neill Blomkamp’s (2009) District 9, both of which she interprets as ‘white fantasies about race’. In both 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 assimilate into the Na’vi culture, but he also becomes their 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’ also criticises Avatar as a ‘racial fantasy’:

\[\text{Avatar}\] 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.\textsuperscript{16}

As these brief examples demonstrate, Avatar has provoked both academic and popular debates about its representation of colonisation, and is 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 Avatar 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. Both 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.

References


\textsuperscript{15} Annalee Newitz (2009, 18 December), ‘When will white people stop making movies like Avatar?’ \url{http://tiny.cc/gpvl} (retrieved 18 June 2010).

\textsuperscript{16} David Brooks (2010, 7 January), ‘The Messiah complex’ \url{http://tiny.cc/hf2ky} (retrieved 18 June 2010).


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