Educational Fabulations

Teaching and Learning for a World Yet to Come

Edited by
Diane Conrad · Sean Wiebe

Palgrave Studies in Educational Futures

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The series Educational Futures would be a call on all aspects of education, not only specific subject specialists, but policy makers, religious education leaders, curriculum theorists, and those involved in shaping the educational imagination through its foundations and both psychoanalytical and psychological investments with youth to address this extraordinary precarity and anxiety that is continually rising as things do not get better but worsen. A global de-territorialization is taking place, and new voices and visions need to be seen and heard. The series would address the following questions and concerns. The three key signifiers of the book series title address this state of risk and emergency:

1. **The Anthropocene**: The 'human world,' the world-for-us is drifting toward a global situation where human extinction is not out of the question due to economic industrialization and overdevelopment, as well as the exponential growth of global population. How to we address this ecologically and educationally to still make a difference?
2. **Ecology**: What might be ways of re-thinking our relationships with the non-human forms of existence and in-human forms of artificial intelligence that have emerged? Are there possibilities to rework the ecological imagination educationally from its over-romanticized view of Nature, as many have argued: Nature and culture are no longer tenable separate signifiers. Can teachers and professors address the ideas that surround differentiated subjectivity where agency is no long attributed to the 'human' alone?
3. **Aesthetic Imaginaries**: What are the creative responses that can fabulate aesthetic imaginaries that are viable in specific contexts where the emergent ideas, which are able to gather heterogeneous elements together to present projects that address the two former descriptors: the Anthropocene and the every changing modulating ecologies. Can educators drawn on these aesthetic imaginaries to offer exploratory hope for what is a changing globe that is in constant crisis?

The series Educational Futures: Anthropocene, Ecology, and Aesthetic Imaginaries attempts to secure manuscripts that are aware of the precarity that reverberates throughout all life, and attempts to explore and experiment to develop an educational imagination which, at the very least, makes conscious what is a dire situation.

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Foreword: To Come …

The question of a "foreword" seems to raise that inevitable dilemma: "forward" to what? From what? Diane Conrad and Sean Wiebe have gathered a cadre of thirty-eight "story-telling" scholars from various perspectives and disciplines to query the "forward" of education through the approach of Speculative Fiction (SF). The reader is invited to enter twenty-eight fictive stories, each disclosing a singularity of a created world that presents a problematic that stirs the nerves and worries any glib expectations of each outcome. In their rich and informed introduction, Conrad and Wiebe develop the background to SF along with its various directions such research can and does take. Their project is prescient in all the ways imaginable, as the authors readily point out an array of contemporary issues that frame the precarity of life on this planet, and the very real need to think of education "otherwise." Technology, the corporate capitalist economy, numerous social issues, the fundamentals of what should constitute curricular concerns, the question of the "spiritual soul" of education and projections concerning teaching and learning where the "more-than-human" forms the new inclusionary landscape are the broad themes that are addressed. It is a comprehensive and extensive vision projected by extrapolating the forces that are already there in their nascent forms, which will manifest themselves in ways, as yet not fully known, but certainly provide an array of possible future outcomes, both utopic and dystopic in their socio-ethical impact as to how we "might" live, and what might be possible to shape such futures given the dangers and the opportunities that are but dimly visible.

Speculation and fictioning have received greater and greater traction in this "era" that has been inappropriately named the Anthropocene, forwarding "anthropos" (Greek for human) with all of the allusions contributed to the New Testament as the son of "Man," where Adamas (Hebrew for earth) as the first human being reinstates or vivifies the very values of destructive anthropogenic productive labor, which are to be mitigated and curbed so as to, at the very least, delay and stave off the extinction of the genus Homo. The Earth's phase change is unlikely to be "stopped" or put on hold. To say that "we" are in a crisis situation is an understatement: the growing global autocracy, increased surveillance, unbridled migration from war-torn countries, crop failures, resources wars provoked by droughts, ocean plasticity, rising coastal waters, increase in volcanic activity, the change of the Earth's magnetic resonance, all point to crossing of irreversible thresholds in the near future. The bio-politics of life have been intensified by the COVID pandemic. The paradoxes of the fourth industrial revolution that converge nano-bio-info-cogito innovations (NBIC) together are all around us. These technologies, perceived as the future panacea to solving the "climate crisis," the all-inclusive euphemism for the Earth's phase change, mask the generation of heat required to sustain the "wired world" of the Internet. One anomalous solar sun-flare could "snuff" out global power-grids. Then what? The fundamental elements of sustenance are all at risk: air, water, land. The increase of "clear-air turbulence" (CAT) will curb future commercial aviation, the current lingering pandemic will certainly not be the last, and the global supply-chain that affects global economy and the tech industry is in deep jeopardy. The irony is that tourist-billionaire astronauts going into space have at last found their "freedom" of escape from the devastations that plague the inhabited planet: the weightlessness of their bodies from gravity in a temporary capsule that sustains their illusion of being "above" it all. Perhaps, the "true" future inhabitants of the Earth are the AI self-learning systems that are in control of Blue Origin's Shepard rocket. They are in their infancy now. The "mature" posthumans will emerge when AI program their next generation.

Education, as these fiction-scholars all agree, is not up to the task that awaits. Each story forces us to think this "outside" as it is precisely this "outside" which forced each author to think and provide us with a problematic to grapple with. In this sense they offer the reader a gift; the gift of the unthought, as the not yet realized, and the "yet to come." If the story is "utopian" in its force, it is not that some ideal utopia will be

achieved; rather, it is because the germs of its realization are "now here" rather than being "nowhere." If the story is dystopian in its force, it's not that the dark night will fall on us, just the opposite, it is to face the Lovecraftian Cthluhu, to dispel any promise of false hope, yet hope nevertheless.

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Introduction

Diane Conrad and Sean Wiebe

As educators and long-time speculative fiction (SF) fans, we are excited to be bringing these two elements together in this collection of original works of speculative fiction as fiction-based research (Kitchin, 2020; Leavy, 2018). The term "fabulation" in our book title is described as "fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way" (Scholes, 1976, p. 47). You might be asking: What does speculative fiction have to do with education? Imaginings allow us to conceive an alternative version of the educational landscape and gain insight into possibilities for its enactment.

As Imarisha (2015) contends, "we are dreaming new worlds every time we think about the changes we want to make in the world" (p. 4). Indeed, SF has had significant influence in technological innovation and scientific

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research: submarines, helicopters, satellites, robots, the desire to visit Mars, all have their roots in SF (Zaidi, 2019). Haraway contends, "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" (2004a, p. 8). SF and social innovation are overlapping fields, so in this vein, let us envision together other worlds in which education, teaching, and learning are different from how they are now. Social scientists as fiction writers can provoke nuanced understandings of present teaching and learning challenges through the offering of speculative worlds.

Already a fan of SF, co-editor Conrad began reading science fiction voraciously in the late 1980s when she was serving as a volunteer teacher in a remote mountain village in Southern Africa. Among the books in the small school library of a few hundred or so paperbacks, more than half were SciFi—donated by the Peace Corps. This foreign (to her), isolated setting provided the perfect backdrop for consuming these exotic tales: all the classics—Asimov, Bradbury, Clarke, Dick, Heinlein, Herbert, Le Guin … In doing so, she began to appreciate the social commentary the genre provided. Upon her return to Canada, she could not get enough of the *Star Trek* spin-off television series that had begun in her absence, and she used some of these episodes in her teaching about social justice issues. Karen Anijar (2000) agrees with the significance of *Star Trek* as social curriculum. Conrad is still an avid SciFi film viewer and, apparently, a newly aspiring speculative fiction author! Looking for inspiration she recently picked up a copy of *Octavia's Brood* (Brown & Imarisha, 2015)—a book of short speculative fiction stories from social movements—and inspire it did.

Co-editor Wiebe's influences trace back to the speculative essay. A long-time fan of hybrid genres, when Wiebe first stumbled upon some of Lydia Davis's early stories, he was intrigued by the overlap between fiction writing and essay writing but also between poetry and fiction. A few of Davis's flash fiction stories have been included in poetry anthologies; oftentimes the narrator that she constructs sounds like an ethnographer—deeply reflexive and demonstrating, often ironically, the human struggle of living with others in a world fraught with ideological precommitments (Davis, 2010). Recently, Wiebe has encountered Ted Chiang's (2019) award-winning collection of stories, *Exhalation*. As Chiang illustrates so well, the promise of speculative fiction is in opening space for new thinking by disrupting our normative associations. His story, "The Life Cycle of Software Objects," originally published by Subterranean Press as a novella (Chiang, 2010), brings to narrative form

the utilitarian ideology of late twentieth century and contemporary capitalism that pervades almost every aspect of education. For Wiebe, it is the fictional form of the speculative that has an additional capacity to arrest us, to cause us to question.

Speculative Fiction as Social Critique

The contributions included in this book might be identified as speculative fiction, or as science fiction, fantasy, or visionary fiction (Imarisha, 2015). We are less interested in making distinctions between genres—distinctions that are debated elsewhere (see Atwood, 2011; Gill, 2013); rather, we value all this work for its imaginative possibilities, for taking us on journeys to "elsewhere" (Haraway, 2004b). Speculative social fiction might be the most appropriate term to describe the works collected in this volume; they do not all focus on science per se, nor do they necessarily deal with aliens or extraterrestrial space—common themes in science fiction, nor with yet unimagined technologies … though some do. All the contributions do imagine a social order and educational approaches that build upon, but differ significantly from what exists currently.

For SF writers and scholars, the work that SF can do is vital for critiquing current situations and imagining others. Atwood (2011) speculates that SF emerged as a genre in the early twentieth century (followed closely by related forms) continuous with and in response to a decline in our dependence on mythologies and theologies to make sense of our existence. Future studies scholars Lombardo and Ramos (2015) concur that the genre of SF offers "modern myths about the future, and significantly contribut[es] into the great wealth and diversity of contemporary paradigms and approaches to the future" (p. 1). Meaning-making through stories and literary texts has been a common feature of our existence across cultures and through time. Early science fiction demanded scientific accuracy, but the genre has evolved with ever-expanding sub-genres and themes. Haraway suggests that SF "is generically concerned with the interpenetration of boundaries between problematic selves and unexpected others and with the exploration of possible worlds in a context structured by transnational technoscience" (2004b, p. 70). Haraway sees promise in the virtual or imaginative space of SF to allow a productive tension in the deliberate overlap among selves and others. Whether human or non-human, organic or technological, SF writers create interconnectivity and responsibility "for an imagined elsewhere that we may yet learn to see

and build here" (p. 64) that moves away from the domination of anthropocentric scientism.

Similarly, for literary scholar Gill (2013), SF

> envisions a systemically different world in which not only events are different, but causes operate by logics other than normal ones … Transcendental interventions, idealistic and artistic creations, dreams, and the fulfillment of impossible wishes and fears come within its scope: all go beyond versions of the standard procedures of this life … their alternative realities will comment on this world—negatively to satirize its shortcomings or positively to provide a model for emulation. (pp. 73, 81)

Gill includes such classics among works of speculative fiction as: Mallory's (1485) *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Shakespeare's (1610) *The Tempest,* Swift's (1725) *Gulliver's Travels*, Wells's (1897) *The War of the Worlds*, Stoker's (1897) *Dracula*, Tolkien's (1948) *Lord of the Rings,* and Orwell's (1948) *1984.*

What SF does well, Atwood (2011) offers, is to explore and interrogate "the consequences of new and proposed technologies … the nature and limits of what it means to be human … the outer reaches of the imagination" (pp. 62–63) and to interrogate or critique social organization—economies, governments, and institutions. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), for example, explores women's subjugation in a totalitarian state of patriarchal rule and religious fanaticism at a time of women's diminished reproductive capacities. The novel comments on social, political, and religious trends in the 1980s, imagining how they would unfold if taken to their logical end.

Dick (1974/1995) suggests that authors write SF because they "sense a continuity and the possibility, the opportunity, the ethical need … to add onto [a] growing 'future history'" (p. 71) that addresses the problems we see around us. He explains that

> the SF writer is able to dissolve the normal absolute quality that the objects (our actual environment, our daily routine) have; [the SF writer] has cut us loose enough to put us in a third space, neither the concrete nor the abstract, but something unique, something connected to both and hence relevant. So we do cut loose, but with enough ties still remaining never to forget that we do live in one specific society at one specific time. (pp. 75–76)

Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968)—adapted into the films *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982) and *Blade Runner 2049* (Villeneuve, 2017)—is a futuristic detective novel focused on hunting android criminals, exploring our human capacity for empathy. This collection of speculative social fiction is open to diverse speculations of educational possibilities, but read always in relation to what we already know and experience in the present.

In an essay originally written as an introduction to a 2013 publication of Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), Gaiman (2014) suggests there are three types of questions that inform writing about a world yet to come:

> "What if … ?" gives us change, a departure from our lives. (What if aliens landed tomorrow and gave us everything we wanted, but at a price?)
>
> "If only … " lets us explore the glories and dangers of tomorrow. (If only dogs could talk. If only I was invisible.)
>
> "If this goes on … " is the most predictive of the three, although it doesn't try to predict an actual future with all its messy confusion. Instead, "If this goes on … " fiction takes an element of life today, something clear and obvious and normally something troubling, and asks what would happen if that thing, that one thing, became bigger, became all-pervasive, changed the way we thought and behaved. (If this goes on, all communication everywhere will be through text messages or computers, and direct speech between two people, without a machine, will be outlawed). (pp. 177–178)

Gaiman sees *Fahrenheit 451* as Bradbury's response to the rise in popularity of television in the 1950s, thinking, "If this goes on …" no one would read books anymore. The novel is about a time when books are outlawed and burned. Also about censorship, government control of our lives, human communications and caring for traditions; it is as relevant today as it was when it was written.

Our collected contributions alternately address Gaiman's (2014) three questions: What if? If only? If this goes on … ?, which are, arguably, the very questions educators all ponder, fret over, contemplate, and debate in relation to the present educational contexts in which we work, let alone a world of education yet to come. Such questions tease us with a predictive element. Consider Margaret Atwood being called "a cultural prophet" by Daniel Viola (2019) of *The Walrus*. But more than imagining futures, these questions open us to a world inaccessible by any other means. Such worlds reach beyond pedagogical questions of practice, beyond

developmental questions of cognitive and behavioral objectives, and beyond the language of empirical reasoning, whether the emphasis be on critical thinking, creativity or the scientific method. Aldiss (2011), reflecting on his SF publishing career, says this:

> As Charles Darwin looked at things and saw them as they really were, so was I now looking clearly at things within myself, hidden from myself. I had known they were lurking there, indeed used them to empower my fiction, yet had never perceived them clearly: they were the smoke, not the bonfire. (p. 230)

How do we explain this lurking? Aldiss's (2011) own theorizing posits a proto-self, a concept he adapted from Antonio Damasio's (2000) *The Feeling of What Happens*: "We are not conscious of the proto-self. Language is not part of the structure of the proto-self. The proto-self has no powers of perception and holds no knowledge" (p. 154). Just as childhood is forgotten and our memories fade, there are phenomena within us, both psychological and sociological, that sink deep into the unconscious—though, and this explains Aldiss's reference to Darwin, such phenomena can still be pieced together with interpretive leaps. This is not surfacing a memory or connecting the personal to a historical event. What Aldiss is trying to conceptualize is something more like listening to that murmur in the unconscious, what he calls "metaphysical realism" (p. 230).

Thus, SF presents a world beyond us that is both accessible and not accessible. When combined with social science research, SF writers work with findings in a way that demonstrates our humanity. The worlds they construct, as in many successful SF stories, generate the plots and characters. Consider, for example, Aldiss's (1964) novel *Greybeard* that provokes us even before reading the first sentence. Right on the cover, we see Aldiss has created a desolate world without childhood; this is the construction. If it were educational research, we would be explaining social constructivist theories, and we might be questioning why so much of teaching can appear to happen regardless of whether children are in the room with the teacher. You can imagine the teacher at the front. Whether writing on the blackboard or advancing slides on a PowerPoint, you hear only the teacher's voice. As the teacher repeatedly taps at a key concept, an entire lesson is delivered without ever knowing for sure whether there are children listening.

So, what does SF do? What function can it serve and how might this help us think about the future of education? According to Gaiman (2014),

> People think, wrongly, that speculative fiction is about predicting the future, but it isn't … What speculative fiction is really good at is not the future, but the present. Taking an aspect of it that troubles or is dangerous, and extending and extrapolating that aspect into something that allows the people of that time to see what they are doing from a different angle and from a different place. It's cautionary. (p. 178)

Le Guin (2004) concurs. Of her SF, she writes:

> My stories are neither dire warnings nor blueprints for what we ought to do. Most of them, I think, are comedies of human manners, reminders of the infinite variety of ways in which we always come back to pretty much the same place, and celebrations of that infinite variety by the invention of still more alternatives and possibilities … The important thing is not to offer any specific hope of betterment but, by offering an imagined but persuasive alternative reality, to dislodge my mind, and so the reader's mind, from the lazy, timorous habit of thinking that the way we live now is the only way people can live. (p. 218)

Taking up Le Guin's position, we seek to be bold and brazen in our imaginings and build on what these veteran SF writers and critics have noted in turning our attention to speculating on the future of education. We draw inspiration from Maxine Greene's consideration of the question "Who am I?" during a 1996 talk at Louisiana State University: "I am who I am not yet" (as cited in Pinar, 1998, p. 1). Greene's forward-facing response prompts us to consider ourselves and our environments as sites of potential becoming, futures still to be imagined and enacted. Research findings provoke us and we choose to write about them to provoke public interest. Harnessing the creative and disruptive capacities of SF, we write to help shape the *not yet* of education.

Given the particular convergence of economic and governmental pressures in educational institutions today, schools represent imaginative sites especially well-suited to interrogation through an SF lens. The relevance for education of the exploration and interrogation of themes related to technology, human nature, and social organization is evident; yet the speculative fiction approach is unique in its harnessing of creative capacities to envision alternatives.

Speculative Fiction and Education

Re-visioning Education

While education represents a significant social phenomenon in every culture across the globe, the field is under-represented in speculative fiction. Some of the authors in this collection may never have written fiction before, let alone speculative fiction, but, as educators, we all have visions for how education in the future might be different. The contributions in this collection are generated from educational experiences and research. Rather than move findings from research to practice, which never seems to be adequately bridged (Biesta, 2010; Joyce & Cartwright, 2018), we move from experience and research to speculation, to theorization. The point is that ideas are powerful in themselves; in their speculative form we try out, experiment, and integrate into a schema of thinking. For some ideas, those that are so often beyond our unconscious reach and become the assumptions underneath our beliefs and values, only the speculative can engage them. Empirically produced evidence is seldom enough to displace the epistemological precommitments that comprise confirmation bias. By engaging the imagination, speculative fiction can interact with the resistant places of our thinking. Doing so provides a provocative context for more robust theorization of education as a cultural phenomenon. We draw on scholarship in curriculum studies and teacher education and on our experiences and imaginations as teachers, teacher educators, educational scholars, and human beings. The authors' speculations are imaginative, but not frivolous. Imagination is the beginning of becoming otherwise—we need to envision a future before we can hope to shape it. As Imarisha insists, "once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless" (2015, p. 4).

Education is in dire need of re-visioning. The century-plus old model of education that we cling to no longer serves us well in this third decade of the twenty-first century, let alone into the future (Kumpulainen et al., 2008). This is clear through our educational research, in our teacher education, and for those in the public school systems and in higher education. Based on colonial Western values, conceptions of knowing and ways of being in relation with one another, the old model ignores our current realities and our just and ethical aspirations. We can only imagine how education might face a future we can foresee, let alone the future beyond our predictions. With the many challenges we face today, including

climate change, environmental toxicity, human migration, species extinctions, invasive technologies, large-scale conflicts, xenophobia, economic disparities, more potential pandemics, food and water insecurities, and so on, imagining how education might address these challenges is paramount.

For example, the basic premise of Chiang's (2019) story "The Life Cycle of Software Objects" is educational as Ana Alvarado cares for, adopts, then raises as her own child, an artificial life form named Jax. While initially her child exits only in a software environment, over the course of the story it becomes possible for Jax to enter the human environment. As with human beings, Jax's central questions involve making meaning of one's lived experience and finding purpose in life. At a key moment in the story Ana is looking toward Jax's future, and, as so many parents, she is navigating the complex world of what is best for her child, including considering if Jax's life would be more fulfilled if he had a meaningful job to perform. In conversation with a software developer from *Exponential*, Ana must weigh the benefits of some rewiring that will enhance her child, but will also fundamentally alter Jax's interiority. Rewiring—the ultimate promise of education, no? (Wiebe, 2016).

The perspective relayed by *Exponential* is: "We're not looking for human-level AI; we're looking for superhuman AI … It's nice that they're fun to talk to, but all the attention you've given your digients has encouraged them to think of themselves as persons" (Chiang, 2019, pp. 134–136). *Exponential* does not want "employees" for its enterprise, but products to do the work. Ana's resistance is a succinct articulation of what critical theorists such as Michael Apple and Peter McLaren (e.g., see Apple, 2006; McLaren, 1999) have been forwarding for decades—that the agenda of global capitalism dehumanizes education to produce workers for efficiency and economic gain. She believes, "They want something that responds like a person, but isn't owed the same obligations as a person, and that's something she can't give them" (pp. 137–138).

In *Exponential's* words, work is no longer a place for human beings:

> If these digients were going to be products, the potential profits might be worth the risk. But if all they're going to be is employees, that's a different situation; we can't justify such a large investment for so little return. (Chiang, 2019, p. 139)

Are the needs of persons and profits incommensurable? How might SF as curriculum theory look at the history of work to better understand the

process whereby work is no longer an appropriate domain for being human? Readers new to curriculum studies might not have encountered the Latin origin of "curriculum," to run a course, that is, the course of one's life (Pinar, 1975). The title of Chiang's story, "The Life Cycle …" is synonymous with curriculum. One's curriculum vita quite literally means life course, a recording and ordering that gives meaning and purpose to life. Through Ana's interior struggle we too wrestle with what makes human beings valuable. Increasingly the world of work has conflicting aims with being human. What does it mean for education if one's life course is directed only toward becoming workers to produce wealth? Should neoliberal trends in employment practice continue, then education will also feel the pressure to rewire its students as products for future jobs (Altass & Wiebe, 2017).

Speculative fiction has the potential to make a contribution, to intervene in the business-as-usual perspectives that currently shape our systems of education. The neoliberal agenda sees education as the mechanism for maintaining the status quo (Apple, 2006), for maintaining the divisions of power in society that put wealth in the hands of the elite few and prime the majority for their place in supporting these unjust economic structures—for preparing "workplace-ready" students. Speculative fiction that imagines more copious functions and possibilities for education critiques such a limited vision of education and suggests productive alternatives. As Le Guin (2004) contends,

> the exercise of imagination is dangerous to those who profit from the way things are because it has the power to show that the way things are is not permanent, not universal, not necessary. Having the real though limited power to put established institutions into question, imaginative literature has also the responsibility of power. The storyteller is the truthteller. (p. 219)

Though our contributions are fictional they do tell truths about education and about our desires for the future of education, and, borrowing from Haraway, "give grounds for a scholarship and politics of hope in truly monstrous times" (2004b, p. 79). These fabulations are, as Truman notes, "always grounded, situated, and entangled with our past-present inheritances" (2019, p. 37). The hope stems not from an idealized version of what already is, but from the potential to mobilize or enact an alternative future that addresses injustice (Truman, 2019).