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University of San Francisco

**Through Critique and Beyond:
Speculative Fiction as a Tool of Critical Pedagogy**

A Field Project Presented to The Faculty of the School of Education International and
Multicultural Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Human Rights Education

By

Syd Thorne
December 2021

Through Critique and Beyond: Speculative Fiction as a Tool of Critical Pedagogy

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS
in
HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

by
Syd Thorne
December 2021

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this field project has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

Approved:

Instructor/Chairperson

Date:

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Committee Member

Date:

*Added only if there is a second reader

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ABSTRACT

This field projects centers around the issue of hopelessness among teachers and students and examines the genre of speculative fiction as a potential tool for cultivating critical hope in the classroom and as an asset to critical pedagogy. Utopian pedagogy and critical pedagogy make up the theoretical framework of this research and project development. The research explores the use of speculative fiction in three areas: activism and identity, student engagement, and utopian performance. The review of the literature demonstrates that the use of speculative fiction in the classroom has the potential to engage students in conversations about social justice and provide opportunities for students to express their feelings about the future, which could aid in the cultivation of critical hope. This research led to the development of a learning guide which includes sample lessons for grades 9 and above and utilize reading, creative writing, and performance as methods of engaging with speculative fiction. The lessons invite teachers and students to work with short stories from *Octavia's Brood* (ed. Imarisha, W., Brown, A.M., Thomas, S. R., 2015) and include questions for discussion, activities, and questions for reflection. The learning guide also includes recommendations for further reading and curriculum development.

Keywords: Speculative Fiction, Utopian Pedagogy, Critical Pedagogy, Utopian Performance

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

bell hooks writes that “educating is always a vocation rooted in hopefulness” yet maintaining hope, and fostering critical hope in others seems to be an increasingly difficult task, as those practicing critical pedagogy from within marginalized communities bear witness to and often experience first-hand, daily assaults on hope by the hands of structural violence and oppression (2003, p.xiv). Jeffery M.R. Duncan-Andrade (2009) states “there has been an assault on hope, particularly in our nation’s urban centers. This attack has taken place on numerous fronts, including disinvestment in schools and overinvestment in a prison industrial complex” (p.2). This idea is echoed by Shawn Ginwright (2015) in his book *Hope and Healing in Urban Education*. He talks about how students are often exposed to an “ecosystem of toxic environments” especially in urban schools where students experience structural oppression and structural violence in the form of racism, classism, heterosexism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, ableism, etc. (p.3). Ginwright’s observations about the dangerous effects of hopelessness on youth’s physical, emotional, social, and spiritual health lead him to look to the healing justice movement for ways to repair individual and community trauma (Ginwright, 2015). He grounds his work in three major ideas about hope. First, “structural oppression harms hope”, second, “healing is a critical component in building hope” and third, “building hope is an important political activity” (Ginwright, 2015, p.2). Just as systems of oppression work in multitudes of different ways and affect each community and individual differently, it is important

to approach healing from an equally diverse and intersectional lens, and to look for tools in places they may be least expected.

Speculative Fiction and its Possibilities

Speculative fiction has an important place in critical pedagogy and in the pursuit of healing and building hope in the field of education. The term “speculative fiction” has many conflicting definitions that have changed over time, but for the purpose of this project, one of the most expansive definitions fits best. Marek Oziewicz, in his 2017 article for the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature, discusses the difficult task of defining speculative fiction, calling it a “fuzzy super-set category that houses all non-mimetic-genres—genres that in one way or another depart from imitating conscious reality” (p.2). Genres typically housed under the speculative fiction umbrella include science fiction, fantasy, dystopian/utopian fiction, and horror. These genres, in contrast to other forms of fiction, “construct models of reality” rather than transcribe it directly and can also be understood as a “thought experiment that embraces an open-ended vision of the real” (Marek, 2017, p.3). Because it is such an expansive category, I have chosen to include scholarship that analyses the use of speculative fiction works that have specific connections to themes of justice and liberation. These works are most often written by people of color, women, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, [dis]abled authors, and authors that experience life at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities and many of these works of speculative fiction serve as critiques and responses to oppression.

A recent surge in justice oriented speculative fiction has also given birth to new terms and definitions. For example, the authors of *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* developed the term “visionary fiction” to distinguish science fiction that has “relevance toward building new, freer worlds from the mainstream strain of science

fiction, which most often reinforces dominant narratives of power” (Imarisha, 2015, p.4). This constant process of challenging and creating new definitions speaks to the ways that speculative fiction has evolved and the ways that it has gained increasing acceptance and legitimacy in both academic and popular culture, making space for new and emerging storytellers to join in conversation with seminal voices in the tradition.

Speculative fiction usually deals with imaginary or fantastical worlds, but many subjects and themes are rooted in the writers’ lived experiences, often incorporating thoughts and feelings about the worlds they live in, the worlds that they desire living in, as well as the worlds that they fear living in. The reflective, analytical, critical and constructive qualities of speculative fiction are what make the genre a useful tool for critical pedagogy. Engaging with the genre through reading, writing and performance can uplift the voices people from marginalized communities, facilitate generative conversations about systems of oppression and how they manifest in our daily lives, and provide a space for experimentation with ideas about the future, all of which have the power to aid in the cultivation of critical hope in the classroom. Studies by S.R Toliver (2020), Sarah E. Truman (2019), Julie Doyle (2020), and Leigh Anne Howard (2019), have shown that students of all ages are capable of creative, critical, and self-reflective thinking through the lens of speculative fiction and the practice has potential to aid in the healing of collective and individual trauma by moving beyond critique and imagining more just worlds. These studies also show how speculative fiction can be an effective tool in engaging students in various, often difficult topics such as police violence, white supremacy, climate crisis, gender binary, and other topics related to identity and oppression.

Because we know that the persistent attack on hope affects teachers as well as students, it follows that teachers would also benefit from the opportunity to engage with speculative

fiction in the classroom. Through exposure to speculative fiction centered curriculum, teachers can practice cultivating critical hope through self-reflection and experimentation with ideas about the future. This process has the potential to inspire teachers to incorporate speculative fiction into their curriculum by building teachers' confidence in working with the genre and themes and focusing on strengthening their ability to create safe spaces of reflection and experimentation for their students. Using speculative fiction in the classroom is a form of arts integrated pedagogy that many teachers may not be familiar with, which is why learning guide should offer background on the genre and support teachers' understanding as well as student understanding.

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this field project was to create a learning guide and sample lesson plan for teachers to explore and practice with the genre of speculative fiction through reading, writing, and performance-based storytelling with their students. The learning guide features speculative fiction texts written by and for people of marginalized communities as well as texts about speculative fiction as a tool of social and political change. The learning guide includes discussion questions, creative writing prompts, and performance exercises as well as sources for further reading and additional recommendations. The aim of this project is to introduce teachers to the genre of speculative fiction and create generative conversations about how to use texts and activities as pedagogical tools in the pursuit of creating liberatory classroom environments and fostering critical hope. This field project may be of interest to students and teachers in secondary education, higher education, and teacher education, but the themes and activities can be scaled up or down to meet the needs of all age groups. It may also be of interest to activists, parents,

artists and writers, as well as anyone interested in being transported to new worlds, where they are also invited to create their own.

This project is a result of my lived experience as an undergraduate student studying Women and Gender Studies and as a graduate student studying Human Rights Education and critical pedagogy. I saw first-hand how privileging critique and de-centering art and storytelling limited students' ability to foster critical hope and move beyond exposing unjust systems of power. This project was inspired by educators who went out of their way to showcase narratives of underrepresented people and write joy into their curriculum through arts integrated critical pedagogy. This project would not be possible without the artistic, literary, and intellectual contributions of people of color and of LGBTQIA+ experience, especially Black women and their contributions to critical pedagogy, critical race theory, feminism, and AfroFuturism, movements which have created the conditions that allow the classroom the potential to be a space of transformation and liberation despite the ever-presence of White supremacy, cishetero-patriarchy, and capitalism. I acknowledge how my privileged identities as a white, able-bodied, graduate student intersect with and inform my experiences as a trans-masculine, queer person, especially in the context of education as it exists as an institution of both oppression and liberation.

Theoretical Framework

Critical pedagogy and utopian pedagogy will be used as a theoretical framework for this field project. Critical pedagogy applies aspects of critical theory to the field of education and emphasizes making “visible the connections between power and knowledge and provide[ing] the conditions for extending democratic rights, values, and identities” while maintaining a critical

understanding of history and lived experience (Giroux, 2007, p. 28). Critical pedagogy will be used due to its reliance on the belief that education can be liberatory and the centrality of hope within the theory, which speaks to the potential of tools such as speculative fiction to reinvigorate hope, and aid in the practice of critique and self-reflection. Foundational authors in the field of critical pedagogy include Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire and American author and educator bell hooks. Freire, in his most famous work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) outlines a critique of the traditional “banking model” of education and proposes instead a “problem-posing” pedagogy that posits the learner as a co-creator of knowledge in the classroom. Freire (2004), in his later work, *Pedagogy of Indignation* writes about utopia, stating

If I am not in the world simply to adapt to it, but rather transform it, and if it is not possible to change the world without a certain dream or vision for it, I must make use of every possibility there is not only to speak about my utopia, but also to engage in practices consistent with it. (p. 7)

which speaks to the value of pursuing a balance between critique and imagination in critical pedagogy, as well as understanding hope as praxis. bell hooks in her book *Teaching Community* emphasizes the importance of approaching social issues on a community level in the field of education and centers hope as an important aspect of healing and moving beyond critique (hooks, 2003). Taken together these authors represent the way that critical pedagogy has grown and expanded throughout the years and has responded to contemporary social and political issues while maintaining the belief in the potential of schools as sites for transformation and liberation.

Utopian pedagogy is a philosophy of education that is related to critical pedagogy and the two inform each other in various ways. Utopian pedagogy speaks specifically to the importance

of maintaining “critical attitude towards the present and a political commitment to experiment in transfiguring the coordinates of our historical moment” meaning that critique must also include an investment in the process of imagining different ways of being and knowing in education (Coté, Day, Peuter, 2007, p. 13). Utopian Pedagogy is used in this field project because using speculative fiction as method is an example of putting utopian pedagogy into practice as it encourages creating space for both critique and creation through the exploration of new worlds in literature and art. Some foundational authors who have contributed to utopian pedagogy are Mark Coté, Richard J.T. Day, Greig De Peuter, Rhiannon Firth, and Henry Armond Giroux. Coté, Day, Peuter and Giroux among others, contributed to 2007 book *Utopian Pedagogy: Radical Experiments Against Neoliberal Globalization* which traces the history of the utopian impulse in philosophy and education and posits utopian pedagogy as a direct response to questions about the role of education in the current neoliberal landscape and the potential for not only survival, but moving beyond the struggles that people are facing (Coté, Day, Peuter, 2007). Firth expands on utopian pedagogy by looking at the ways that the ideas inform research methodologies within the education and social movements by providing a critique of existing practices (Firth, 2003). Taken together these authors provide a rationale for the project of experimenting with tools such as speculative fiction in the classroom as a way of employing utopian pedagogies and settling into the balance of critique and creation.

Significance of the Project

This field project may be of interest to students, teachers, professors, scholars in the field of literature, language arts, theater arts, sociology, critical theory, ethnic studies and gender studies. It may hold significance because it reviews literature demonstrating successes in the

field of education where speculative fiction was implemented in learning environments to encourage generative conversations about race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability as well as environmental and global health challenges. The literature shows that it is possible for teachers of all subjects and age levels to introduce speculative fiction to their classrooms in order to engage with students about their hopes and fears about the future as well as create space for them to explore these feelings by reflecting on their own lived experiences and practicing creative storytelling. This project may be of interest to those in the field of education who desire methods of diversifying their curriculum and showcasing voices of members of marginalized communities, as well as voices of contemporary authors because a large amount of the literature that can be classified as justice oriented speculative fiction or “visionary fiction” has emerged in the last thirty years. Those looking for examples and resources related to arts-integrated pedagogy would also find this project significant, as the methods explored include pedagogical tools that utilize reading, creative writing and performance. This project may also be of interest to grassroots organizers, activists, community educators, writers and artists. It may be significant because the literature highlights the contributions of organizers and scholar activists to the genre of speculative fiction, specifically those involved in transformative justice, queer and trans liberation, healing justice, and disability justice movements as well as the movements to end police brutality and incarceration. The act of imagining new worlds is at the heart of these movements which all center storytelling and desire as critical points of resistance, yet many activists and scholars experience burn out and feelings of hopelessness as a result of living under oppressive conditions.

Finally, this project may resonate with anyone who has experienced the negative mental and emotional effects of engaging in critique both inside and outside of academia without also

being given the opportunity and space to imagine what a just world would look and feel like. Scholar and activist Robin D.G. Kelley states “without new visions we don’t know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us all” drawing the connection between the practice of dreaming and social movement work (Kelley, 2001, p.xii). Social movements have a long-standing connection and affinity to speculative fiction because the genre allows both the reader and the writer to analyze current realities and challenge sociopolitical norms about identity and community and as Wallidah Imarisha (2015), editor of *Octavia’s Brood* argues, all organizing is science fiction. This is relevant to educators and organizers but also to anyone that is interested in integrating the utopian impulse into their personal practices and relationships.

CHAPTER II REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Ginwright (2015) and Duncan-Andrade (2009) both speak to the crisis of hopelessness in the lives of many educators, specifically those that experience systemic oppression in the multitude of ways it affects marginalized communities. Howard (2019) also highlights how according to her observations, educators trained in and desiring to implement critical pedagogy struggle with praxis and the process of navigating through pushback from administration. These experiences can take a significant toll on teachers' well beings and their confidence in their ability to create spaces of critical hope and transformation in their classrooms. There are many emerging tools and methods such as speculative fiction and utopian performance that have significant potential for addressing the needs and desires of teachers engaging in critical pedagogy, but there are not many resources for teachers to experiment with these tools for themselves. Utopian scholars Coté, Day, & Peuter emphasize the importance of experimentation as a part of utopian pedagogy and Freire (1970) specifically states "knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention" (p.72). Providing various scholarly examples and resources that use speculative fiction and performance is one way of allowing educators to experiment and practice with the concept of critical hope and sharpening their ability to engage in conversations about social justice with students.

Activism and Identity

For many activists and people from marginalized communities, speculative fiction has been used as a method of storytelling because it has the power to analyze lived experience and experiment with ideas about the future. Because one's ideas, fears, and hopes about the future are

influenced by one's current reality and knowledge of history, speculative fiction written by people from marginalized communities can offer powerful insight. Authors such as Octavia Butler, Ursula K. LeGuin, and Toni Cade Bambara are among the many authors in the genre of speculative fiction that analyze oppression and injustice in their work. Modern authors, activists, and academics have followed in the footsteps of these foundational authors in the genre, advocating for speculative fiction as method and praxis, having immense value for writers, readers, and the collective imagination. Burnnet (2019) speaks to the common dismissal of the genre of speculative fiction from African writers and argues that this writing is an example of direct resistance to colonialism and hegemony. Lai (2020) is another speculative fiction author who analyzes what makes the genre powerful and situates herself as a writer within a complex history of racist depictions of Asians in science fiction and reclaims and re-subjugates these images and ideas. These authors demonstrate the many ways that speculative fiction can be used as a tool for self-reflection and self-determination for people of color and activists seeking to work through real life problems and imagine other worlds.

The work of Octavia Butler and her most popular speculative fiction titles has inspired many activists and storytellers today, including the authors of the collection, *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (ed. Imarisha, W., Brown, A.M., Thomas, S. R., 2015). The book is grounded in the idea that all organizing is a form of science fiction and is focused on issues such as prison abolition, transformative justice, and uplifting the voices of queer and trans people of color in organizing. Imarisha, in a roundtable article with the authors of *Octavia's Brood* adds, "our movements for justice vitally need spaces where we start with the question 'What is the world we want to live in?' rather than starting with the question, 'What is a realistic win?'" (Imarisha, 2017, p. 2). This shift in questioning represents a shift toward critical hope that challenges one to think beyond current realities. adrienne maree brown, one of the

authors of *Octavia's Brood* speaks to the importance of finding balance between realism and hope in social justice movements stating, "I think our survival depends on being able to hold both views, surviving the present, and supporting the most vulnerable with our eyes on the horizon, looking as far as we can, shaping our reality towards that" (Imarisha, 2017, p. 10). This idea of shaping one's reality is one that is common throughout Octavia Butler's novels and is an example of how ideas explored in speculative fiction can influence the way we live, allowing us to create the future in the here and now.

Speculative fiction is a genre that is often overlooked in mainstream literary and academic spaces, especially speculative fiction written by members of marginalized communities because the academy tends to favor "realistic" accounts of racism, trauma, and adversity (Burnett, 2019). Burnett argues for the importance of uplifting speculative fiction authors, specifically African and African diaspora writers. He writes "The notion that fiction must be 'realistic' is ideologically tied to Enlightenment epistemology--the very same epistemology that actively justified and promoted the colonization and enslavement of so-called savage, insufficiently 'enlightened' Africans by the rational, 'realistic' West" (Burnett, 2019, p.1). By writing speculative fiction, African and African diaspora writers make interventions that carve out space for themselves and their communities into imagined futures, an act that directly resists hegemonic, Euro-centric, colonial cosmologies. This perspective speaks to the possibilities of using speculative fiction in the classroom, giving children and adults from marginalized communities the opportunity to see themselves reflected in literary futures, and create their own.

Larissa Lai is a Chinese speculative fiction author that echoes similar ideas about the power of storytelling for members of marginalized communities. In a 2020 article she discusses her personal reasons for writing speculative fiction as opposed to other styles of writing, saying the genre allows her to draw on her lived experience, and analyze the history of Asian people and

culture in popular science fiction media. She writes that her practice aims to “distinguish the racist figurations of Asians in speculative fiction from the work of re-subjectivation in which racialized people reclaim or remake racist stereotypes for the purposes of self-empowerment” (Lai, 2020, p. 3). Lai (2020) sees speculative fiction as a thought experiment that allows writers and readers to examine real-world problems and the systemic and sometimes interpersonal dynamics at play, “giving us the opportunity to work out and think or dream through what we need to think or dream through” (p. 8). This idea speaks to a common misconception about speculative fiction and the utopian imaginary- that they are entirely separate from the realm of dystopia- when the worlds are deeply intertwined. Speculative fiction can be a place to imagine the worst-case scenarios, which can be just as useful as imagining the best-case scenarios because tactics and ideas about resistance can be practiced in the fictional world, creating examples for what can be done in the here and now.

Student Engagement

Research demonstrates that with children and adults, curriculum that includes speculative fiction provides space for marginalized voices to be uplifted, and has the potential to engage students in a wide range of social justice issues, allowing them to analyze their current realities and imagine the worlds they want to live in. This is shown through a multitude of studies, each with varying methodologies, subject identities, and areas of focus. Taken together, the following studies show that integrating speculative fiction into social justice curriculum is highly effective in engaging students and inspiring creativity, leading them to discover new ways of understanding themselves and the world around them.

S.R. Toliver, in her 2020 study, showcases the results of a writing workshop for Black middle school girls that focused on “Black feminist/womanist storytelling and the three-

dimensional narrative inquiry space” and illustrates the power of speculative fiction as a method of creating both testimony and counterstory. Toliver frames her interest in speculative fiction as method through the lens of Black feminist/womanist storytelling and critical race theory with an emphasis on counterstorytelling. She also highlights how counter storytelling can be a call to action, as the reader or listener plays an active role in witnessing and “engaging in a dialogic process with Black girls, affirming their words as legitimate sources of knowledge” (Toliver, 2020, p. 507). This specific example highlights the work of Black middle school girls who participated in a two-month writing workshop that both exposed the girls to speculative fiction through “mentor texts” written by Black women and provided space and instruction for them to write stories of their own. The narrative inquiry study looked at the ways that a specific young author, Avenae’J, weaved personal experience, historical events, social issues, and ideas about herself and the world around her within the writing that she produced and in interviews. The young author explains how she incorporated themes such as racism, police brutality, and social movement organizing in her story and how she used fiction to imagine solutions and realities where these issues did not exist. Her story is set in an imaginary time and place but reflects her feelings about the world she lives in and her experiences as a Black girl in the United States. This study, and Avenae’J’s story, show how exposure to speculative fiction can inspire creative writing that can help students analyze their realities and imagine new ones, while engaging in dialogue with the readers or listeners and inspiring them to act.

Engaging youth with speculative fiction as a means of analyzing the past, present and future is an idea mirrored in Doyle’s (2020) work that responds to the ongoing climate crisis. She notes that “young people’s voices are crucial to the collective re-storying of climate change” and that it is common among young people to feel pessimistic about the future, as is proven through the emergence of youth-led climate justice movements around the world (Doyle, 2020, p. 2750).

Doyle (2020) looks at the results of a FutureCoast Youth workshop for 14–15-year-olds in the U.K. that utilized speculative fiction and participatory play to engage students in conversations about climate change and imagine more hopeful futures. The workshops were evaluated using qualitative mixed-methods and focused on “students’ cognitive and emotional responses to the creative process, their sense of confidence, and the climate communication they produced through their project-based learning” (Doyle, 2020, p. 2755). It was clear through the response from youth participants that the interdisciplinary nature of the workshop led to them feeling engaged and creatively excited about the activities. Adults leading the workshops noted that it was easier for children to be engaged creatively outside of the classroom and that the “play space” created by facilitators was a crucial part of making students feel safe to express themselves and experiment with ideas (Doyle, 2020). The biggest takeaway was increased confidence among students in communicating what they learned about climate change, their fears, and their ideas about how to influence change and create a better future. This finding supports the idea that incorporating speculative fiction and interdisciplinary play can be a strong addition to critical pedagogy by providing alternative ways of thinking and expressing oneself when tackling difficult concepts such as climate change.

The previous examples looked at speculative curriculum within a workshop space, but it is also important to consider examples of studies done in the traditional classroom space to see how students respond and link exercises with the rest of their curriculum. Truman (2019) analyzes the use of speculative fiction in the 9th grade English classroom and focuses on the potential for the approach to engage teachers and students in feminist praxis. Truman draws heavily on Donna Haraway’s concepts of situated feminisms and speculative fabulations, arguing that centering the intersectionality of race, gender, sexuality and class allows thinkers and writers to “conjure more just futures” (Truman, 2019, p. 32). This article analyzes the results of a four

month in-school project with grade 9 English students in Wales, U.K. and explored specifically the intersectionality of race, gender and power through walking and writing exercises. Walking and physically getting out of the classroom and into the community to inspire writing is an important part of Truman's methodology for teaching speculative fiction, as she believes grounding in place provides a common setting for students to generate ideas and reflect on their situated knowledge. A typical writing exercise would include a group walk around the school grounds and surrounding areas, a group discussion about ideas and thoughts that came up, a speculative reading assignment, and time to write independently about their ideas. Truman found that it was common among students to write speculative short stories about their community that proposed improved, more just, futures and that "students were attuned to how their own situated knowledge, race, gender, class, and sexuality affected the trajectory of their worlding practices (Truman, 2019, p. 37). This project and its analysis highlight the power of speculative fiction to help young people understand the world they live in and analyze the different intersectional locations that they occupy. This example of connecting speculative fiction to situated feminisms provides yet another example of how pedagogy and curriculum such as these can empower students to think critically about a variety of social justice issues and practice critical hope through storytelling.

Using speculative fiction in the classroom has been shown to be beneficial for young students, but it is also extremely effective for adult learners. This is because there is a wealth of potential speculative fiction literature and educational content available, and thus a wealth of diverse narratives and stories that touch on many different social issues. Creating spaces of imagination and critical hope is especially important for adult learners because adults often spend most of their academic careers focusing on critique and do not have many opportunities to practice self-reflection and collective dreaming through the lens of speculative fiction. There are

several examples of educators using speculative fiction in classrooms with adult learners through literature, film and tv media, writing, and theater. Boaz (2020) considers the value of speculative fiction in the university classroom with a focus on gender and power dynamics.

Boaz (2020) analyzes the value of speculative fiction in a Sonoma State University class called “Gender and Geopolitics in Science Fiction and Fantasy”. The class uses feminist theory, international relations, and game theory to scaffold engagement with the works and to examine key themes. Boaz includes a mix of film, television shows, and novels as a part of the syllabus to allow students varying entry points into speculative fiction. The main digital media works are *Battlestar Galactica*, *Game of Thrones*, *Jessica Jones*, *Star Trek*, *Misfits*, and *Watch- men*; and the novels include *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Atwood, 1985), *Oryx and Crake* (Atwood, 2003), *Parable of the Sower* (Butler, 1993), and *Never Let Me Go* (Ishiguro, 2015). Boaz developed this syllabus based on findings from research in psychology, cognitive science, and philosophy that showed that engaging with speculative fiction had a positive effect on student learning. One study cited by Boaz suggested that “science fiction reading promotes abstract thought and improves theory of mind, key dimensions in the development of both critical thinking skills and empathy” (Boaz, 2020, p. 244). As students partake in the class and with each piece of media, they are encouraged to analyze the issues such as representation of women, queer people, trans people, and people of color in the works as well as the power dynamics of race, class, gender and citizenship. Boaz (2020) argues that speculative fiction “encourage[s] us to think not just about the problem or policy at hand, but to provide some cognitive and psychological tools to speculate on possible futures and work through creative solutions toward constructive ends” (p. 244). This example highlights the ways that speculative fiction can be introduced to adult learners in the classroom through multi-modal syllabi and demonstrates the potential that speculative fiction has for inspiring generative conversations about oppressive power dynamics and social justice issues.

Together, this research shows that students respond positively to a curriculum that utilizes speculative thinking, reading, writing, and play because of its interdisciplinary nature, and its ability to spark creativity. These examples also show how the process of imagining and storytelling can empower students to talk about their lived experience, as well as their hopes and fears about the future. Each example demonstrates how using speculative fiction in the classroom can facilitate important conversations about race, state violence, climate change, gender and sexuality. The success of projects such as those provided rely heavily on the ability of educators and facilitators to create a safe space for students to use their imagination and share their ideas with others, which means that it is important for adults in these positions to take the time to reflect on what makes sense for the group of students that they are serving, and what issues are affecting them, in order to cultivate a space of critical hope.

Utopian Performance

Integrating speculative fiction into the classroom does not have to fully rely on literature or writing based curriculum. There is a strong connection between utopian pedagogy and performance studies due to the liberatory nature of theater and play. This connection can be traced back to Augusto Boal, a Brazilian director and playwright who was inspired by Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and applied ideas about the purpose and possibility of education to the purpose and possibility of theater for oppressed peoples (Caldas, 2020). The work of both Freire and Boal "stems from the need for transformation through social action by unveiling systems of oppression and by blurring the traditional lines between teacher and student, actor and spectator to create new realities or 'praxis'" (Caldas, 2020, p. 56). Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed*, provides a framework for how to practice or "rehearse" more just futures in the here-and-now by acknowledging the embodied knowledge that comes with

individual and collective trauma experienced by members of marginalized communities. Boal's concept of "spect-actors" challenges the role of the viewer and invites them to be transformed by their experience, much like speculative fiction encourages a dialectical exchange between the storyteller and the reader/listener. Boal provides a wealth of examples of how to use *Theater of the Oppressed* in the classroom and the potential for cultivating critical hope though these methods are echoed by scholars of utopian pedagogy and performance studies.

Leigh Anne Howard in her 2019 study, looks at the intersection of critical pedagogy and performance theory and its potential in community-based education. Her work stems from her observations that educators engaged in critical pedagogy often struggle with defining and locating concrete examples of praxis, and often face opposition and skepticism from administration (Howard, 2019). Howard situates "performance as a form of critical pedagogy and as an intervention in the world in which we live" which speaks directly to the goals of utopian pedagogy and speculative fiction by emphasizing the dual importance of critique and creating interventions in the present moment. This research is an extension of Jill Dolan's concept of "utopian performance" which is defined as "performance that depicts visions of an improved world or those that create the conditions that suggest the need for social reform" (Howard, 2019, p. 6). Howard argues that Dolan's definition of utopian performance is incomplete without the acknowledgement of the ways that engaging in performance is in and of itself a transformational and educational process and uses the work of Augusto Boal to emphasize this distinction. This study looked specifically at how Boal-style performance exercises enhanced student's learning through community engagement projects, and data showed that the curriculum allowed students the opportunity to confront stereotypes, practice personal agency, practice empathy and develop creative problem-solving skills (Howard, 2019).

Utopian performances can thus be understood as a form of speculative fiction because they “tell us how to make a better world possible by interrogating behaviors, critiquing their consequences, and demanding change” (Howard, 2019, p. 7). This also means that speculative fiction, as it is used in the classroom through creative writing and sharing ideas within one’s learning community, is a form of utopian performance. As formerly referenced, S.R. Toliver (2020) speaks to the importance of the performance aspect of her speculative fiction workshop by describing how with the young Black girls she worked with, presenting their stories allowed listeners to become involved in a dialogue with the authors and encouraged them to not only reflect, but to act in response to the issues illuminated by their stories. Taking performance theory into account and looking at the ways Boal-style theater exercises have the potential to cultivate critical hope and transformation in the classroom justifies the use of speculative fiction in critical pedagogy and allows educators to embrace an interdisciplinary approach to building curriculum. Theater and performance can be combined with speculative fiction as creative icebreakers, introductions to conversations about power, oppression and social justice, and as the very process of sharing one’s writing with a group. These kinds of performance exercises may be especially valuable in working with students who are new to creative writing or that express themselves best through movement and play. Though there is scholarship that also shows the potential of performance in adult education, there is a gap in the literature about the value of using these methods in teacher education. There are significant opportunities to engage teachers with speculative fiction through performance to cultivate critical hope and equip them with a variety of interdisciplinary tools and examples of utopian pedagogy and praxis.

Synthesis

It is clear after analyzing the many examples of educators using speculative fiction in and outside of the classroom that the success of the curriculum can be partially, if not completely attributed to the ability of the educators to create a safe environment for their students to reflect, engage in generative conversations, speak about their identities, engage in creative writing or performance and use those experiences to deepen their understanding of social issues and express their hopes and fears about the future. Because teachers play such a big role in the creation of these environments, having opportunities for teachers to experience what that looks and feels like as a student may encourage teachers to reflect on what creating safe spaces looks like for their classroom community, which may lead to a more successful implementation. This is does not detract from the power of the texts or activities on their own, but rather emphasizes the importance of creating classroom tools and resources that give educators the opportunity to learn and reflect themselves individually and through discussion and direct experimentation in the classroom space.

CHAPTER III

THE PROJECT AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

The product developed as part of this field project is a guide and educational tool that provides educators with a background on what speculative fiction is, why it may be a useful addition to their current pedagogy, and examples of sample lesson plans to experiment with in the classroom. This guide was created in response to my lived experience as a student in the field of Women and Gender Studies as an undergraduate student and in the field of Human Rights Education as a graduate student. I witnessed many of my peers and educators struggle with finding balance between hope and critique especially while living in times of oppression, uprising, and global pandemic. After spending time reflecting on my time as a student, I recalled that the moments of joy and hope that I felt were most often a result of a conversation or activity that allowed my peers and I to practice using our imaginations and creativity to describe to each other the worlds that we wanted to live in. I had the privilege of working with brilliant and inspiring educators that seamlessly weaved this practice into their version of critical pedagogy, and this guide grew out of the desire for more students and educators to have the opportunity to experience similar moments.

The guide includes a background on the history and relevancy of speculative fiction as a genre and describes the importance of selecting texts and content that support critical pedagogy, by centering the work of people of color and people with other marginalized identities. This is because as scholars such as André M. Carrington (2016) have pointed out- much of the science fiction and speculative fiction genre tends to overlook race and reproduce white settler colonialism in its imaginations of the future. The text may be studied as part of a more comprehensive study of speculative fiction, but the full text is not included in this specific guide.

The three lessons are guided by two different short stories and look at the three methods of engaging in speculative fiction that I researched and discussed in the literature review. First, educators are invited to introduce their students to the genre by reading a work of speculative fiction and engaging with the literary methods that the author uses to world-build and make commentary on issues of oppression and culture. In the second lesson, students will read another selection and practice writing speculative fiction letter format, inspired by the passage. Lastly, building off the previous lesson, students are invited to engage in performance by collecting items to help them tell their story and sharing their writing orally with their peers. The lessons also include discussion questions to help spark dialogue with students as they read and write, and as tools for reflection.

I selected short stories from the book *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements Justice (2015)* edited by adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha because the book was my first introduction to the genre of speculative fiction and includes stories written by social justice organizers of color. What is unique about this collection is that many of the authors would not have even considered themselves writers before their contribution, meaning that for many, it was their first time weaving together their lived experiences and ideas about the future in this specific way. Although some of the authors had never officially written speculative fiction, as the editors theorize, all social justice movement work and organizing is speculative fiction (Imarisha, 2015). By this definition, the authors had plenty of practice engaging with speculative fiction by using their imaginations to fight for and create alternative futures, better futures, in real time. This aspect of the book is what inspired me to include it in this teaching tool because its existence speaks to the fact that everyone deserves

not only to be represented in the stories they read, but also to be invited to write them themselves.

THE PROJECT

Thought Critique and Beyond: A Speculative Fiction Learning Guide

**Syd Thorne
University of San Francisco
December 2021**

Welcome

This guide is designed for educators who are interested in incorporating speculative fiction texts and activities into their teaching practice. This tool includes background and context about the genre of speculative fiction and three sample lessons, all of which highlight texts with social justice themes and have been written by people of color. The lessons are designed for 9th-12th grade students and above and can be easily modified to meet the needs of specific age groups and learning communities. Content included in this guide can be used to complement curriculum in the areas of English Language and Composition, Literature, Creative Writing, Social Studies, Humanities, Sociology, and Ethnic Studies. This guide may also be of use to community educators and organizers outside of academia. It is highly encouraged that educators take the time to practice reflecting on discussion questions and responding to writing prompts themselves prior to engaging with students. This is because educators are rarely given the opportunity to engage in imaginative practices that allow them to reflect on their lived experiences and feelings about the present and the future.

Core Understandings

There is always room for joy in learning.

You are the only one who has or will ever see the world through your eyes.

Utopia exists in the here and now.

Dystopia exists in the here and now.

Pessimism is an appropriate response to oppression.

Hope is not a sign of weakness or ignorance.

Imagination is not just for children.

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What is Speculative Fiction?

The term “**speculative fiction**” has many conflicting definitions that have changed over time but is most frequently used as an umbrella term for several fiction genres. Genres typically housed under the speculative fiction umbrella include science fiction, fantasy, dystopian/utopian fiction, and horror. A work of speculative fiction can be understood as a “thought experiment that embraces an open-ended vision of the real” meaning that there are no strict rules when it comes to world building (Marek, 2017, p.3). Because it is such an expansive category, this project focuses on speculative fiction works that have specific connections to themes of justice and liberation. These works are most often written by people of color, women, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, [dis]abled authors, and authors that experience life at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities and many of these works of speculative fiction serve as critiques and responses to oppression.

Some of the most famous authors in the genre of speculative fiction that use themes of social justice and oppression are Octavia E. Butler, Toni Cade Bambara, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Margaret Atwood. The work of these authors has inspired a recent surge in justice oriented speculative fiction has also given birth to new terms and definitions. For example, the authors of *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* developed the term “**visionary fiction**” to distinguish science fiction that has “relevance toward building new, freer worlds from the mainstream strain of science fiction, which most often reinforces dominant narratives of power” (Imarisha, 2015, p.4). This constant process of challenging and creating new definitions speaks to the ways that speculative fiction has evolved and the ways that it has

gained increasing acceptance and legitimacy in both academic and popular culture, making space for new and emerging storytellers to join in conversation with seminal voices in the tradition.

Why Teach and Learn Speculative Fiction?

Speculative fiction usually deals with imaginary or fantastical worlds, but many subjects and themes are rooted in the writers' lived experiences, often incorporating thoughts and feelings about the worlds they live in, the worlds that they desire living in, as well as the worlds that they fear living in. The reflective, analytical, critical, and constructive qualities of speculative fiction are what make the genre a useful tool for critical pedagogy. Engaging with the genre through reading, writing and performance can uplift the voices people from marginalized communities, facilitate generative conversations about systems of oppression and how they manifest in our daily lives, and provide a space for experimentation with ideas about the future, all of which have the power to aid in the cultivation of critical hope in the classroom (. Speculative fiction may also be an effective tool in engaging students in various, often difficult topics such as police violence, white supremacy, climate crisis, gender binary, and other topics related to identity and oppression. adrienne maree brown, one of the authors of *Octavia's Brood* speaks to the importance of finding balance between realism and hope in social justice movements stating, "I think our survival depends on being able to hold both views, surviving the present, and supporting the most vulnerable with our eyes on the horizon, looking as far as we can, shaping our reality towards that" (Imarisha, 2017, p. 10).

Learning Goals

Engage in thoughtful and analytical conversation about a text.

Reflect on how the stories reference current events or the author's lived experiences.

Make Connections to your lived experience and thoughts and feelings about the future.

Practice using your imagination to envision the future.

Perform by sharing your writing with your peers.

Bear Witness by listening to the stories of your peers.

How to Prepare

It is recommended that teachers should become familiar with the texts as well as the background of the authors. It is also recommended that teachers take time to reflect about the group of students that they will be working with and think about how best to hold space for potentially difficult conversations. This can look different in every context, but it may be helpful to create a list of community norms to frame the conversation and set expectations. This is important because sharing writing and thoughts verbally with the group is essential to the learning experience, and students may not be hesitant to share. It may also be helpful to begin lessons with grounding activities such as breathwork or body movement work and examples will be provided as part of this guide.

The Text

This guide contains three lessons that are guided by two different short stories from the book *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements (2015)* edited by adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha. This text was chosen because many of the authors are people of color who come from organizing backgrounds and as the editors theorize, all social justice movement work and organizing is speculative fiction (Imarisha, 2015). The authors featured in this collection use their imaginations and the art of storytelling to explore complex feelings about the future and their offerings speak directly to the learning goals of this guide.

Lesson Introduction

The three lessons included in this guide explore three different methods of engaging with speculative fiction. First, educators are invited to introduce their students to the genre by reading a work of speculative fiction and engaging with the literary methods that the author uses to world-build and make commentary on issues of oppression and culture. In the second lesson, students will read another selection and practice writing speculative fiction letter format, inspired by the passage. Lastly, building off the previous lesson, students are invited to engage in performance by collecting items to help them tell their story and sharing their writing orally with their peers. The lessons also include discussion questions to help spark dialogue with students as they read and write, and as tools for reflection. It is recommended that lessons be taught together and in sequential order, but the lessons may be spread out over multiple weeks depending on what makes the most sense for the group and their learning goals/educational timeline.

See Appendix for lessons 1-3, conclusion, recommendations, and references.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion

In the early stages of this research and field project I was moved to explore the concept of critical hope and to seek out creative ways that educators and researchers have approached the problem of hopelessness in the classroom. I was driven by scholars such as bell hooks, whose writings on education provide examples of holding both hope and critique and the desire to find more just and humanizing pedagogies. Other scholars such as Jeffery M.R. Duncan-Andrade (2009) discuss the crisis of hopelessness in the classroom as a result of students and teachers, especially those from and living in marginalized communities, being exposed to an “ecosystem of toxic environments” as they are confronted with structural oppression and violence (p.3). These ecosystems are complex as are the lives of individuals, meaning that one’s lived experience and needs cannot be represented by or addressed by any one response. This creates a call for creativity, innovation, and experimentation, to discover new ways of looking at problems and new ways of connecting with one another in community. I chose to focus on speculative fiction and explore its utility as a tool of critical pedagogy because I have seen first-hand as a student, the ways that reading works in the genre, practicing creative writing, and engaging in performance has inspired generative and reflective conversations. As a result of my research, I not only believe speculative fiction to be an excellent educational tool, but also believe the process of thinking about the future with students is an activity that has the power to cultivate critical hope in exciting ways.

This research and field project adds to the ongoing conversation about emerging methods in critical pedagogy by showcasing several ways that arts integrated curriculum has the potential to deepen and enhance student learning. Authors and activists such as the editors and contributors of *Octavia's Brood* (2017), Larissa Lai (2020), and Joshua Yu Burnett (2019) all discuss the many ways that speculative fiction is related to movement work and social justice by highlighting the ways that lived experience informs our hopes and fears about the future and inspires us to imagine change. Researchers and educators such as S.R. Toliver (2020) and Julie Doyle (2020) demonstrate how working with speculative fiction can encourage generative and reflective conversation about difficult topics such as racism, police violence and climate change. Leigh Anne Howard (2019) and other scholars and researchers connect utopian ideas to the world of performance theory, using the work of Augusto Boal to demonstrate the liberatory possibilities of using performance in the classroom. The learning guide developed as part of this project includes resources and methods inspired by the work presented by these researchers, scholars and educators and allows teachers and students to experiment with using speculative fiction, creative writing, and performance to cultivate critical hope and practice self-expression in the learning community.

The intention of this research and field project was to highlight examples of educators and researchers and the ways that they use speculative fiction to foster critical hope in the classroom and facilitate spaces where imagination is encouraged. The learning guide developed as part of this project serves as an example of what kinds of conversations are possible when students are introduced to the genre of speculative fiction and guided through the process of not only finding themselves reflected in the stories that they read but also invited to create their own

stories based on their unique lived experiences and feelings about the future. In reviewing all the supporting research about the use of speculative fiction in the classroom, it was clear that where there was success, there were educators and facilitators that were passionate about the genre of speculative fiction and who knew how to create a safe space in the classroom where generative conversations about difficult topics could occur. This is to say that a learning guide with suggested writing prompts and discussion questions will be most helpful to educators with genuine interest in experimenting with these concepts and methods and with an existing commitment to creating a classroom space in which students feel comfortable sharing and being vulnerable. Because the role of the educator or facilitator is so important, the learning guide includes specific questions and suggestions to help educators and facilitators reflect on what topics and feelings come up while working through the lessons with students.

Recommendations for Further Research and Development

This research and field project grew out of the desire to honor and uplift the concept of critical hope and to explore the many ways that educators and researchers approach the project of fostering critical hope in the classroom. My research revealed that although there are numerous studies and academic papers published that showcase speculative fiction as an effective tool of critical pedagogy, there are still significant gaps in the literature and therefore significant opportunities for research and further development. Some of these gaps include research that looks at speculative fiction as a pedagogical tool in early education and in teacher education. Because existing research suggests that secondary and post-secondary age students respond positively to speculative fiction in the classroom, it can be assumed that there is significant potential for similar results in both early education and teacher education. Further research is

recommended in these areas, and it is possible that this research could grow from existing studies as storytelling and performance lessons are easily modified and adapted to different age groups.

Further development of pedagogical tools is also recommended as the learning guide provided is intended to be a brief introduction to using speculative fiction in the classroom. The learning guide includes resources for further development and a suggested reading list with titles appropriate for different age groups. Educators may extend the lessons provided in many ways by responding to the educational goals and interests of their specific classrooms. Further development of the curriculum could focus on literary analysis by doing a deeper dive into different texts, creative writing skills by workshopping longer stories or collections of short stories, or performance skills by practicing playwriting and acting inspired by the concepts explored. For example, teachers may decide to teach *Octavia's Brood (2017)* in its entirety or select additional short stories or chapters from other collections. There are also several acting games from Augusto Boal's *Games for Actors and Non-Actors (1992)* that could be added to the curriculum as ice breakers for groups that may need more practice being vulnerable in front of each other before presenting their writing.

It is also recommended that in further research and curriculum development that people of color, queer and trans people, [dis]abled people, and people with other marginalized identities be centered by seeking out authors of marginalized experience and doing further studies with students from marginalized backgrounds themselves. The literature reviewed as part of this field project centered the experiences and ideas of educators and researchers of color and the ways that they engaged in conversations with their students from similar backgrounds. The texts chosen as part of the learning guide were also chosen intentionally to center the work of people of color and because the authors' stories revolve around their lived experience and relevant

social justice issues such as racism, immigration, and climate change. In addition to *Octavia's Brood* (2017), the learning guide includes several other examples of speculative fiction written by people of color as part of the reading list for further development. As a white researcher it was important to me to uplift the work of people of color believe that it should be common practice to do so especially in the field of critical pedagogy and human right education.

Toward Queer Speculative Futures

Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present [...] we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. (Muñoz, 2009)

As a queer researcher interested in queer theory and methods, I was hoping to find more studies that supported the use of queer speculative fiction as pedagogical tools. My very first introduction to speculative fiction was through the works of queer authors and my study of utopian philosophy has also been explored in tandem with queer theory. I believe that further research and development of the concepts of critical hope and the possibilities for critical pedagogy are best explored through a queer lens. There is a significant amount written about queerness in speculative and science fiction suggesting that there is a long history in which the two worlds are intertwined, but those worlds have yet to arrive in together in the field of education. This is important because LGBTQ+ students deserve to not only see themselves and their experiences reflected in the media and literature they consume, but also deserve the invitation to dream and imagine worlds in which they are able to express themselves and simply

exist in new and expansive ways. The gap in the research about speculative fiction and queer methods is probably a result of the fact that using speculative fiction in education is an emerging topic, and because focusing on the work of LGBTQ+ authors and developing curriculum for LGBTQ+ students can be difficult in the world of academia that is still plagued by cis-heteronormativity, homophobia, and transphobia.

Although there are few examples of existing research, there exist a plethora of starting places of which to explore queer theory, utopian pedagogy, and speculative fiction together and discover the possibilities for education. José Esteban Muñoz, quoted above, is a scholar and author who writes about the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class through the lens of performance studies and the utopian imaginary. There are also several recent collections of speculative fiction by queer and trans authors such as *Transgent 3: The Years Best Transgender Themed Speculative Fiction (2018)* which offer unique perspectives and approaches to the genre of speculative fiction that represent how important the act of imagining difference futures is for queer and trans people. Speculative fiction as a genre has always been a welcome home for storytellers interested in exploring non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality which serve as both critiques of normative ways of being but also as creative examples of what the future could look like (Pearson, 2003). Further research and development into this topic also include uplifting queer and trans authors that use speculative fiction as a tool to express themselves and invite readers into their complex worlds. There is significant potential for research and curriculum development that goes beyond the inclusivity of queer and trans narratives and recognizes the educational value of these stories.

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APPENDIX

Lesson 1

Intro to Speculative Fiction: Far Away but Familiar Worlds

Materials: Dani McClain. (2015). Homing Instinct. In Octavia’s Brood: Science fiction stories from social justice movements (pp. 239–247). A.K. Press.

This story was written by Dani McClain, a Black woman and an author and journalist. McClain writes about race, reproductive health, and motherhood. This story is a part of the collection *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* and follows a character who is struggling with the decision of whether to follow a law they believe is immoral.

The story is set in Oakland, California but the year is not specified. Climate change, government orders, travel laws, and questions about citizenship, individual responsibility and the definition of the word “home” are explored.

Learning Goals:

- Identify the ways that the author uses a fictional scenario to explore complex feelings about the world they live in.
- Identify literary devices and strategies that the author uses to build the setting of the story.
- Practice classroom discussion that acknowledges different interpretations of texts and the ways that different people can connect or relate to stories in different ways.
- Connect themes to lived experiences.
- Imagine the future beyond the story.

Definitions:

Speculative Fiction: like science fiction, “a broad literary genre encompassing any fiction with supernatural, fantastical, or futuristic elements” (Dictionary.com)

Visionary Fiction: science fiction that has “relevance toward building new, freer worlds from the mainstream strain of science fiction, which most often reinforces dominant narratives of power” (Imarisha, 2015, p.4)

Activity:

Introduce students to the genre of speculative fiction by sharing a definition and asking students to share some of their favorite examples of speculative fiction or science fiction/fantasy from popular culture. Examples could include books, movies and TV shows with fictional settings and characters

Read “Homing Instinct” by Dani McClain; text may be read aloud in class by the teacher or students or may be assigned as homework to be read independently.

In class, allow students 5-10 minutes to free write about their initial reactions to the text.

Open the conversation to the group and discuss the following questions as well as any other thoughts and feelings that came up. Emphasis should be placed on the idea that texts can be interpreted in many ways and that everyone will relate to the story differently depending on their experience.

Discussion Questions:

Who is the main character in this story?

1. When does the story take place? If unsure, guess based on clues from the story.
2. What choices and ethical dilemmas is the main character faced with?
3. What was the “reposition order” mentioned in the story?
4. What similarities are there between the order to “reposition” order and the government orders you have experienced such as the “stay at home” order?
5. Does this reality seem realistic or unrealistic? Why or why not?
6. The main characters struggle with their definitions of “home” how would your definition of “home” affect your decisions if you were in a similar situation?
7. Does the main character express hope for the future? If so, how?

Reflection for Teachers:

This story touches on themes that students should be familiar with as they have been navigating living through the multiple pandemics of public health crisis, climate change, and structural racism. This story may also affect students who have experiences with immigration, or who come from multicultural families.

1. What were the major themes that were brought up by students?
2. What aspects of the story did students relate to their own experience?
3. How were student’s definitions of home different?
4. How does this conversation further inform or change your understanding of students’ lives?
5. How can this conversation influence your pedagogical approach in the future?

Lesson 2

Writing Like a Time Traveler: Letters from the Future

Materials: Gumbs, A.P. (2015). Evidence. In *Octavia's Brood: Science fiction stories from social justice movements* (pp. 33–41). A.K. Press.

This work of fiction was written by Alexis Pauline Gumbs who describes herself as “a Queer Black Troublemaker and Black Feminist Love Evangelist and an aspirational cousin to all sentient beings.” She is a poet, writer, scholar, and researcher who has been involved in numerous projects centered around Black feminism, revolutionary love, and the work of Audre Lorde (<https://www.alexispauline.com/about>).

This work is a collection of letters, poems, and fictional research logs from the past, present, near future and distant future from the perspective of the author and from the perspective of future kin. The “artifacts” reflect the author’s feelings about the present, as well as her hopes and fears about the future, articulated through the practice of letter writing. Gumbs explores the themes of healing trauma, community care, family, and liberation.

This lesson combines reading and writing by introducing students to a unique format of speculative fiction and gives them the opportunity to experiment with their own writing. This activity requires students to reflect on their feelings about the present and hopes and fears about the future just as Alexis Pauline Gumbs does in her writing.

Learning Goals:

- Identify the ways that the author uses a fictional scenario to explore complex feelings about the past, present, and future.
- Identify literary devices and strategies that the author uses to build the setting each period.
- Practice classroom discussion that acknowledges different interpretations of texts and the ways that different people can connect or relate to stories in different ways.
- Connect themes to lived experiences.
- Imagine the future beyond the story.
- Practice writing fiction from different perspectives.

Activity:

Introduce students to the text by sharing background about the author and the format of the text, emphasizing that fiction can include imaginary letters and artifacts to tell a story.

Invite students to read the text independently as homework. In class, read the introduction, Exhibit B and Exhibit E aloud, with a new volunteer reading each section. Pausing in between each section to discuss.

Consider the following discussion questions.

Discussion Questions:

RE: Exhibit B

This letter is written from the perspective of Alexis's 12-year-old kin from five generations in the future, Alandrix. They are writing to ask questions about what life was like for Alexis and to share about how things have changed and how they live

1. What questions does Alandrix have for their ancestor?
2. How does Alandrix describe the world that they live in? What has changed?
3. Does the way that the future is described imply that the author has a more positive or negative view of the future?

RE: Exhibit E

This letter is written to Alexis in the present-day (Lexi), by herself in the future (Lex). Instead of being curious about the past, this person is aware of what life was like for the person she is writing to because she lived through it herself. This letter is meant to inform her past self about the ways that life has changed, and to offer words of support.

1. What has changed in the future that Lex describes?
2. Lex seeks to validate the feelings that her younger self is experiencing; what are those feelings?
3. Lex offers words of affirmation to her younger self; what kinds of things is she proud of?
4. Do you think that the author has a more positive or negative view of the future? Why or why not?

Introduce writing exercise: This exercise requires students to write two short letters. The first, from the perspective of their imaginary kin from many generations in the future, addressed to themselves in the present day. The second letter should be written from the perspective of the student at some point in the future but within their lifetime, also addressed to themselves in the present day.

Be aware this exercise could bring up complicated feelings with regards to race, gender, sexuality, economic status, citizenship, colonization, family, climate change, aging and death. It is common for students to feel a mixture of hopeful and fearful feelings about the future and these reactions are appropriate given the challenges that they may be facing today.

Writing Prompt #1: A Letter from the Distant Future

Write a letter to yourself from the perspective of an imaginary kin in the future. This person could be a relative or an unrelated character that seeks to reconnect with the past. This future may be hopeful, fearful, or a mixture of the two and can be as realistic or imaginative as the writer chooses. Think about the following questions as you write:

- **Who?** Who is the author of the letter? Imagine what name they are called, what they look like, how they dress, how old they are, and what kinds of interests they have.
- **When?** How far in the future does this person live? Should be at least five generations or more.
- **Where?** Where does this person live? Do they live on Earth or another planet? Another universe? What does it look like?
- **What?** What has changed in the time in between your life and this person's life? What does society look like? What kind of political/economic/cultural systems are in place? What kind of technology is available? What solutions have been used to address current or future problems?
- **Why?** Why does this person want to reconnect with you? Is it to offer hope or to warn about a dangerous future? What questions would they have for you about how you live today?

Writing Prompt #2: A Letter from the Near Future

Write a letter to your current self from the perspective of your future self- maybe 20-50 years from now. The future described may be hopeful, fearful, or a mixture of the two and can be as realistic or imaginative as the writer chooses. Think about the following questions when you write:

- What do you look like in the future? What kind of clothes are you and other wearing?
- What does your life look like?
- How has life changed for your friends and family?
- How has life changed for society?
- How has the planet changed?
- What solutions have been used to address current or future problems?
- What words of support or advice do you have for your current self?

Reflection for Teachers:

This exercise is meant to give students the opportunity to practice imagining the future both as it could be in their own lives and in the lives of those who will come after us. This is a powerful and reflective thought experiment and may come more naturally to some students than others, notice and affirm students that may struggle or be hesitant to use their imagination by reminding them that there are no wrong answers and that there are infinite possibilities. Notice whether students tend to develop "realistic" ideas or more fantastical ideas about the future, as well as how salient their identities are in the worlds/characters they create.

1. What themes or current events seem to be influencing students' hopes/fears about the future?
2. How does this conversation further inform or change your understanding of students' lives?
3. How can this conversation influence your pedagogical approach in the future?

Lesson 3

What's in my Bag? Found Artifacts from the Future

Materials: Letters from Writing Prompt #1, 3 found objects or personal objects from home

Learning Goals:

- Continue the process of character and world-building with props.
- Practice using imagination by assigning alternative uses/meanings to objects.
- Practice storytelling and public speaking by sharing writing with others.
- Practice radical witnessing by listening to the stories of others

Activity:

Part 1: Object Collection

Original activity from *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* by Augusto Boal (2002, p.160):

The found object: “The members of the group are asked to bring in five objects each, objects which have been used. They all then place their objects around the space. Once all the objects have been positioned, the group analyses the relationships between the objects, why they have been placed where, what the connections between the different groups of objects are, whether there are ‘families’ of objects, what meanings we project on to the objects.”

The object transformed: “the participants change their meaning by using them differently or in different contexts”

Modified Version:

Invite students to bring in 3 personal objects or everyday items and think of how they would be used differently in the future or how their meaning/significance may change in the future. Students will connect these objects to the fictional future character in the letter they wrote for Writing Prompt #2 by assigning alternate uses or significance to them.

Ask students to think about what kinds of tools, accessories, artifacts etc. would their characters carry with them? Items should be small enough to fit in a backpack and not go against school safety rules. When choosing items, think of cultural significance, family heirlooms, new styles, technology, energy, currency etc. Examples: rocks/crystals, fashion items, technology, jewelry, photos, and books.

Start this conversation in class and give students the opportunity to brainstorm by finding examples of objects in the classroom and assigning a futuristic use for them together.

Part 2: Storytelling as Performance

Teachers may decide whether to break students up into small groups or remain in a large group for the final storytelling portion.

Students will take turns reading their letters from Writing Prompt #2 aloud to the class/small group and showing the items that they brought and explaining their significance. Students may also dress up for this reading if desired.

Encourage students to practice active listening and to give each other feedback on their ideas while reinforcing the idea that everyone's version of the future will be different and that there are no right or wrong interpretations.

Option for feedback and appreciation: Assign each student 2 other students from the class at random to write "reviews" on notecards specifying what the listener enjoyed about the story/performance. If students are comfortable speaking this may also be done orally following each performance.

Conclusion and Reflection

Conclusion and reflection will look differently depending on the group of students.

Options for reflection may include:

- Written reflections via classroom free write about the experience
- Class-wide discussion about the experience
- Anonymous post-its with a few words about the experience
- One-one-one check ins about the experience

Questions for Student Reflection:

1. What was your favorite part of this experience?
2. What was the most challenging part of this experience?
3. What was one thing that surprised you from your experience writing, performing, or listening to others?

Questions for Teacher Reflection:

1. What was your favorite part of this experience?
2. What was the most challenging part of this experience?
3. What was one thing that surprised you from your experience reading, listening to, and observing students engage with these lessons?
4. Were students eager or hesitant to use their imaginations or express themselves?
5. Did the classroom environment support or limit student engagement? How?
6. How will your students' responses to the lessons influence your approach to teaching?
7. What other areas of your future curriculum could benefit from integrated arts or speculative fiction?

YA and Adult Speculative Fiction Recommendations

- Adeyemi, T. (2018). *Children of Blood and Bone (Legacy of Orisha #1)*. Henry Holt Company.
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- Takács, B. (Ed.). (2017). *Transcendent 2: The Year's Best Transgender Speculative Fiction*. Lethe Press.
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Resources for Further Development

Campbell, E. & Rogers, C. (2019) *The Dark Fantastic: Emancipating the Imagination* [Syllabus]

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Rowe, D.D., Rudnick, J.J. & White, L. (2020). Images of identity: Performing power and intersectionality. *Communication Teacher*, 34(4), 312–319.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17404622.2019.1690156>

Toliver, S.R. (2020). Can I get a witness? Speculative fiction as testimony and counterstory. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 52(4), 507–529. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1086296X20966362>

Truman, S.E. (2019). SF! Haraway's situated feminisms and speculative fabulations in English class. *Studies in Philosophical Education*, 38, 31–42. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-018-9632-5>

Volin, K. (2020) *Our New Mythologies Speculative Fiction Unit* [Syllabus] Greenberg

https://theteachersinstitute.org/curriculum_unit/our-new-mythologies-speculative-fiction-unit/

Wood, V. (2020) "Take Root Among the Stars" A Speculative Curriculum for Fifth Grade [Syllabus]

Henry C. Lea Elementary School

https://theteachersinstitute.org/curriculum_unit/take-root-among-the-stars-a-speculative-curriculum-unit-for-fifth-grade/

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