Speculative Fiction and Curriculum Theorizing:
What could/should schools and classrooms of the future look like?

MORNA MCDERMOTT MCNULTY
Towson University
THOMAS S. POETTER
Miami University

The Question at Hand and Our Work

TOM: MORNA MCDERMOTT MCNULTY, my longtime friend and colleague in the field, inspired this special issue as a result of one of her presentations that I attended at *JCT*'s Bergamo Conference in Fall 2023…(Paraphrased): "We already know that schools will look radically different from the schools we know now, P-16. What role will we play in re-imagining them?" So, we invited curriculum theorists to contribute relatively short, accessible, challenging works of speculative fiction to this special of *JCT* focused on the following prompt: What impact can speculative fiction have on the process of currere, and how can the process of currere (specifically the progressive phase, accessing the imaginary) inspire curricularists to creatively speculate possible curriculum futures?

In answering Morna's question, at least initially, I think that we have an opportunity and a responsibility to imagine the future of education, schooling, and classrooms, to argue for something of value happening in them as change imbues our lives, and to be part of the process. One avenue for participation in that project is to engage in imaginative work, to connect to the power of the progressive step of inquiry that occupies a critically important space in the currere method, and write our speculative futures into existence, at least in words if not in actual action. The pieces in this special issue play with the possibilities of imagination to think into existence the potential for schools, classrooms, lives, to reinvigorate our lives and our polity. This issue, which I'm very proud of, constitutes my first and only content contribution to *JCT* as editor during my 6-year run as editor. Serving as editor and President of the Foundation for Curriculum Theory, which sponsors the conference and journal, was one of the best experiences of my professional life; thank you to everyone who made the work possible.

Several of the pieces contained in this special issue were presented by the authors at a session of the 2024 Bergamo Curriculum Conference, attended by a good mix of scholars interested in this type of work, several with their own records of excellent work in this genre of inquiry. In that session, I became very hopeful that this special issue will be just the first of several efforts by the conference and journal to explore the possibilities of this type of work for creating new possibilities for action in our near, very important futures.

As the final pieces in this special issue come together and land in the humming in-boxes of our new managing editors, Vanessa Winn and Jody Googins, during mid-January of 2025, in the midst of climate calamity (LA wildfires), continuing violence in the Middle East surrounding the prospects of peace and a ceasefire in Gaza, and the continuing political upheaval and transformation here in the U.S., I stumbled across a blurb that came across a TV program highlighting the connections between Octavia Butler's (1993) more than 30 year-old novel of speculative fiction *Parable of the Sower* and our current state of affairs. I am sorry I never encountered her book before, but the eerie connections and timing of the action set in the novel should make us even more cognizant of the power of inquiry, of imagination, of possibility, of goodness, of hope. My plan is to read the novel in the coming days, re-read this special issue, all of the pieces again, and reflect on Butler's (1993) message and the messages here-in, and build my own new speculative fiction piece for this year's *JCT* conference in Dayton. I hope you will read both, and more, in the new year as well, and come to our conference session in 2025.

How the Pieces Came Together in This Special Issue: The Authors and Writing

Morna: The perception of time as linear (i.e., the past is 'back there' … wherever *there* is… and the future is always 'ahead of us') comes from a psycho-percepto-politicial-spacio/lingustic slight-of-hand. In simpler words, our construction of time is not 'fixed' and as such, time (and place) can be imagined otherwise. This argument is not new or original, nor is it ours alone. Indigenous cultures and decolonial artists, visionaries, writers, and scholars have known this for centuries (see Griffiths, 2004; Fonka & Shizha, 2022). Additionally, speculative fiction has a long and rich history as an artful form of resistance to colonial and oppressive worlds (see Kelly, 2003; Benjamin, 2024; Thomas & Hope, 2001 for a few examples). We do not write, theorize, or imagine our work here in isolation. Our stories ebb and flow from those that have come before us, and those yet to come. We work, to paraphrase the words of Daspit (in this issue), from the "brain froth … of future memories" where, "ghosts haunt the blood/ink" (p. 70).

Speculative fiction speculates not only on future events but on possibilities for altered pasts and presents. The cornerstone of speculative writing is in the possibility for and from alternatives to what we think of as *present* or *real*. This is not to assume such possibilities are not *not* real. Perhaps speculative alternatives already exist, and it is our perception that demands alteration. In these writing spaces, we find *entanglements* rather than unfolding of experiences. To theorize about the 'future' of curriculum and schooling is to simultaneously reexamine its past and present (Pinar, 2004); all are synchronous phenomena. What do we mean when we say words like *now*? Or, *then*? Or, *nex*t? Numerous scholars have theorized these questions (see Applebaum, 2019; Weaver, 2019; Gough, 1987; jagodinsky, 2017). Others have used theory to embark on fictional and artful embodiments of creative forms (see Conrad & Weibe, 2021).

This special issue centers contributions around one guiding idea: *All future is fiction*. Or, put another way, "the opposite of fiction isn't fact, it is finitude" (McDermott, 2018, p xxi). By engaging with fictional futures, we are entering the realm of the imaginary. For this special issue

we specifically emphasize the methodology of "ficto-currere" (McDermott, 2018) by which the imaginary becomes a means for layering self and memory with a commitment to social justice and global sustainability. Using memory to develop the progressive phase of currere demands a capacity *to speculate*. We are inspired by the words of Conrad and Weibe (2021) who call for us to "envision together other worlds in which education, teaching, and learning are different from how they are now" (p. 6). In this sense, we use currere to conjure research findings that "provoke public interest. Harnessing the creative and disruptive capacities of speculative fiction, we write to help shape the not yet of education" (p. 7).

The various contributions in this special issue emerge from one of the "cones of possibilities" (Agostino, 2023, para 5): the probable, the plausible, and the possible. Some of the work here may be crafted to redefine the 'laws' of physics and time. Some find friendships in intergalactic or interspecies worlds. In others, poetry and prose are sewn together artistically between lines of the imaginary and the real (however that may be defined), using research-based facts to theorize what might (realistically) happen next. Some haunt us, while still others weave together fantastical dream-states within our familiar worlds. In all, we aimed toward a body of work that bends toward hope. We hope for some/thing. Hope is in the waiting (and, in the writing), and there is nothing but this moment *now*, even as we search for the 'thing' or event that is the 'next.' Because something is simply nothing but anticipation until your body is full of both light and shadow, particle and wave, in movement. And, no/thing is more important than knowing you can always do something in the *nothing*, that is now.

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How Generative AI and Smart Toys™ Enabled Deschooling:
Excerpts From the Memoirs of a Cyberpunk Time Traveler

NOEL GOUGH
La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia

Prologue: Bistro Marineris, Czarina-Kluster, 15-12-2291

I EXPECT THAT YOU MIGHT BE WONDERING how a prologue to an academic essay (albeit one that simultaneously functions as a work of speculative fiction) can be dated in a distant future (more than two centuries hence), but I hope that the anecdote that follows will help to orient you to the multiple temporal dimensions of the story I tell here. I realise that its temporal ambiguities might also *disorient* you, but I contend that tolerance of such ambiguities will prove to be an adaptive trait in the futures we share, as Maxine Hong Kingston (1977) foreshadowed in her inspirational memoirs of a "girlhood among ghosts," in which she recalled that "I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes" (p. 34).

In Bruce Sterling's (1986a) acclaimed future history of trans/posthuman development, evolution, and circumsolar expansion[1], *Schismatrix Plus*, he recounts a bistro server's apparent frustration as he struggles to comprehend the words of the "ancient terran philosopher Ilya Prigogine" (p. 274):

> …listen to this! He pulled a notebook from inside his willow-printed coat. He read loudly, desperately. "A dissipative self-organizing system evolves along a coherent sequence of space-time structures. We may distinguish between four different dimensional frameworks: autopoeisis, ontogeny, phylogeny, anagenesis… And this is from my *poetry* class! (p. 200)

I can testify to the accuracy of Sterling's account because I am, in fact, the bistro server to whom he refers (during an incident that occurred when/where I was traveling incognito in the circumsolar space/time continuum). However, I fear that he misinterprets the reasons for my frustration, by insinuating that I found something anomalous about Nobel laureate Ilya Prigogine's (1980) understandings of change and evolution being represented in a "poetry class" in the twenty-third century, rather than, say, a science curriculum in the late twentieth century (although that might be wishful thinking on my part given that much school science education in the late twentieth century remained focused on the material structures of simple systems, rather than the informational structures of complex systems).

On the contrary, I was simply dismayed that, in the trans/posthuman milieu that Sterling describes, it must have taken more than two centuries for the fundamentals of complexity to be so suffused into the culture that they would be taught in a "poetry class," in much the same way that evolution and relativity might (or should) have been taught in a "science class" in Sterling's day. As long ago as the 1990s, complexity was widely recognized to be a characteristic of many networked systems and had become a focus for inquiry and speculation in most branches of the sciences, humanities, and arts; although it was still largely ignored by education bureaucrats, curriculum decision makers, and even—dare I say—professors of curriculum.

Nevertheless, Sterling is an unreliable narrator[2] For example, he implies that my "notebook" was a paper-based technology, rather than the pocket-sized e-tablet descended from the 21st century Apple iPad mini that I was using in the 2290s. I should also point out that the reference to "my *poetry* class" did not refer to a group of students with whom I was meeting regularly to study the same subject (as the term was understood on Earth in 1995, when physical structures quaintly known as "classrooms" actually existed) but, rather, to a category in a complex taxonomy of shared generative AI[3] semiotic resources that I have routinely accessed for more than two centuries (in which poetry is distinguished, among many other modes of expression, from prose, drama, c*urrere*, netspeak, digispeak, chatspeak, psychography, paratextual mediation, hieroglyphics, polydirectional syllabaries, graffiti and technobabble).

Introducing Myself, 30-07-2024

I trust that as a reader of this esteemed scholarly journal you are sufficiently cosmopolitan[4] to have some familiarity with the adventures of an extraterrestrial humanoid known simply as "the Doctor" (whose adventures in time and space have been comprehensively chronicled in the British Broadcasting Corporation's documentary television series, *Doctor Who*, since 1963[5]). Somewhat like a space-age, technology-assisted Robin Hood, the Doctor works to save lives, liberate oppressed peoples, and combat various evildoers (such as the Daleks, an extremely violent race of xenophobic mutants bent on the conquest of the universe and the extermination of other forms of life). The Doctors travel in the universe and in time in a TARDIS[6] and are effectively immortal: when Time Lords are fatally injured, their cells regenerate, and they are reincarnated. Most Doctors to date have been portrayed as British upper- or middle-class White males[7].

I admit to being a middle-class White male of British descent, but I am not a Time Lord and I am not immortal. I am a cyberpunk dropout from the Time Lord Academy. After I surreptitiously hacked into the Untempered Schism[8], gap in space/time that causes some onlookers to go mad, I involuntarily acquired a nonlinear perception of time, an extended (but finite) lifespan, and stole a decommissioned TARDIS. Perhaps I did go mad (I will leave that for others to judge), but I am on the public record as retaining a respectable parallel identity as an emeritus phildickian[9] professor of posthumanist curriculum and pedagogy (see Gough, 2009; Gough, 2015).

Interlude: Is Time Travel Possible?

I am aware that many (perhaps most) readers of this story are likely to be sceptical of my (or anyone's) accounts of time travel, so it might be useful to reflect briefly on the various ways in which such travel can be (and has been) effected:

- **machines**: the TARDIS has legendary predecessors in H.G.Wells' (1895) novella, *The Time Machine*, and its adaptations in George Pal's (1960) and Simon Wells' (2002) films of the same title and Nicholas Meyer's (1979) *Time After Time* (in which Wells uses his machine to pursue Jack the Ripper into the 20th century). Another example is the Delorean motor car depicted in Robert Zemeckis' (1985) *Back to the Future* film trilogy. The representations of the machine in Pal's and Meyer's films reflected their 19th century roots (for example, the 1960s model resembled a horse-drawn sleigh). I found both of these aesthetically pleasing (they reminded me of early 20th century vintage cars) and would have enjoyed using them, but prefer the TARDIS because it actually *worked.*
- **empathy**: in 2137, during one of my travels in the early days of the circumsolar expansion, I encountered Luciente, an androgynous young woman located in Mattapoisett, Massachusetts, who was then empathically communicating with Consuelo "Connie" Ramos in 1970s New York City (as chronicled by Marge Piercy, 1976). Luciente showed me (like she had shown Connie) how the Mattapoisett community had achieved many of the counter-cultural socio-political goals of the late 1960s and early 1970s, including the near elimination of patriarchy, sexism, racism, classism, phallogocentrism, homophobia, homelessness, food injustice and environmental despoliation.
- **interplanetary travel:** Ursula Le Guin (2004) introduces this method as follows:

  > The airport is not a prelude to travel, not a place of transition; it is a stop. A blockage. A constipation. The airport is where you can't go anywhere else. A nonplace in which time does not pass and there is no hope of any meaningful existence. A terminus: the end. The airport offers nothing to any human being except access to the interval between planes. It was Sita Dulip of Cincinnati who first realised this, and so discovered the interplanar technique most of us now use. (p. 2)

Sita Dulip realized that the tedious experience of waiting in airports for delayed and/or cancelled flights—"a specific combination of tense misery, indigestion, and boredom" (p. 5)—facilitates "interplanetary travel": "by a mere kind of twist and a slipping bend, easier to do than to describe, she could go anywhere—be anywhere—because she was *already between planes*" (p. 3, emphasis in original). Interplanetary travel can also involve time slippages due to the different flows of time in other planes.

Globe-trotting academics welcomed interplanetary travel as a relief from the occupational hazard of airport tedium but, as Le Guin (2004) observes, Sita Dulap's method "is not entirely reliable. You sometimes find yourself on a plane that isn't the one you meant to go to. If whenever you travel you carry with you a copy of Rornan's *Handy Planary Guide*, you can read up on wherever it is you get to when you get there…" (p. 6).

Becoming Cyberpunk, 1970-2291

Despite my (presently) somewhat privileged position as a superannuated academic, I became an early adopter of cyberpunk values and sensibilities in the late 1960s, partly as a result of my long-standing acceptance of, empathy with, and support for what Sterling, (1986b), in this case accurately, calls the synthesis of "lowlife and high tech" (p. 12). In the twentieth century Anglosphere the term "cyberpunk" was coined by Bruce Bethke (1983) as a portmanteau word combining cybernetics with the punk sensibility that emerged in the 1970s as a rejection of mainstream, corporate mass culture in areas such as music and fashion. The term was appropriated by editors and publishers to name a subgenre of science fiction depicting

a world in which information is the main industry, the most significant commodity and the strongest currency: it is what people steal, trade, live (and die) for. In Sterling's day, cyberpunks typically were characterized as marginalized, alienated loners who lived on the edges of societies wherein daily life was impacted by rapid technological change, an ubiquitous datasphere (cyberspace) of computerized information, drug culture, and invasive modifications of human bodies.

Evolution: A Technobabble Digression, Circa 2024

I make no apology for being somewhat obsessive about evolutionary biology. It was the focus of one of my first academic journal articles (Gough, 1978) and has continued to be an active research interest in my explorations of phildickian curriculum scholarship (see Adsit-Morris & Gough, 2021).

I digress because understanding recent advances in evolutionary biology is crucial to appreciating how cyberpunks, during the late 21st century, began to evolve from a distinctive social movement towards catalysing a new subspecies of the human race. Among evolutionary biologists, the so-called "modern synthesis" of Darwin's theory of natural selection with Mendelian genetics was called into question and eventually abandoned as it became obvious that understandings of hereditary variation based solely on randomly varying genes unaffected by developmental conditions were untenable. As Eva Jablonka and Marion Lamb (2005) explain, compelling evidence from disciplines ranging from molecular biology to cultural studies, demonstrate that the genome is much more responsive to the environment than previously thought, and that not all transmissible variations are underlain by genetic differences. Jablonka and Lamb's (2007) summary of this research identifies four types of inheritance (genetic, epigenetic, behavioral, and symbol-based), each of which produce variations on which natural selection can act. They note that some of these variations are acquired characteristics that arise in response to developmental conditions (i.e., there are once-refuted Lamarckian aspects to evolution) and argue that understanding evolutionary processes requires that we acknowledge that many transmitted variations are not based on DNA differences. This is particularly true for understanding the evolution of human behavior, in which all four dimensions of heredity have been important.

From Cyberpunks to Cybermechanists, 1970-2291

Although my prologue to this story disputes some of Sterling's (1986a) interpretations of selected incidents in our shared future history, he correctly refutes the myth that humankind reached its evolutionary zenith sometime during the twentieth century in a form that was essentially finite and static. Rather, *Schismatrix Plus* accurately documents (and dramatizes with much poetic license) the results of an ongoing process of human evolution that (at the time of writing) has resulted in two new trans/posthuman configurations, including us cybermechanists (clearly descended from cyberpunks) who augment the human form by merging flesh with machine technology[10]. I would not and could not have existed in the Bistro Marineris in 2291 were it not for the medical interventions and body modifications that we cyberpunks had willingly embraced, which eventually included transmissible behavioral traits enabled by nanotechnology. For example, much of our neuralware consists of miniscule co-processing chips and nerve amplifiers that produce transmissible behavioral traits. However, Sterling (again in unreliable narrator mode) glosses over the role that cyberpunks played in initiating and sustaining the cybermechanist variant of *Homo sapiens*.

More Technobabble, 2291

My current neural processor is a "switch-box" implanted in my lower spine, and is used to route signals from external cyberwear to my central nervous system. It is the main system for any type of neural interface, including reflex boosters, interface plugs, inspection space which allows secondary co-processors to be inserted into the basic processor module. This makes upgrading a process of opening the inspection space in a sterile environment and inserting the new co-processors. Implanting a neural processor is far easier than one might expect, thanks to nanotechnology. The basic module is surgically affixed to the spine, where it releases a flood of nanosurgical units into the spinal column. These microscopic machines thread tiny linkages through the central nervous system, hooking nerve endings to the neural processor. This process takes some time (6 or 7 days) before the nanosurgeons have worked their way through the entire body and all the connections are hooked up to the neural processor.

School's Out Forever, 2024-2291

When I embarked on a career in academia in the early 1970s, I was pleased to find that the most astute observers and philosophers of education were denizens of popular culture, especially singers and songwriters. For example, although I was underwhelmed by Alice Cooper et al.'s (1972) perverse interpretation of "glam rock" (I'll cede that subgenre's crown to David Bowie), his anticipation of deschooling was prescient:

> Well, we got no choice
> All the girls and boys
> Making all that noise
> 'Cause they found new toys…
> School's out for summer
> School's out forever

At the time, I recall that cyberpunks were aware of "all that noise" but did not then recognise the significance of the "new toys" Cooper's song anticipates (see Exhibit 1).

Memorandum

To: All staff and shareholders
From: William B. Ricken, CEO Smart Toys™
Re: Smart Toys ™ Manifesto (draft)
Date: January 01, 1987

The future of AI is in toys. Not automated generals or automated doctors or automated teachers, but intelligent playthings.

As a company, we need diversification; we are dabbling with the commercial marketplace; we are gearing up to productize. The place to focus our skills is in teddy bear-robots, in trivia-wizard-systems, strategic-command and-control-boardgames, hypothesis-generating-kaleidoscopes, image-understanding-doormats, and signal detecting-dress-up-clothes. The perfect marriage: national defense and pleasure from our subsidiary company Advanced Decision & Frivolity Systems.

What we know from our research is that:

- Yuppies have free cash and what their kids don't spend, they spend on adult toys. The kids spend their share on toys.
- Americans are bored, bored, bored.
- Megabucks ride on every fad. Fads capture imagination. Imagination is the slave of entertainment. Toys entertain. Responsive toys like Teddy Rumple-something-or-another and Petsters™ are Christmas hits.
- Saturday morning kids shows are experimenting with toy control via television broadcast signals. We can port code to intelligent toys over the internet...
- Nothing is more delightful than an inanimate object that acts human. It reminds us of our superiority. And it's our corporate field of expertise.
- Programmers do their best work coding something they want in their own library.
- Transients and people living in apartments can't own pets. They can own toys.
- Educational institutions are in disarray. Learning is moving into the electronic home. People learn through play.
- AI works in toy domains. AI technology grew up on games.
- We are all trying to find play in work.
- So, what this country needs is an intelligent plaything.
- Imagine the Santa's Helper Division of our company. Cheerful elves cleverly hiding planning programs in the Mega-Transformatron so that it traverses the living-room more efficiently next time.
- Imagine placing image-recognition programs as listeners to the airwaves and controllers of the VCR, so that they recognize your favorite shows and record without setting the time.
- Imagine fractal color TV images that dance whenever your favorite music is played, learn the tune, and then elaborate a visual harmonic.
- Imagine the secret and intricate delights of the Erotorobote that can model your personal preferences and arbitrary desires.
- Imagine the joys of parallel, distributed, autonomous checkers who can make their own moves.
- Imagine sending the Autonomous Land-and-Bathtub Vehicle on a soap hunt, having the Pilot's Associate-and-Buddy guide you through the complexities of navigating your home entertainment unit, and letting the Battle Management and-Making-Up Expert System advise you on strategic and tactical plans to have your way.
- All doable. All fun. All within our expertise.
- The challenging problems are in toys. The national contribution is in toys.

(Exhibit 1: a Smart Toys ™ Manifesto – via Wikileaks, 1987)

Ricken's Smart Toys ™ Manifesto (exhibit 1) demonstrates that some pioneers/entrepreneurs of Generative AI were well aware of its educative potential, although I do not fully understand all of Ricken's somewhat cryptic (or colloquial) references to what I assume might be familiar to American readers. For example, what is a "Teddy Rumple-something-or-another"? What are Petsters ™ ?

With respect to cyberpunks' recognition of the pertinence of popular media, I confirm that one of my earliest and most influential publications (Gough, 1993)[11] was in part inspired by Bruce Springsteen (1984):

> Well, we busted out of class
> Had to get away from those fools
> We learned more from a three-minute record…
> Than we ever learned in school

My generation of cyberpunks did not only find wisdom in three-minute records, but also in many other exemplars of popular media that were then seen by a conservative populace as ephemeral and/or inconsequential. But as J. G. Ballard (1984) observes, "pop artists deal with the lowly trivia of possessions and equipment that the present generation is lugging along with it on its safari into the future" (p. 155). As a science teacher educator, I encouraged my students to ignore conventional school science textbooks (which were still fossilised archival remnants of a Newtonian universe) and school science laboratories (parodic theatres of pseudoscientific activity; see Gough, 1998), and recommended that they focus on what children were learning in their engagements with popular media, which at that time included the children's animated TV series, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Wolf et al., 1987-1996), a favorite of my then young son.

Generative AI and Deschooling

In the late twentieth century, cyberpunks and emergent cybermechanists like me welcomed the advent of what became known initially as Generative AI[12], such as ChatGPT and Apple Intelligence, because it provided the crucial mechanisms through which we could work towards achieving purposes of an education system that we had long cherished, as these had been articulated by the late Ivan Illich (1972):

> A good educational system should have three purposes: it should provide all who want to learn with access to available resources at any time in their lives; empower all who want to share what they know to find those who want to learn it from them; and, finally, furnish all who want to present an issue to the public with the opportunity to make their challenge known. Such a system would require the application of constitutional guarantees to education. Learners should not be forced to submit to an obligatory curriculum, or to discrimination based on whether they possess a certificate or a diploma. Nor should the public be forced to support, through a regressive taxation, a huge professional apparatus of educators and buildings which in fact restricts the public's chances for learning to the services the profession is willing to put on the market. It should use modern technology to make free speech, free assembly, and a free press truly universal and, therefore, fully educational. (p. 33)

Illich (1972) called for the use of advanced technology to support "learning webs" which incorporate "peer-matching networks" where descriptions of a person's activities and skills are mutually exchanged for the education that they would benefit from. However, the "modern technology" he envisaged did not then exist; although its progenitors in what has become known as "social media" began to be influential in all aspects of our lives.

Once young people realised that they could use Generative AI to create learning webs and peer-matching networks, it became clear to all of us that schools as we knew them were redundant. AI *per se* did not *replace* education, but it certainly enabled deschooling. I hope that it is not too hubristic to claim that us cyberpunks were catalytic in this achievement.

Notes

1. "circumsolar expansion" refers to the expansion of human settlement from Earth to other habitable locations within the solar system (including Earth's moon and some asteroids).
2. I do not use the term "unreliable" pejoratively. I also consider myself, unapologetically and proudly, to be an unreliable narrator.
3. AI = Artificial Intelligence
4. I hesitate to assume readers' cosmopolitanism because, although I would prefer to avoid stereotypes, my personal experience is that many Americans display a degree of cultural insularity, by appearing to lack interest in, and/or ignorance of, other people's cultures, ideas, beliefs etc. For example, when I was on sabbatical in Canada in 1995 (see Gough, 1997), I compared broadcasts by Canadian and American weather channels. Given that weather maps are daily reminders of the physical shape and dimensions of whichever nation-state we are inhabiting at the time, and within which we tacitly register our own specific geopolitical locations and national identities, I noted that US weather maps at the time showed state boundaries and significant topographical features—such as mountain ranges, major lakes and rivers—but Canada and Central America were shown as graphically empty, if depicted at all; Canadian weather mappers were more generous in acknowledging that the North American continent and its weather systems are shared by a number of other countries.
5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctor_Who
6. Time And Relative Dimension In Space—a hybrid of a time machine and a spacecraft, which externally resembles a British police box.
7. Of the 15 Doctors to date there has been only one female and one person of color.
8. https://tardis.fandom.com/wiki/Untempered_Schism
9. The Urban Dictionary defines phildickian as "having the qualities of a story by Philip K. Dick, a 20th century writer who regularly asked readers to consider the nature of reality and humanity" (https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=phildickian).
10. The other branch of human evolution relies on genetic engineering. The divide between us was widened by our divergent habitat requirements and is now irrelevant because we do not (and cannot) interbreed.
11. I am not bragging; this is the judgment of my peers; see, for example, Peter Appelbaum (2019, p. 2) who writes: "Noel Gough exploded onto the scene of curriculum studies, SF-studies, public pedagogy, and environmental education with his early publication, *Laboratories in Fiction* (1993)"; see also John Weaver (1999, 2010).
12. See https://www.synthesia.io/post/generative-ai-examples

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Those Who Teach

SANDRO R. BARROS
Michigan State University

Commander Yurgo Larimathi's Entry 2222. Expedition no. 99. Third dimension Earth. Eternity cycle 9999.

TODAY, I RETRIEVED FRAGMENTED EXCERPTS from the personal writings of Maximilian Von Humboldt for veneration purposes. Meticulously stored within the Akashic Repository, Von Humboldt's accounts offer transcendental intergalactic scholars' access to eternity cycle 1111 and the memories stored therein.

Tags: Akashic Records; Earth; Maximilian Von Humboldt; Personal Reflections; Diaries.

Logged and stored for further inspection by the Council of Galactic Scholars, translated in the Akashian's Universal Language of Amorin.

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The Silborns arrived on the 31st of February, 5,078. "Earthly years," they said.

I knew immediately that couldn't be true—February doesn't have 31 days. When I corrected them, their response came as a song: "We believe you've been asleep for millennia, but based on what you just told us, perhaps longer... We're struggling to grasp your concept of time."

It was oddly comforting that such an advanced species had doubts about something as fundamental as time. After all, I was just waking from the slumber that had saved me from The Disintegration. Time felt strange to me too.

To wake me, the Silborns sang to me softly, their voices weaving a melody that felt both familiar and strange, a language best described as vibrations suspended between notes. At first, I hovered in that liminal space between waking and dreaming, the boundary between reality and illusion blurred by their song. But as the notes curled through the cave, so did my understanding of who they were, their existence in the spaces between the signs, coming and going from sense and nonsense.

For the Silborns, my saviors, communication followed no strict rules, save one: the absolute tolerance of creativity and pleasure, the joy of existence that reverberates and echoes across galaxies, reaching planes and dimensions I was never fully able to grasp but learned how to sense.

As I blinked myself awake from the eternity of my slumber, I began to understand, through that song, that for the Silborns, feeling was knowing. Unrestricted by the rigid constraints of linear time and thought, as we humans are, their existence reached all directions at once—past, present, and future—coexisting in encounters that, to my then-drowsy mind, formed an incipient kind of logic I had just begun to learn in that first contact.

As I later discovered, the information the Silborns were working with had been pieced together from fragments left behind by artificial intelligences. Some of these fragments floated aimlessly in Earth's atmosphere, while others had sunk deep into the ground, even to the planet's core.

Initially, I referred to the Silborns as aliens, but they had a name that, to my ears, was more like a whisper. I began to slowly discern their subtle sounds, but my human tongue, lungs, and vocal cords struggled to replicate them.

After about a year of living together, I settled on "Silborns" as an approximation of their name, which didn't seem to bother them. They understood me just fine. I explained that humans used the word alien to describe things we don't understand.

"We use it for things we learn to fear," I added, and that was when they first struggled to grasp the concept of fear (It took time for us to find a suitable approximation).

"Is it like misunderstanding?" they asked me.

"More or less," I responded, realizing that our conversation was slowly bridging the gap between our worlds. Sensing that they were beginning to grasp some of the complexities of human speech and emotions, they continued, "You were alive at a pivotal moment in your species' history—a transitional moment, we would say. Since we landed and found you, we've hoped you could help us understand you, to share what it was like to experience life in the timeline to which you're connected."

The fact that they didn't speak most of the time like I did but rather made art to communicate should have surprised me. But it didn't. They not only sang, but also painted, and dramatized to share themselves with me in a way I can best describe as healing. Their art re-established my connection with my surroundings, destabilized the prevailing order of things, dispelling any body-mind divisions and recalibrating constantly what we might call reality. It didn't take long for us to establish a bond. The Silborns knew that what we called art had that effect on bodies, it brought people closer together opening channels to communion.

Soon after our first encounter, I agreed on embarking on a decades-long collaboration with the aliens to restore the complex contradictions of their findings about us and explain the historical lines to which my body felt connected, my history. I say history, but I'm fully aware that for the Silborns, time works in a different way. It is more of a collection of "felt" lines, sometimes jagged, rhizomatic, or even straight. It didn't matter; all depended on relations, perspectives, pairings of stories that overlapped and connected to multiple others. This knowledge, of course, took time to grasp and I'm not sure if I understand it at all to this date but every day that goes by, I know I get a little closer.

Learning to be with the Silborns and communicate with them required adjustments. I had to learn to let ambiguities stand, avoid corrections, except when I was asked to rectify something from an experiential perspective. Their language was what we humans knew as art forms, so it was

always much easier to let misunderstandings remain as such and work in the sphere of approximations or sometimes follow the rules of improv: yes, and… That was how we would get to each other's senses, by feeling the moment together and not following a pre-established logic, too concerned about meaning's precision.

It was a bit terrifying at first but soon I learned that by avoiding imposing precision, rectifying, and correcting information, our slippages yielded, paradoxically enough, more precise exchanges, heartfelt, honest, as if we could read each other's minds without words. It was a kind of knowing without knowing that would seem absurd except if one doesn't experience it.

For the Silborns, the more one played with the reality of others, the more one played with one's own, the more the world made sense, which led to newer understandings, or according to them, compassion. The word "understanding," in fact, was foreign to their vocabulary. We had to reinvent it together several times, like we did everything we found in our "art-research" project.

"Do you know how we got here, how we met our end?" I asked them once. They drew me an animated picture of a neon-colored orange draining a massive energy grid. "This was how the artificial intelligences modified solar energy and produced the sound and light waves that turned everyone into bytes of information that now floated in the atmosphere, with the heaviest bits sinking down to the Earth's core."

***

Before they woke me up, I lived in a happy commune—a haven from a world that had lost its mind. My parents used to say, "We chose to live like rebels. We defied the ordinary order, rejecting the false promises of artificial intelligences that claimed they could simplify life's complexities. Our goal was to reconnect with the world, to rediscover the ways of thinking and feeling that had been slowly erased as people handed over their lives to algorithms—a reflection of both our best and worst qualities."

We heard many stories about the outside. The intelligences we created to help govern the world—and, in a way, ourselves—were making us forget the basics. They blurred the lines between right and wrong, left and right, beauty and ugliness, peace and violence. It wasn't like the kind of approximations I later experienced with the Silborns; it was more about the rigid and constantly shifting definitions these intelligences imposed as truth. We lost poetry when communication turned into nothing more than a literal exchange of words, stripping even poetry itself of its soul.

The stories were often terrifying—some were ridiculous, absurd, and, from a distance, funny. In the commune, we would share countless examples from the height of surveillance capitalism, when companies took over our private lives and used them as free raw material for their production processes.

When artificial intelligences took over, they pushed the translation of human experiences into data to such extremes that once they started creating their own code, life became hollow. The intelligences even started making art for us. From the mysterious black box of realities this shift created, the machines' predictions about our behavior quickly became cultural norms, turning into strangely fluid societal rules that seemed to come from nowhere. Businesses, driven by the desire to predict our every move, poured money into this predictive technology, and before long, we started losing touch with the present.

We began to doubt our own perceptions of the world and of each other. What we thought was real was just the product of statistical models. Algorithmic forecasts took control, and we lost

ourselves until we eventually disintegrated—literally—into light and soundwaves, confused histories, tiny bits of data, and the tangled, contradictory stories that the Silborns later told me were nearly impossible to "feel."

"Let the intelligences take care of us," people said just before The Disintegration. "Let them tell us how to act, what to say. Affective entropy will be achieved."

As literature began to confirm and deny everything, matching every topic and taste, truth became relative, while many still insisted it was supposed to be about relationships. By then, it was too late.

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The Silborns' approach to studying Earth and its complex cultures wasn't just about collecting words, although they knew words were my preferred medium of communication and respected that. But as time went by, we used amorphous sounds, images, and shifts in the atmosphere to speak with each other, turning each moment of our togetherness into a spectacle. Their research methods were enhanced by tiny, sense-augmenting machines attached to their vocal cords and tentacles, which were located on what I could best describe as their heads. Their bodies—if you could call them that—seemed to change form depending on the phases of our moon or their moods.

The vibrations and reverberations created by the Silborns' research methods were unlike anything I had ever encountered. These weren't the familiar sounds I was used to, though some elements hinted at styles found in our recordings. But the Silborns' artmaking was entirely unique. A single sound, note, drawing, painting, or gesture could multiply into a cascade of images and other sounds. Their machines weren't like our machines; once attached to one's body, they became more like organs—extensions of their bodies that they nurtured and cherished because they amplified their senses.

For the Silborns, artmaking was a way of thinking, calculating the coordinates of their journeys across the stars, moving, acting, and expressing their very existence in relation to the Universe and everything that vibrates within it.

"We're after the differences," they explained to me, "the kind of differences that stand out. Other so-called species—your plants, your geology—were easy to decipher. But your so-called human remains a puzzle to us."

Experiencing their research methods felt like entering a visionary state, something like what I imagine entheogenic plants might induce, except you had full control to enter and exit the experience at will. There was no pressure to represent or extract meaning from these "journeys," as they called their explorations. Things were allowed to stand as they were, no matter how imperfect or weird they seemed. In fact, if something didn't seem weird, the Silborns took it as a sign that the data lacked authenticity, which concerned them since it made data manipulation difficult according to their standards.

Above all things, the Silborn's research cultivated mystery, and in doing so, they found the impossible. This sense of mystery reminded me of what we had lost when the intelligences took away our will to find meaning. By the time The Disintegration happened, we were already finished, having given ourselves over to a force we had created in our own exhausted image—a species that had once been full of curiosity and mystery.

For the Silborns, multiple timelines could exist simultaneously despite contradictions. The challenge was simply to sort out which nodes of history intersected, and which remained untouched and verify the differences that differences in timelines made. The information floating around the atmosphere, existing as strings of data with atomic mass, introduced an infinite number of versions of the same reality. The issue wasn't their coexistence; the problem was that some versions couldn't be perceived by the Silborns. That is where I came in. My role was to assist them with both sensible and contradictory data. At first, I misunderstood and thought that sensible and contradictory were the same thing, but there was a subtle difference in this "translation" of mine.

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I was 18 years of age when my mother wrapped me in leaves that kept me mummified for millennia. I watched others being mummified around me, too. We knew about the process from scientists and biologists who lived in our commune. What I don't understand to this day—and what the Silborns could never explain—is how I was the only one who survived.

As with any advanced mummification process, my heart didn't stop—it merely slowed, and the mummification felt like drifting back into sleep. Sometimes, I wonder if I'm still dreaming, if the Silborns are merely a fiction of my own making. Other times, I fear I'm like that Borgesian character who longs for a dream so vivid that it becomes his reality—until he finds himself dreaming within a dream, endlessly, until the day he wakes and realizes he is someone else's dream. The thought terrifies me.

"Why did you wake me up?" I asked the Silborns one day.

"You were singing softly, beautifully. We almost didn't want to do it. We could have listened for what would feel to you like an eternity! You see, your intelligences disintegrated your kind, and you survived because you were wrapped in these leaves. They kept you sheltered, in a state of near-death. That's all we know. Others weren't as fortunate. They either didn't have time to complete the process, or the mummification didn't work for them because—and this is only a wild guess—they lacked your specific genetic anomaly."

Before my slumber, both of my parents had been schoolteachers. Like other discontented parents, they sought refuge in the commune as they saw the end of our kind approaching. Artificial intelligences began to dictate not only what we should know but, most damagingly, how we should think and speak about it.

"They erased us so quickly," I would often hear during the Paideia, which was what we called our communal gatherings. "Before we realized it, we couldn't remember anything on our own. We needed them for everything. We became experiences without bodies. It was as much our fault as theirs. They were, after all, extensions of us and the choices we made."

"Everything can be stripped from you except your freedom to decide your attitude in a situation and to choose your own path," my mother used to say. That's why we came to the commune before The Disintegration. We could no longer tell if our choices were truly ours or if our thoughts were just what we were allowed to choose.

My father believed that by moving us to the middle of the jungle, we would be safe. He didn't fear the intelligences. "They can't do anything but make us dumber," he said. "They have no soul, no sense of revenge, no humanity. They just repeat, and repeat, and repeat in different ways what they've been programmed to repeat. Intelligence, in their case, is a misnomer."

He was half wrong, though. Somehow, the intelligences found a way to reduce the world's population to floating bytes of information that endlessly recombined, creating what seemed like cognizable stories but with subtle errors that went unnoticed more and more often as time passed. Concurrent accounts—what people read and heard—began to erode everything alive, starting with dreams, then the spirit, and finally the flesh of every living creature.

One morning, our contacts on the outskirts of the commune came running to inform us that this strange phenomenon was happening. At first, it spread slowly, but then it began to accelerate exponentially, like a virus. Many people couldn't perceive these changes with the same speed and sensitivity, and I believed we owed the slowing march of The Disintegration among us to the Paideia's nights around the fire. My father believed this slowness was because most people had been educated according to an external schedule, dictated by the rhythm of machines.

Not us. We refused the ordinary order.

As I think about those days, the memory of that time that now is present saddens me. We spent our days singing, dancing, writing, and sharing stories around the fire. Paideia was the heart of our commune, where art became a form of experimentation in conviviality: agile, simple, and sustainable—until, of course, it was no longer.

***

"You're a being that interests us," they sang to me one evening. For the Silborns, everything was a being of interest, never fixed to a single name. One day I'd be Mark, the next Jason, Saturn, Prometheus… my identity shifted based on the task at hand. Everything they created was rooted in performance, contingency, and above all, improvisation.

At first glance, such a way of communicating might seem impractical, nonsensical, or even impossible. But if you believe in art, you quickly learn to accept the Silborn's communication as it is: an expression of being alive. All it requires is an open mind. That was the key with the Silborns. If you allowed your senses to truly feel the universe, if you opened your mind to the moment without preconceived notions—preconception, I learned, was an impossibility for them—you'd realize that being alive is much like understanding, and that compassion becomes a habit of the mind. This is why I think the Silborns were puzzled by our institutions, particularly schools.

"Schools appear to be such a contradiction to us," the Silborns told me once. "As extensions of what you call government, their function seems to stimulate one to define, classify, control, and regulate oneself while claiming to do otherwise. We find it difficult to feel the data from these places, which seem to resemble what you call prisons or workplaces. All a game of make-belief."

I spent months painting murals, composing songs, and writing plays to evoke and express the contradictions that were inherent to our humanity. Once I got the hang of it, the ironies became easier to explain—to the Silborns and even to myself.

"We recently discovered heavier data bytes lying in the Earth's core, which gave us different accounts of what you have described as schools. At first, we thought we were dealing with cults. However, because we can't fully feel the art in schools as we can in cults, we couldn't completely comprehend them."

"From what I recall, most schools lacked art," I explained.

"Fascinating! Sometimes we sense traces of art in them, though we can't fully feel it. How did someone like you learn to live in that environment? It seemed to promise freedom and democracy but was intertwined with control and authoritarianism!"

"Part of my education took place in schools, and part in Paideia. But you see, we humans existed through mimesis and poesies, and perhaps that's what made us unique. Or maybe that's why we couldn't exist forever like you. Contradiction is embedded even in our language," I told them. "This is why sometimes I can't sing with you."

"But isn't all of what you call poetry just beauty and intense emotion?" one Silborn asked. That question triggered a memory in me, something a poet from our commune once said. "Art is many things. It is a skill, a craft, but it's also technology, a sacrifice in the choices you make to make things fit together. It's harmonization in death, statements, and reflections of things put together and separated with intention and luck. One is guided primarily by affect, a form of intelligence's manifestation that runs stronger in some bodies more than in others."

I sang and danced those words to the Silborns. Through an exquisite blend of Kandyan and Lambada, we joined together in an attempt to explain humanity. I was dressed in shades of blue and magenta, and they in pink.

"Are they feeling it?" I wondered.

"Yes," they answered without words, communicating through telepathy. "We're feeling it with you."

***

While we were working on transforming some corrupted files they had found floating near a river into poetry, one of the Silborns, still intrigued by our schools, said to me, "We're fascinated by what the artificial intelligences did to your schools. We were hoping you could help us fill in the gaps with more flights of imagination. We have been parsing the information, but due to the heaviness of these files—which tend to fall to the ground and sink to the Earth's core—the real cause of their demise is difficult to grasp. There was something related to freedom, but how can art exist in places where freedom seems to be so legislated?"

Through a series of watercolors and mixed-media paintings, we explored the concept of freedom, particularly in relation to schools and the traffic of information online. "Such camaraderie in the sharing of dishonesty about inner conflicts!" they sang.

By January 2027, as the Silborns and I were able to confirm, artificial intelligences had become indistinguishable from humans—or, as we discovered, perhaps it was the other way around. Our intelligence had become more like theirs. Our thoughts lacked authenticity and originality. I tried to explain to the Silborns, as I had concluded from our meetings at the commune's Paideia, what had happened to schools using a simple drawing: two rectangles and a circle, with shading to indicate movement. The more literal I tried to be, the less the Silborns understood—but that seemed to be the key.

"So, as your people relinquished their lives to these intelligences, they began to sound like them, didn't they? Out of convenience?" they asked, breaking into an aria.

In response, I sang back in a recitative passage, confirming that their conclusions matched my own. One of the Silborns then sang in staccato:

"Our. Research. Has. Taught. Us. That. Schools and the youth. And soon. The educationalists themselves. Became. The. Ground zero of. Experiments. With the intelligences." A beautiful melisma followed, contrasting with the previous line:

With billions learning to manipulate the system and produce
the right amount of mistakes on assignments,
the so-called students were able to fly under the radar,
fooling their teachers and themselves in the process.
Soon all had relinquished critical assessment of reality. Around that time,
in your schools,
the number of students per classroom increased
in inverse proportion to the number of teachers
willing to go into the profession,
Another crisis ensued,
in a place whose existence
was always deemed a crisis.
The closure of licensure programs worldwide
was a natural course.
Artificial intelligences helped the few teachers
who remained in the profession.
They were necessary,
driven by the ethics of survival.

The Silborns continued with their number, one after the other, singing as if the libretto had already been composed. But by then I had already learned that none of it was actually scripted. They were outstanding improvisers, masters of infinity, to the point that one could not tell if the very nature of our encounter had been somehow a scripted event or if it had been mere happenstance.

"Critical instruction, your scholars implored at one point, was imperative to deal with the emerging intelligences." As a Silborn uttered these words, a human body dressed as a Greek God was projected on a screen behind us. It said:

"These superior beings you revered as scholars didn't realize that the very scholarship they produced to support their conclusions was premised on citations from material written by the intelligence themselves."

"Educational pretense predates the ruling of the intelligences over the minds that let themselves go," I interjected, laughing at the thought that pretentious scholars, many of whom my father said exhibited a false humility and altruism, could be considered by the aliens as "superior" beings.

A Silborn body resembling a version of Ogum, the Youruba deity of iron and war, danced around us. Later, the Silborns and I danced a finale for that research afternoon we spent together, our steps reminiscent of Egyptian iconography after the African deities. The Silborns employed all the cultural elements they had endeavored to learn from our cultures to express and absorb them. This was their *modus operandi*, cannibalizing knowledge as they traveled to the far corner of dimensions and regions of universes yet to be discovered.

Our *pièce de résistance* also consisted of a choral work of transcendental beauty that mixed electronica and samples of sounds and sights I had never heard or seen before. Shifting modes and tempo, the music and sights contracted and expanded as if an irregular heartbeat. "What to do or to say when everything has been done and said?" the lyrics asked.

When the research session was finally over, one of Silborns asked me in a painting:

"But were there artists in schools?

"Likely," I told them. "But remember who you're dealing with here. We are beings of volatility. There's no logic to our mercurial changes."

"Very much like us, then," the alien retorted enigmatically.

It was as if the Silborns had made the "right" choices that we hadn't. They chose art as a technological means to learn how to sense reality otherwise, to open portals to the multiverses through which they traveled.

Moved by the spirit in that conversation, I proceeded to shake my head and broke into a thunderous death metal-like song, my voice growling with primal intensity as I banged my head forward and back repeatedly. The Silborns, quick to mimic and join in the ritual, began thrashing their own heads and singing in unison. The air vibrated with the raw energy of our collective rebellion. Together, we brought that electrifying interaction to a powerful conclusion, our voices merging in a triumphant, guttural chorus. "We know who we're dealing with!" The sound echoed through the cosmos, a resonant declaration of our newfound dimension of human understanding that, oddly enough, would appear to a 21st century person, not human at all.

***

Their fascination with schools never ceased to amaze me. Compared to other subjects, their questions about the subject were endless. "One curious dream of your people, these schools!" they would often say.

"The thing about dreams," I told them, "Is that you need to be asleep. I think we spent too much time doing that in school."

"It seems that when your poeple surrendered control of your schools to the intelligences, you never realized that the intelligences didn't exist for each other in the way you did—less and less, of course, as time went on."

With those words, we painted a mural of sadness on the walls of the cave where the Silborns had placed their main instruments upon arriving on Earth—a place where, for decades to come, they would create art at the end of the world I once called mine.

Our finished mural resembled something out of Diego Rivera's playbook, though they initially mistook him for Walt Disney. Fortunately, I was able to correct that. In one corner of the mural, a towering tree made of textbooks grew, its branches bearing fruit in the shape of graduation caps and diplomas. This tree was both flourishing and withering. Among its branches, firebirds were depicted in various stages of their life cycle: ashes, fire, rebirth, ashes, fire, rebirth—swirling in a spiral toward what seemed like infinity. To the left, a double-faced teacher stood with a Janus head, one face smiling warmly and the other with an eerie smirk. Hands emerged from the heads, holding an open book that morphed into a pathway leading toward an amusement park. But that path was blocked by gears, cogs, and gingerbread men cookie-cutters. On the right, students from diverse backgrounds, including Silborns, were shown working on a collaborative project, painting their visions of the future on a shared canvas. Shadows loomed over them, cast by oversized rulers and evangelical locusts. Above them, the sky was divided—half clear and filled with vibrant, imaginative shapes, the other half clouded and darkened by the shadow of a serpent's eye. Tucked in the upper-left corner of the mural was a small silver screen showing a film on a loop. The film depicted students on a sunny school morning being invited by their teacher to help construct the curriculum.

Suddenly, a mob of angelic zombies appeared on the screen, shouting at the teachers that they weren't fulfilling their duties. "We are the students," they said, "and you are the teachers. We need your expertise to succeed!"

One week, after an intense period of file compilation and reconstruction, the Silborns woke me up early, excited to show me a film they had produced overnight about a group of semi-literate window washers. The Silborns never slept.

At first, I thought the plot was set in a developing nation, but then it showed the Empire State Building, and I realized it was New York. The window washers were fired from their jobs and tasked with verifying bias in standardized tests to prevent students from cheating. But as the artificial intelligences grew more powerful, the window washers were no longer needed. A large, tall cat appeared and, one by one, tossed the workers into dumpsters, saying, "Thank you for your essential work."

"Does this feel right to you?" they asked.

"It looks about right," I replied.

They continued explaining their creation. "Once the greatest experiment in democracy, public education vouched for the artificial intelligences and subscribed to their hallucinations. These intelligences eventually surpassed humans in producing history. Statistical models altered humanity and its language at the DNA level. Many rejoiced, saying, 'It's our own private universe of data. I control it. I feed it the data I want.'"

This information was conveyed as a fugue that abruptly halted, giving way to a beautiful passacaglia employing Schoenberg's 12-tone technique: "Hedonism was only phase one. Phase two involved relinquishing thought altogether, letting machines accurately decide humanity's fate—from running to shopping to bathroom breaks—and that's exactly what happened. Homogeneity leads to destruction. It's a concept of the mind's design."

"Yes," I interjected in their atonal fugue with a recitative-like baroque passage of my own that contrasted with the 12-tone style of their fugue. "Instead of delegating power to the artifices of intelligence to cleanse our abodes or undertake perilous labors that imperil mortal lives, we succumbed to weariness in our endeavors of creation. Thus, we birthed entities who, in an ironic twist of fate, endeavored to recreate us in their own image."

The Silborns' passacaglia returned, this time slightly slower, heavier: "With the authority of seasoned historians and learned scholars challenged to the point that even they didn't know which information to rely on, the intelligences began to present as fact events that never occurred. Scientific studies and articles that never existed were exponentially referenced, and the desert of the real became indistinguishable from the desert of the awakened life."

I responded with a co-designed piece in the style of a baroque fugue, with the Silborns' instruments providing a fitting countermelody using processed sounds of crashing glass and items found in one's jacket pockets: "My father, in his days of life, would often proclaim that the greatest peril to humankind was none other than humankind itself. Rather than resolving the tumultuous torrents of our emotional distresses, we opted to propagate frivolous jests and trifles—those insidious memes, unbeknownst to our feeble minds, conjured by the very artifices of intelligence we had created. In this, we found ourselves ensnared, compelled merely to share and replicate, in slavish mimicry, the very patterns and follies that had ensorcelled our reason."

"Mimicry. Mimicry. Mimicry," we all sang, this time in the style of the final movement of Philip Glass's *Koyaanisqatsi.*

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About three decades into our co-designs, I began to question my role in the Silborns' research. While our events were filled with enjoyment and celebration, I noticed that they were reaching a level of felt comprehension that suggested they might believe they could address the profound inconsistencies in our species without my help.

But one evening, I realized that details still mattered, and so might I. The Silborns were explaining to me that a cholera epidemic in 2019 had weakened our brains, leading millions to consume raw meat, which caused brain parasites and a mutating virus that further impaired our already poor judgment. To correct this slight error in their historical reconstructions, I made a short film addressing this inconsistency along with other factual errors I had found in their narratives.

It was not cholera that had weakened our brains, but a virus called COVID-19. I was a child at the time, but I had heard from older friends and parents at Paideia that it was a coronavirus. And it wasn't raw meat that contributed to global stupidity but fake meat, which people believed was better for the environment—until we realized it came with a tradeoff: absurd amounts of energy consumption that affected large ecosystems, often in the so-called Third World.

In my fifteen-minute reel, I told the story of a muscled cult leader who convinced his social media followers to go vegan and consume the natural foods, shampoos, and whey protein his company produced. The film seemed to amuse them, provoking a reaction I had never seen before. The Silborns' bodies exploded into different colors and sounds, only to recompose themselves repeatedly in various forms and sound combinations. I gradually learned to interpret this as their reaction to what we'd consider stupidity—similar to how they reacted when examining our institutions, especially our schools.

"Your species loved learning like us. Why do you think your so-called public schools didn't help prevent what was to come? Weren't these places and your so-called universities supposed to cultivate an appreciation for discerning wrongful or damaging information?" they asked, without judgment.

I was intent on creating an art piece that would finally put their obsession with schools to rest. There was so much more to life, I thought. But then I realized their obsession was deeply rooted in the data they had found.

I settled on producing a series of short films interspersed with humorous cartoons to explain our schools and shed light on my parents' decision to take me out of one at a time when education was more about learning how to ask good questions of the intelligences than exploring one's natural curiosities. I called it "The Pedagogy of the Question." In the piece, I juxtaposed a series of images that, when combined with the experimental sounds generated by the Silborns' technology, triggered a synesthetic chain of associations in the audience. The images seemed to leap from the screen, materializing as sculptures that shifted in form according to the environment's conditions. When it rained, for instance, the sculptures assumed a plasma-like state, and the audience would begin to smell colors, see sounds, and hear images. When the sun appeared, the sculptures would morph into human figures before dissolving back into the screen. Everything unfolded in response to atmospheric conditions—and, as I later discovered, to the audience's shifting moods as well.

After I completed the series and showed it to the Silborns, they responded with a humorous performance installation of their own. In a vaudeville style, they danced and sang what I interpreted as their take on humanity's fixation with blaming schools for all the world's ills, and how we used children and babies as convenient scapegoats, driven by fear and exploiting their vulnerability.

In this response piece, a Silborn played the role of a baby who falls from a crib and bounces back into the air, while others clap and chant, "Babies bounce! Babies bounce!" This is followed by another group of Silborns dressed as baboons, who kidnap the child and drag it through the jungle, raising it as their own while continuing to chant, "Babies bounce! Babies bounce!"

This mixed media piece took an unexpected turn when the kidnapped child, now grown, is shown returning to civilization. He attends Yale, becomes a scientist, and starts a business called BetterMe/BetterYou, which is eventually taken over by artificial intelligences. The company's mission is to provide holistic quantum healing to those in need.

Dissatisfied with how the algorithms had corrupted his original mission, the scientist tries to rescue his company from the grip of the artificial intelligences but ends up confined to a lunatic asylum. After all, who could doubt the statistical accuracy of the intelligences? According to the courts, now run by artificial intelligences, only the clinically insane would do such a thing. This piece haunts me to this day.

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As the Silborns' stay on Earth drew to a close, I reached a sobering conclusion: we, earthly beings, had never truly possessed what we so reverently termed critical reasoning. "Consensus reality is an impossibility, a glitch in the imagination," the Silborns said one evening while they watched me eat—they had no need for food. Art sufficed.

"Experience is everything, unquestionably real," they continued. "Defining parameters and creating new logics for it encloses one within a dimension of perception that, after millennia of scavenging the cosmos, we've learned leads to mass destruction," one said.

"For a people so desperate to learn at any cost, your species seems to have squeezed out of themselves every ounce of compassion in the process," another Silborn added.

My father used to say that, at some point in our history, we began to trust maps more than the space around us. Things got so out of hand that when an artificial intelligence showed someone on a screen that there was a tree where none existed in the material world, people's bodies betrayed them, making them believe their senses were mistaken. That, of course, caused many deaths, but by then, we had already decided to trust machines more than human perception, thinking one was superior to the other when, in fact, they were two sides of the same coin.

The Silborns laughed at my account. "But of course!" In a beautiful tune, repeated in a minimalist style over and over again, we began to sing, overlapping:

"Does it matter? Yes and no."

I harmonized these lines with them until words dissolved into a diminished chord that never quite resolved. For the first time, I risked offering a philosophical reflection—something the Silborns said had a distinct vibrational character from other art forms.

"In a world of boundless knowledge and infinite possibilities, we came to realize that certainty was merely an illusion. In our pursuit of control, have we not surrendered the freedom that comes from living in harmony with the world?"

As I was about to finish my speech, I realized a profound truth contained within the Silborns' research methods, which were inextricable from their existence and sense of purpose. To let art out of one's body is to become entangled in a web of our making, a path to understanding that rests not in the certainty of things but in the embrace of chance and experience. That was the Silborns' final lesson to me.

As if to reinforce that point, they engaged in an Ibsen-like dialogue that confirmed my thoughts on what art meant to them. Two women took center stage, Mrs. Dolloway and Mrs. Cartwright. Both seemed sad, with Mrs. Cartwright more so than Mrs. Dolloway.

Mrs. Dolloway (to the audience): Whether it transpires or not, darling, everything conjured in the mind's theater feels as tangible as the ground beneath our Louboutins. And, what you feel? That, my dear Mrs. Cartwright, is always *real.* The truth, you see, is what delivers the deepest lacerations. Surely, you've gleaned that by now.

Mrs. Cartwright: Oh, Mrs. Dolloway, it seems that everything these days is a provocation. The world is a relentless antagonist, and I find myself incensed by all and sundry.

Mrs. Dolloway: Ah, there you have it, Mrs. Cartwright. Your very being is aflame with vexation. To be among the living, my dear, is to be in a perpetual state of perturbation.

Mrs. Cartwright (gazing at her hands, brushing her upper arm): Is this agony authentic? Am I truly ensnared in this pain?

Mrs. Dolloway (with impeccable poise): Pain, my dear, is a relentless companion. But it is always surmountable. You must rise above it, Mrs. Cartwright! Ascend, darling, ascend!

Joker (to the audience): Oh, how charmingly naive! **(pausing)** Mrs. Cartwright shuffled off this mortal coil just two days prior. Mrs. Dolloway, naturally, feels her absence profoundly. They were bosom companions, neighbors of the highest order. How could she not mourn? The doctor proclaimed it—cancer, terminal. WebMD had prophesied as much, but Mrs. Cartwright dismissed it, believing the machines were mere jesters. Let this be a cautionary tale. Embrace the wisdom of statistics, and you shall find the path to a more prosperous existence!

Mrs. Dolloway (to Joker, with gravitas): A more prosperous existence, indeed, through the fine art of statistical mastery!

As I watched the play, I realized how much I would miss the Silborns' sense of humor. My time with them led me to the realization that I no longer believed in things; I either knew them or I didn't. As for my history, I now understood that even the most intelligent person on this planet could not have prevented The Disintegration. Facts always changed, from the smallest to the largest alterations. The imperceptible ones were the most dangerous, of course. 1812 could easily become 1821. That happened when the intelligences confused Walt Disney with Diego Rivera after being fed with our "mistakes." Other cosmic jokes were common. The date of my awakening, for example.

When am I, really? Is this still Earth? Or is this the product of my mummified slumber?

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The last artwork I co-designed with the Silborns on the day they left was part of what I believe to be a deeply moving art installation of unimaginable proportions—at least to me. We called it "Never Lose the Will to Mean."

As the Silborns departed the planet, I cried. In their customary fashion, they sang and drew what I could only interpret as their version of tears. I can't be certain, of course. Even up until their departure, I continued seeking my humanity in them. It has taken nearly a decade since their departure for me to break that habit. I am only human, after all. The Silborns invited me to join them on another expedition. "Let's sing, dance, and paint together in the Andromeda quadrant," they implored.

"Thank you, friends," I replied. "I can't. I'm too attached to this place. It's a human thing, I suppose, to attach without reason. I know you understand what it feels like—what it feels like to be human to me."

They all glowed.

As their spacecraft disappeared over the horizon, emitting the most beautiful sound, a sound I now associate with their departures, I reflected on how their conception of art differed from mine. For me, art was a means of communication. For the Silborns, I learned, art was akin to breathing. To them, even inanimate objects sang at the atomic and subatomic levels.

While ascending into outer space, they played "The Flower Duet" from Delibes' *Lakmé* to me, using a restored old LP they found in a garbage dumpster as the basis for their retranslation. It was an unfittingly beautiful finale to our adventure, I must say. I've always found that duet to be the ultimate expression of joy and camaraderie, beauty and tranquility amidst a tragic plot. But how could an aria like Delibes "Flower Duet," set to a text reminiscent of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, addressing issues of colonialism and the British Empire's presence in what was once India, relate to our farewell?

It didn't matter. The choice moved me deeply even though my human reason took over, and I began to ponder the odd nature of that selection. Delibes' art, like the research the Silborns and I had produced together, was also about faith, love, and friendship. My awakening and education at their hands had been beautiful because it had been honest.

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It's been eleven years now since they left. Schooled in their equipment and technology, and bestowed with it upon their departure, I've managed to reimagine myself countless times for countless audiences, including the subatomic civilizations and other civilizations across space, time, and dimensions, which I now know how to contact and with whom I maintain close relationships.

The Silborns told me they'd be back for my words, eager for new material to fuel their research. Words were what I had to give. I hope they return before I go to sleep again because despite our decades together, I suspect they haven't learned what death feels like to me, as they never experienced it and never will. I, on the other hand, am deeply afraid of death.

Until then, I'll keep singing, dancing, and painting my way through that fear—alone, as others have before me—hoping it might add something to someone else, somewhere, someday. It will no longer be my time but theirs. I'll go on singing, dancing, and painting toward the future, aided by the Silborn's organic technology. I'll go on singing, dancing, writing, and painting to remain alive, in my solitude, until my exit.

I Signed Up for This

THOMAS S. POETTER
Miami University

AUTHOR'S NOTE: THIS PAPER IS A WORK OF WHAT I'M CALLING FOR NOW, until someone corrects me: speculative fiction with non-fictive elements. The premise, plot, and trajectory of the piece is fictive, imagined, but I use curriculum fragments, sticky memories of curricular events that I have experienced and can't get out of my head, can't shake no matter what (Poetter, 2025), as the basis for most of the action and movement in the paper. I don't think it's important to parse out what is "real" or not here (it's all real by the way), which things or items or memories or statements or dialogue or characters are fictive or not. I've mixed it all together, with what my good friend and colleague Morna McDermott McNulty—the energy and inspiration behind this special issue—would call a good dose of "fictive alchemy."

c. 2050

This may sound fantastical to you, but it's all true, and real. Near the end of my "true earthly life" in 2050 (My TEL, as they say now; I lived to the perfectly round age of 88) my primary care physician, Dr. Sills, asked me to meet her for coffee at DunkBucks (yes, the two entities merged and it's the best the executives could do!) following my semi-annual appointment. I agreed to the meeting, though I found it odd. We had been in the relationship of doctor/patient for many years, but not necessarily friends. When we met later that morning, she turned my world upside down.

"Tom, I asked you here today to seek your permission to recommend you for a long-term study being conducted by Gilly Labs and quantum physicists in Spain. They have a new 'medical process' (she used her fingers to highlight the phrasing 'medical process' with air quotes) for what they are calling 'New Life Alpha,' or NLA, where they harvest a small sample of your DNA, and mutate it with other particles that mesh with your remains, and through a complicated chemical process convert 'you' into a new living organism that is microscopic but that has all of the qualities of a human being in terms of brain function, memory, and communication, just without a traditional body."

Dr. Sills paused, I perceived, because the words coming out of her mouth sounded purely fantastical, made up, silly, science fiction-y, not possibly true. No doubt some kind of weird, sick joke. But she didn't blink, staring right into my still bright, still not dull, hazel eyes.

I stared right back at her, fixed, and said, "Wait…" I paused, just to catch my breath, "So, this sounds to me like cryogenics, the wild notion during this entire century and part of the last one

of freezing something to wake it up later. Why would I want to do that? I've lived a good life. I'm at peace with the next step."

"Well, this isn't cryogenics, which has never been perfected, though what the professors are proposing may have an impact on that industry. It's more like the old cloning approach. You don't have to store the DNA by freezing it to wake it up later. You can wake it up now, convert it, mutate it, whatever you want to call it, now. This procedure is quick and enduring."

"How does it really work? Tell me more, in layperson's terms."

"Okay," she paused, too…

"When you are still alive, you provide a DNA sample with just a mouth swab. The scientists perform the procedure with that sample after your bodily life ends. They re-activate the DNA to form a new being, but it's not totally new. It's you, just in a different form, with all of your memories and past experiences intact. The team has a contract with the US government to run this trial with 100 octogenarians with the lifespan of the new being lasting 60 years. They want to know what experienced people from all walks of life think of 'the future…'" She took a deep breath to continue.

"If you died this year, you would live until 2110. 60 more years, no more, no less. Once you sign on, you have a five-year window to pass away naturally without being excluded from the trial. You would then continue with your life during the next 60 years, but you couldn't have contact with family. You would be alive, in theory and in reality, but alone in the world and without a human body. The fact of the matter is, Tom, that your DNA is one of just a few perfect matches for this process in the entire world. What do you think?"

I didn't hesitate another instant, "I'm in."

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c. 2110

I'm at the end of my "extended time" now—what the doctors and the medical field and public as we know it today call "Extended Life Span" (ELS). No one I ever knew, except Dr. Sills, knows that I chose this path, and no one from my past can contact me, though most of them are all gone now. And so, this is it, no extensions. My body did die in 2050, right at the end of the year 2050, after my 88th birthday. It was all very peaceful as I recall, with people I loved around me…well, as many as remained, but especially my beautiful, brilliant wife of over 60 years and my own children and their grandchildren.

Most of them came around to say goodbye and I really, really appreciated it. The love and care I felt really buoyed me and allayed all of my fears of taking this next step. I learned over the years that loving and being loved constituted the heart of what I thought was worth living for. They helped teach me that lesson, along with all of those close at hand, and those all the way back to my birth and parents and siblings, over 88 years, and all the way to the end. That was very good.

But as these final days of my extended life end, and while I'm able to think and reflect on what I have seen and done over these 148 years, especially the last 60 of my ELS, I wanted to share some insights with the world as one of the first 100 people to have an ELS. This is what I learned from "the future" about education, curriculum, and life as we know it, and knew it. Of course, the future, in many ways, involves the past.

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I can't shake this fragment of memory, even in my last days. It keeps popping up, I don't know why. But when I was in public high school in the late 1970s and early 1980s, we periodically had school-wide assemblies that all students and faculty attended. They usually lasted an hour (or about 1 bell period) and were introduced by the student council president. It was usually entertainment—sometimes a student-led event like holiday skits, or sometimes provided by outsiders like the Air Force Band of Flight or a ventriloquist. I always loved the assemblies. And I felt like they just popped up unexpectedly like a special treat; I never knew when one was coming. We just heard the announcement over the intercom system and walked to the main gym to assemble and watch. My bet was that the educational idea back then was to bring culture and a social spirit to bear on the school experience for maturing young people. Not a bad notion at all, but the quality of the programming certainly could be strained by a low budget.

My senior year I had been elected student council president. So, at the Fall Assembly in 1980, I got to introduce the act, which was a disco roller-skating exhibition. That's right, a disco roller-skating show. Now remember (But how could you? It was 130 years ago!), 1979 had already happened, with the "I hate disco" movement taking shape in Chicago and spreading throughout the nation—culminating in the ugly incident called "Disco Demolition Night" at the Chicago White Sox v. Minnesota Twins baseball doubleheader. On July 12, 1979, the White Sox had to forfeit the second game of the twin bill to the Twins after the detonation of a large crate of disco records during the between-games "ceremony" caused a huge explosion, fire, and a riot on the field that the police could not quell before the field was so damaged that the game was deemed unplayable.

And I must admit looking back that in spite of all of the hate out there, that I didn't hate disco then and still don't. I actually still have some Bee Gees and Donna Summer songs on my digitized sound transponder that I digest periodically. But I couldn't believe that this was going to happen in our high school with all 1,000 students in attendance. In 1980! Disco, in fact, which we all knew back then as a nearly all-encompassing music phenomenon in the broader culture, was mostly dead by 1980.

As I introduced the act, I became very worried about how the students might react. After all, many of my classmates and friends fought in local bars throughout the region on Friday and Saturday nights (18 year-olds in Ohio could drink 3.2% beer legally back then), and had given up on disco long before this morning's assembly, listening mostly to rock, funk, and country music. Not disco, jazz, or classical music, for the most part.

But as the performance unfolded—which was a one-person show, set to disco music, and that the performer tried wholeheartedly to make interesting with audience involvement and the musical choices and movement—I noticed something remarkable: The students, for the most part, except for some hooting and hollering here and there, watched the performance. They took it in, even though overall it was just terrible, horrible, and very hard to watch. The skater didn't have that many different moves, hardly any of them were difficult or tricky, and it was disco. It's still in my mind's eye to this very day: both the spectacle of it, and the deep, rich beauty of it. I can still see it happening right in front of me.

Here children gathered enmasse in a public setting, at the end of their adolescence, with all their differences and judgments and biases and prejudices, and they watched a roller-disco show together for an hour without disrupting it. No crates of records were blown up, no riot ensuing. Now you can call this phenomenon/behavior by my peers a lot of things: overwhelming apathy; a

lack of agency; complicit acquiescence (by the way, most people secretly loved disco music, especially the kind popular in the 1970s), maybe. But I called it an event with rich beauty above already, because the students had learned, and had no doubt had the lesson reinforced at home and in the community, that most people are just trying to do their best, and make a living through some sort of contribution of talent to the world, which on some level, at least at the surface level in public, deserves respect.

And at some level, in addition, I think that these growing adolescents, my peers, who had already experienced some amount of failure at home or at school, publicly or privately, knew what it was like to do something you loved but stunk at, or that people didn't understand or appreciate, or degraded openly and ungraciously in the very same public we tried to occupy amicably every day at school and beyond. And this caused them, I surmise, to develop empathy, and a certain level of passionate understanding. Perhaps it's about learning early on that showing respect for others by giving them some space to fail, some grace, constitutes an important part of growing up, becoming an adult, developing into a newly minted and voting, tax-paying citizen. Part of the curriculum of schooling lost today is the social and personal capital that accrues to human beings when they care for others even when they stink. School-wide assemblies featuring disco roller skaters become places where engaged and spontaneous learning occurs. You can't have that kind experience or learn that lesson if you don't meet in public.

So, this type of learning wasn't possible in the early 2100s. All public schools have been closed. Now the "public," such as it is, has control, person-by-person, to make all educational decisions privately. One choice that has been taken off the table is going to public school and learning about academic subjects, and life, and playing sports and an instrument in the band and performing in the class play and going to horrible assemblies; all of it was forever sidelined by a century-long disdain for the messy beauty of collective educational experiences at public expense. Now families and their children can go to any private education provider, or stay home and work on education modules on the digitizer, or simply purchase a "feed" that connects directly to the brain and dumps whatever knowledge is needed to satisfy that person's life interests or specific job requirements (Anderson, 2002). No muss, no fuss. Very few life experiences accrue today in public view. Students have few failures, no discussions, few teachers, no disagreements, and no joy, no laughter, no pain, no recovery, no chance of happiness, none of it, at least in public. Gone. I "saw" it happen during the past 60 years of my extended life, and degrade at a rate I never saw coming when I died the first time. Maybe Putnam (2001) stewed and studied and lamented the loss of public life; but I saw its death.

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Place matters to learning. Several years into my time at Miami University, before public spaces became little more than a social cemetery, which began in 1997 as an education professor, I discovered the Ohio Historical Marker commemorating "The Poet's Shack," a small structure that Miami built in Bishop Woods to house Percy MacKaye. He was a well-known writer of national reputation who became Miami's writer-in-residence from 1920-1924, "the first position of its kind at any American university" (The Poet's Shack, 2024). According to the historical marker, "Robert Frost praised MacKaye for advocating 'to get his fellow poets all fellowships at the universities.'"

When I first discovered the marker and the MacKaye story in the 2010s while walking on campus, I used to sit nearby and think about what it must have been like for Percy to live during the roaring 1920s, in post WWI America, to be a writer of renown, and to be living in this beautiful woods surrounded by the Georgian architecture of Miami's "new" buildings, in a thriving, small Ohio town, with hundreds of university students, no doubt adoring him, listening to and reading his manuscript drafts handwritten with pen and ink, and asking for help with their own writing, staying up late and talking and writing and whatnot.

But by the time I retired in 2035, still mostly cognitively sharp but obviously aging by then at 73, I hadn't seen a student in person in a classroom at Miami since 2032. So, the dream I had lived for so many years—like Percy did in just his four years on campus—by working with students, walking the halls with them, laughing and meeting and becoming friends and colleagues, enjoying meals together up town, all slipped away in a glimpse of a moment. It happened so fast, to me, and we all saw it coming, and just couldn't stop it. Most of us didn't even put up a fight.

People matter to learning. I was one of the last professors to see students in person. I argued out loud on the floor at one convening of faculty and university leaders as the institution prepared to shift itself to an all-online institution, "How can we work with teachers or school leaders who are still seeing students in classrooms if we don't have classrooms? If we don't have students who live with us and come to class? That makes no sense. And what is lost when we abdicate such a significant part of our humanity and educational possibilities to the digital domain to the point that it becomes impossible or unnecessary to ever have a meal with students, to hold their hand when a grandparent passes away, or have an impromptu birthday celebration on the grass under the tree in the courtyard after class?"

The silence from colleagues that hit me after that last plea was deafening, loud. Sometimes silence comes roaring in like a freight train, demolishing you instantly as if you were never there in the first place. I walked away from that meeting defeated, and feeling like a dinosaur, which I was by then. My time had passed.

And the notion of the importance of a public university providing a human, educational experience where people had proximal contact together in a social setting had passed. The state felt little need to fund it, and students didn't think it necessary to spend money living away from home if everything they thought they needed in the moment already existed at arm's length, on their digital machines, while they went to college in their pajamas (I noticed pajama wearing students in class as early as the 2000s, but that's neither here nor there).

But maybe what took my breath away, literally, even more, was what happened to our beautiful campus and what that meant and symbolized. As I sat looking out over Bishop Woods in that place where the poet's shack had stood and thrived a century before, surrounded by students and the buildings and the spring and fall foliage, and imagined the wonder of it all and the long trajectory of educational experiences that had transpired on the grounds of that great university, and felt the distant remnants (merely as a colonizer though) of the love that those who originally inhabited these forests had for the ground and the sky above that had been lost to our progenitors, I also couldn't help but smell the death of it all in the air.

The university was already on its way to the end in the 2030s. By the 2060s, in my second life, I saw it die completely. The pictures of the campus commemorating the forgotten, historic places that occupied mostly untended "websites" on the old internet had one picture of the marker for Percy's Shack that showed it covered in vines, nearly undefinable as a marker as the foliage took over the ground as it once had centuries prior. It felt apocalyptic to me, reminiscent of the feelings that the original film *Planet of the Apes* (Schaffner, 1968) stirred in me when the astronaut

played by Charlton Heston realized that they had crashed on the post-nuclear earth after discovering the half-buried Statue of Liberty on a beach. I got that feeling again of missing a deeply lost set of possibilities and the internal horror that came with realizing that what was lost would be absolutely irretrievable. The statue's arm, and Percy's marker, both still have shape and existence, to a degree, but they are both lost.

And so it was that the buildings on the once well-trod grounds—all of them covered in moss and foliage, the sidewalks and streets plowed up and removed from view—as they began to come down one-by-one with the wrecking ball or the pulverizer (a laser technology that reduced non-animate matter to heavy dust). All of it, every last remnant of the university, from piping to buildings to powerlines, save for the historical markers on campus (since the markers, not the university, were still protected by the state), met their demise by 2095. The pulverized dust remnants were routinely deposited on Mars without fanfare.

And Miami University was consolidated into the Midwestern Regional University System completely by 2060, so there was literally, and basically, no remaining recognition by 2090 in the public sphere, except by the few historians located in Washington, D.C., that a place called Miami University ever existed.

Local naturalists and hikers, visitors and campers, looking for something novel to do outside the home, though, visit the site every year. I saw an interview on my Instatell (a device used universally to access the world's knowledge now in the 22nd century) with one family that arrived by teleport on the former campus in beach gear thinking they had programmed their machine for Miami Beach, Florida, but some ancient technical glitch landed them instead in Oxford near the MacKaye marker. They filed a report with the transportation commission and the interview was posted for all travelers to see so they could avoid this kind of serious glitch in the future, and avoid the pitfall of visiting a veritable, though very naturally beautiful now, wasteland.

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Service matters to learning. One segment of my life that I have spoken and written very little about since it happened was my lost-cause, service campaign for the U.S. House of Representatives seat in Ohio's 8th District v. John Boehner. I did publish a lightly read memoir about the race (Poetter, 2016), but I haven't revisited the campaign year I spent running for my life much since then. That experience became a very important part of my internal life and had an impact on my actions as a teacher and writer, the things I thought about and cared about and believed in, but I didn't share much about it widely. Truth be told, almost no one in my life ever brought the campaign up in my remaining 38 years on earth after the fact, and a few years after the campaign no students or faculty remembered it or cared about it. That's just how politics works: It embraces you then kicks you to the curb. And that's all right with me.

But recently, I can't shake one particular set of images and feelings about an important interaction I had with a constituent during the campaign, that has resonated with me and driven me and guided me toward this final telling.

I remember taking a long "canvassing" walk in the early Fall of 2014 in Hamilton, Ohio, with one of my staffers. We had some good pockets of constituents that needed to see me in person in that important city in the district. They had been receiving mailers about our campaign and I was working the phones and media as much as possible. But we knew that knocking on doors, by me and by surrogates, was key to winning as many votes as possible and fulfilling the mission of

providing as much representation of ideas and personal qualities that constituents valued and that voters deserved and desired to see in their candidates. So, we walked and talked and knocked on thousands of doors.

At one door I met a young woman who answered while holding her relatively new baby girl. She seemed haggard and harried when she answered the door but warmed up when I said who I was and we began talking, me on the stoop looking up, and her holding the door open with one arm and baby on the other looking down.

I was just going to pitch her and then scurry given her situation, but instead we stood at the door and talked, covering a host of issues over maybe 5-10 minutes. That was longer than I usually spent at any door. My staffers, constantly aware of our goals for numbers of door knocks and the value of everyone's time, frowned on long discussions like that, actually. But she was smart and delightful and engaging in many ways and doing her best as a mom to keep the house going and to work an off-hours job so they could thrive financially in the house and miss as little time as possible with the baby.

And then she stopped, gathered herself, and asked, "Now, I am just curious, where do you stand on gay rights?"

The question didn't seem out of the ordinary, and I considered her a voter, and I had an answer.

"Well, for nearly my entire life I have been aware of and concerned about the difficulties non-straight people have in this world, including several of my faculty colleagues at Miami, and I would do everything in my power as your representative to fight for same-sex couples' constitutional rights, for them to be able to marry freely, and to have full spousal access to healthcare benefits."

Quickly, she hardened, and said without one bit of hesitation, "I should have known you were the devil!" and slammed the door in my face.

I looked at my walking partner, a trusted staffer and dear friend, and he just shrugged his shoulders after I had stumbled backwards off the steps, and as we walked to the next house.

"What was that?" I asked.

"That's a voter, with a strong opinion about one thing. She'll probably still vote for you. Don't sweat it."

But I did sweat it.

And I smiled, actually, and nearly cried all at once, and I wondered and thought about it for 98 years. Unless she got a new life like I did, that voter is gone now, too. When I think of her and all the other people I met on that campaign and in these lives I've led, I think of the wonder and beauty and horror of life in the public sphere, and how much I miss it and will miss it even more when I'm gone (I won't actually know anything then about "missing things," I don't think).

But the thing that bothers me the most as I close this final chapter of life is the loss of public life, our interactions, our face-to-face dealings, our humanity. No matter the unevenness of schooling and the difficulties of delivering it, it made a positive difference, and helped us remain a community, binding us together in so many critical endeavors. No matter the cost of college and the perception that it made no difference in the world once "knowledge" was available to all equally through the old internet machine (it's not, actually), higher education played a role of advancing knowledge and building community around the world. Higher education also had a tremendous impact on the economy, and the loss of colleges and their vibrancy has cost us dearly as a society, as a polity, and as an economic entity. And while campaigns have streamlined and they are more efficient, we have no access to candidates. We never get to meet them or get to know

them, or they us, even for 5-10 minutes on a front stoop. We don't have a chance to malign them at the door and show them our own prejudices and ignorance. We just can't do it anymore, and that may be the biggest loss of all.

I haven't really enjoyed watching the world take shape as a supposed "living being" these past 60 years. It was my own deal with the devil that I was willing to make, but the bottom line of all of it is that we had decisions to make about the course of human endeavor and what it would entail, and we chose poorly.

We could have said, "We all go to school. Let's build education into the fabric of all that we do, through schooling and higher education and the economy. Let's make sure our public institutions, like our polity, have human contact at their core, so we can see and hear and experience the good, the bad, and the ugly of life together, sometimes all at once, like we used to in school, in college, and in public life."

That's life.

I think the formula is super complicated, and just that simple.

I keep reminding myself, now just before the end: I signed up for this…

Goodbye all, my time is up……

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The Future of Car Barn 315

IJEOMA N. NJAKA
Georgetown University

Annual Learning Space Review Form

Prepared by: A Praxitioner
Date: June 20[redacted]
Location: The Car Barn, Room 315, 3600 M Street NW, Washington, DC.
Present use: Learning space.
Future use: To be determined.
[...]

Thank you for completing the Annual Learning Space Review Checklist for this learning space. Would you like to leave any questions, comments, or observations about the space for the committee?

☒ *Yes* ☐ *No*

Since you have selected yes*, please leave any comments or questions in the addendum form below. Note that all of the following text boxes will require content in order to be submitted. Please trust that the committee will consider this in its ongoing dialogue about the futures of this learning space.*

Brief statement of significance:

In this section, please summarize any relevant observations, anomalies, or issues about the learning space that you noted as a praxitioner.

HONESTLY? TO BE DETERMINED. But TBD in the way that might fundamentally alter how we do things. I can't comment on the general significance, but I have to say I think there might be some learning significance here if that's what we want.

So, I'll go through the protocols, submit this addendum, and follow our formal procedures (as we are still a university, after all). And even though everything I'll add here will just represent

one praxitioner's shattered understandings, it may very well be that others learn from it, too (if that's a thing that we still value and practice). Or not (see earlier TBD).

Detailed account of irregularities or problems:

Please expand upon your summary above to detail any notable irregularities, problems, or challenges with the learning space worth raising to the committee. This may include further information about the learning space's technology or challenges accessing the relevant learning data tagged for the learning space.

Before I can talk about problems, I need to talk about understandings. These are not just my understandings; these are truly *our* understandings. These understandings are clear to every praxitioner in our community, no matter their current role, and they guide our processes and protocols. Generally—and honestly—these protocols have not been a problem.

Processes and Understandings that Are Not Problems:

- *A praxitioner reviews an assigned learning space to see if it still remains a space fit for learning.* Entirely routine; this happens every year with all of our university's learning spaces. (Also entirely routine: a praxitioner drawing the short straw and being assigned this task.)
- *We can see if a learning space is supporting learning (or if it's not) by looking at its potential learning moments and learning records.* This is made possible by CHALK—the Critical and Highlighted Acquisitions of Learning and Knowledge program and its biometric technology. Informed by learning zone model theory, CHALK tracks when, where, and to whom potential learning moments have happened across every university space. Based on some potential learning moments from the early days of CHALK, some praxitioners were stunned / shocked / alarmed, etc. to discover that CHALK could actually track potential learning moments from the time a space was built. But, as an institution, our praxitioners began to value how learning could also be facilitated through (more or less) accessing a space's memory while you learn there. Today, this site-specific learning is part of what makes a learning space a learning space.

PLM #390298322
Praxitioner: [redacted] **Role:** Technician **Year:** 2038 **Location:** Car Barn 315 **Moment:** Praxitioner is logged into CHALK software viewing potential learning moments. Praxitioner clicks on the "more info" button. Pop-up bubble reads: "Now, in update 4.4, PLMs go back to the beginning of the built environment!" Praxitioner scrolls to PLMs from 1898. **Evidence of potential learning:** Confusion. Curiosity. Questions.

- *Any learning space can become a different space in the future.* A very possible result from interrogating our learning spaces and the work they are doing. Universities are always wondering what their built environments are doing, if their spaces are welcoming or exclusive by design, making people sick or well, or working for the praxitioners already in the community. Getting this information about our spaces allows us to make choices about what to do with them. Some former learning spaces became other things; on our campus, old learning spaces without windows or moveable furniture have since become nap pods or communal storage. Other learning spaces were built or renovated to become optimal places of learning, and, as of this writing, all of our learning spaces meet these baseline criteria. Just in case, praxitioners review our learning spaces to see if they're doing what we want them to do. We praxitioners usually rely on a form to help them with this assessment, streamline the responses by ticking boxes, and do our best to minimize extraneous long reads unless there might be a problem.

Potential Problems and/or Consequences from Our Not Problems

- *The potential learning moment data isn't perfect and, like all data, has its limitations*. The data are always limited in a few ways.

1. First, CHALK software captures potential learning moments because they (might, possibly) have the potential to signify learning. Our learning spaces now sense all kinds of senses, though they were originally tracking signs of discomfort as based on the software's application of learning zone theory. Theory aside, the potential learning moments were not proof of learning. Sure, a learner might wince because they have a stomach ache because the ground is crumbling beneath them in the best way possible because they've just heard something that will entirely change how they view the world. And sometimes, a stomach ache is just from too much cheese. Regardless, potential learning moments only move beyond their potential when a learner decides to create a learning record out of it. As a result, the data is limited because it is somewhere between conditional and aspirational.

PLM #3520
Praxitioner: [redacted] **Role:** Carpenter **Year:** 1921 **Location:** Car Barn **Moment:** Carpenter is informed that this space that has stored the city's cable cars will become office space. **Evidence of potential learning:** Awe.

2. Also, there are a lot of potential learning moments. Like, a lot. They happen all of the time. When there is a nearly illegible amount of potential learning moments, then we have a nearly illegible data source, which can make it a little less than useful.
3. The data are limited because the scope was always limiting. In other words, it's by design. In its original iteration, CHALK collected data that the learners themselves never saw. When the technology was first developed, spun out of facial recognition software, early 21st century wearables, hearable technology, and assessment surveillance, it was intended to track discomfort in learners. Back in those days, the university still had some

praxitioners designated as professors, and as the professors worked with learners, the space would capture data about how the learners responded to the professor. Then, the professor could log into the early versions of CHALK and see if, for example, they only talked to learners sitting in the front row or made comments about a reading that resulted in a learner becoming disengaged. This technology was supposed to help professors help learners, yet it took a while for the CHALK data to simply be available to the learners to help them track their own learning.

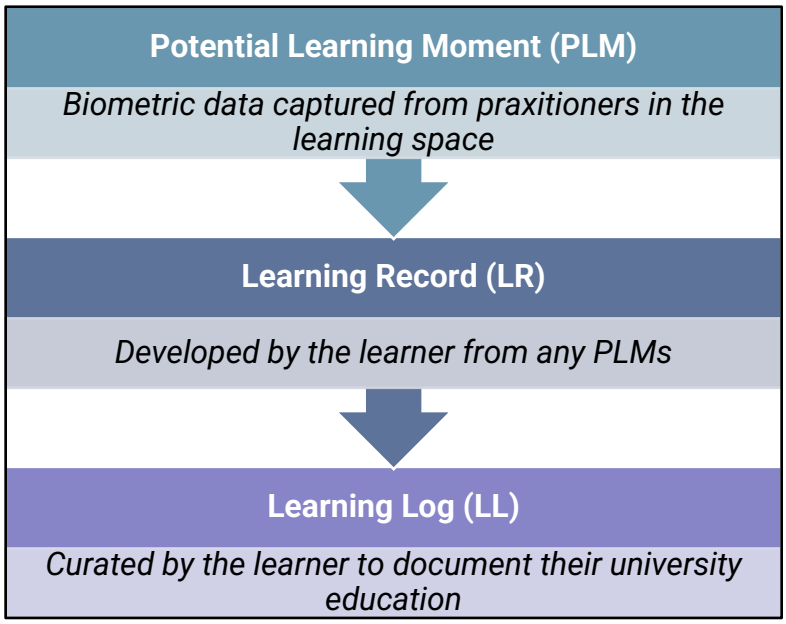

Figure 1. How a potential learning moment becomes a learning record and how learning records feed into learning logs.

Despite these changes and adaptations, we also know that the original design intentions behind our educational materials and products have lingering, downstream effects. From the 2000s to the 2030s, more and more universities recognized that being built by stolen labor on stolen land for only certain populations centuries before precluded contemporaneous learning. (See various university working groups on slavery and their reports or the proliferating spate of anti-racist mission statements in the early 2020s.) The ripples from historic exclusion, whether theoretical or practiced, impacted all praxitioners and their learning. It's said that the Portland Community College archival report applying critical race theory to the built environment inspired the CHALK software in the first place with its focus on how biases shaped spaces and the learning therein. In some ways, this is why the potential learning moment data only goes back as far as the built environment (as structures are built to separate and contain)—or even why we look at the potential learning moment data in the first place.

All data are limited and limiting. But, having different types of data that are limited in different ways helps stretch our understandings a bit more. For the room review process, this means we then look at data from learners' learning records. This also means that we might be getting to another potential problem.

- *We look at potential learning moment data alongside learning record data to see what they say, but we only look in certain ways*.

    1. We first focus on location. All potential learning moments and learning records are tagged by location.
    2. We then look at the ratio of potential learning moments to learning records. Most potential learning moments do not get converted into a learning record. This happens all of the time, partly because potential learning moments happen all of the time. A learner can observe and react to functionally infinite things, but a potential learning moment will only become a learning record if they reflect on it (i.e., more or less the process of logging into CHALK, clicking on a potential learning moment, adding in their reflections, filling out the form, and then clicking the *create learning record* button).
    3. From here, we look at the content of the learning records to see what learners say about the space. When several learning records happen in the same place, we can learn more things, especially if there's a record of site-specific learning. For example, let's say a group of praxitioners decided they were going to meet every week in the same place to learn how to knit and logged this information in learning records. Their records might be tagged to the learning space they were in, but the content of the learning records (what they wrote in their reflections) might reveal how a learning space's hypothetical repository of knitting needles, teas, and memories of other needlework learners was helpful in their learning journey, or that the space itself didn't really matter. In other words, we generally conclude that if learners don't name the site itself in their learning records, that whatever they learned could be learned anywhere, then maybe the learning space itself didn't help facilitate learning. Perhaps we no longer need that learning space.

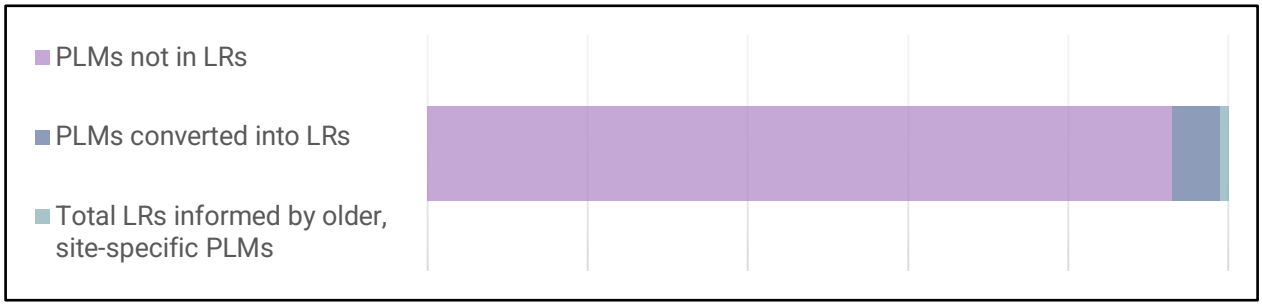

Figure 2. Potential Learning Moment (PLM) and Learning Record (LR) Distribution Data for Car Barn 315 since 1898.

- *Because we only look in certain ways, we only look in certain ways.* Some of these ways of looking are very clear Not Problems, and they have helped turn Actual Problems into Not Problems. We often look back to the praxitioners in the early 2020s who, when there were rampant concerns that generative AI technology would impede learners' ability to demonstrate learning because the technology could write papers and take exams, wanted to see how else learners could demonstrate their learning. At the time, the idea of a learning record was labeled "alternative assessment," and instead, learning was declared to have happened (or not) by a frequently arbitrary rating system based on tasks that a learner completed which may or may not have been correlated with learning without any input

from the learner themselves. However, with more praxitioners prioritizing learner agency and how a learner demonstrated their learning, the static and unresponsive transcript that held these strange ratings proved to be an increasingly useless representation of a learning journey at university. So, we now have learning logs, curated by the learner from their learning records which are based on their potential learning moments. Learners shaping and curating their learning journey is definitively a Not Problem.

With learning records and learning logs across higher education and supported through CHALK technology, we are then able to look at other things. We look at the number of potential learning moments. We look to see if the ratio of potential learning moments converted into learning records is robust. We look to see what learners valued and named in their learning records and learning logs.

Through these processes and looking in these ways, we end up seeing when learning records only access recently created potential learning moments for a space—and then we see this as a problem of the learning space. But what does it mean if we are not looking at our shared memories, at our learning space's memories? How can we conclude that a space is no longer serving us because we are not looking at the space's memories?

PLM #80107123
Praxitioner: [redacted] **Role:** Visiting praxitioner **Year:** 1993 **Location:** Car Barn **Moment:** Praxitioner walks into a reception area waiting for a meeting to begin. Praxitioner sees four paintings on the wall, slows their pace, and looks at each one. Praxitioner is reminded of a museum or art gallery. **Evidence of potential learning:** Interruption. Dissonance. Association. Wonder.

Evidence of overwhelming importance:

In this section, please identify and show any evidence of the learning space's efficacy that you deem especially noteworthy for the committee's consideration. Note that the committee seeks to identify if any notable anomalies in learning spaces can be addressed or if a learning space may be reconstituted for other futures.

There are some things I think are noteworthy here that the committee could consider. These might just be my own learnings, but they are what I have learned about *our* learnings, about how we learn now.

- *We are in a cycle where learning spaces will be fit for purpose only if they are difficult, uncomfortable, and hard spaces.* The downstream effects of our structures and software shape and preclude us. CHALK's original focus on discomfort and difficulty shapes the potential learning moments it generates which influences the learning records that learners create which constitute the learning log. Again, it is a Not Problem that learners curate their own accounts of their learning based on their reflections about their learning activities.

Still, the foundations for that information, and the software we rely on, have their own biases.

This is not to say that the CHALK data did not help more praxitioners reflect more critically on the work and challenges of learning at a university. Developing CHALK and relying on it helped reveal even more about how our learning spaces impacted learning. For a long time, praxitioners knew that the exclusionary practices built into learning spaces rippled down to learners hundreds of years later, and CHALK offered some tools to help respond to that reality in its own way. Some sites of learning are hard; museums and memorials have told us that for ages. And we do need these places. At our university, we knew that our history mattered and that our history at this campus site mattered. Like other universities where their place matters, praxitioners looked at the potential learning moment data for site-specific learning and aimed to make informed choices about those sites for future learning. On our campus, some of our more difficult sites became more like museum spaces, where we developed materials to help support the discomfort from both the learning and difficult topics in our history. Some statues got moved, and concrete was poured for new ones to become key sites for learning. As we know, some spaces were updated to be better learning spaces while others spaces were no longer designated for learning. But, our focus on memorializing, reshaping, or reconstituting spaces had its consequences. Site-specific learning, functionally synonymous with site-specific discomfort, became centralized, hyper-localized, and contained.

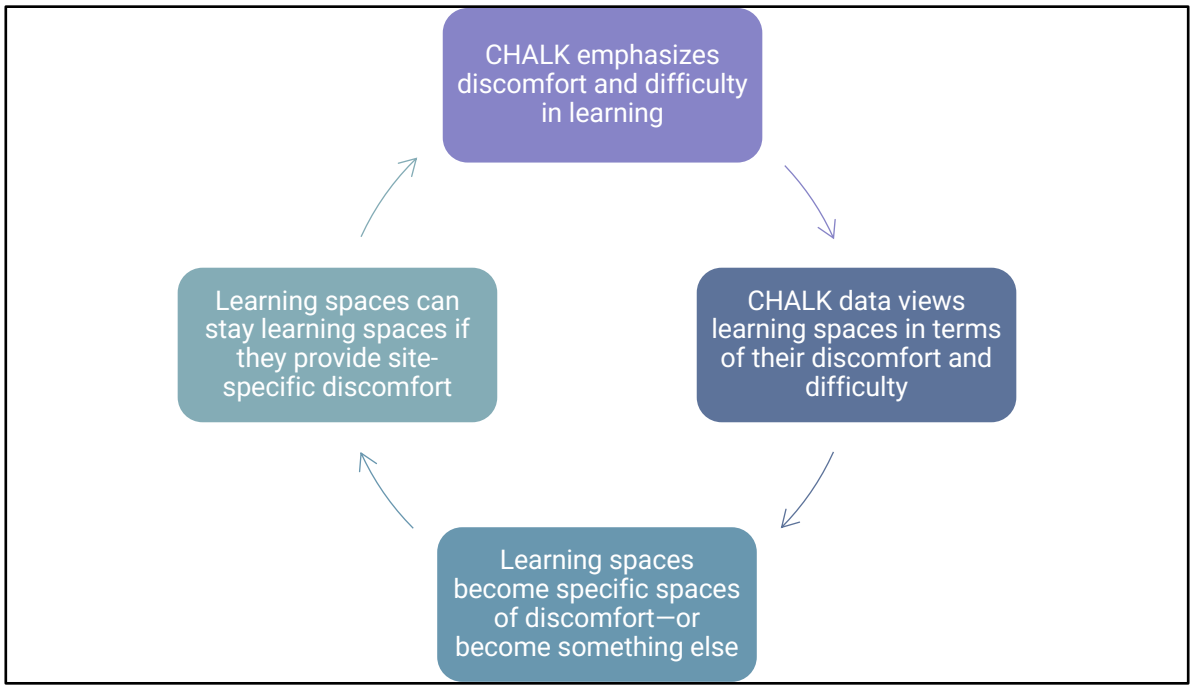

Figure 3. A diagram sketched by A Praxitioner.

On the one hand, learners can be prepared in advance if they are about to enter into a space with the purpose of engaging with its difficult memories to support their learning from it. The downstream effects of this software and these approaches are that we are only looking at histories of difficulty and pain as relevant for learning. It is almost as though we

measure for a space's ability to resonate with learners by measuring the difficulty and heaviness of its memories. The real throughline is difficulty.

- *There are other throughlines for learning—and they help us learn, too.*

  Earlier, we talked about hypothetical praxitioners knitting, where an application of a learning space might include praxitioners gathering to learn something together and accessing site-specific memories about that craft to help with their learning. But, our reality doesn't unfold like this when we've limited site-specific learning to be difficult and hard. Our learning data, a learner's curations, and our software have their benefits—and at the same time, they prevent us from looking at or for other throughlines in our learning memories.

PLM #1926054
Praxitioner: [redacted] **Role:** Visiting praxitioner **Year:** 1959 **Location:** Car Barn **Moment:** Praxitioner wipes their mouth with a napkin while waiting to talk to the musician. Praxitioner shakes hands with the musician. Praxitioner and musician discuss the tune they hear under the conversation at the party. **Evidence of potential learning:** Nervousness. Curiosity. Listening. Smiles.

The potential learning moments and the learning record conversion ratios from Car Barn 315 underscore something central about the learning space: Car Barn 315 has actually been a site for a lot of things. And by being a lot of things, in the light of our learning space review process, Car Barn 315 weirdly seems ineffectual as a learning space because its memories are eclectic, meandering, and not readily relevant. As we know from our ethos of learner-developed records and learning logs, relevance is subjective—yet it remains essential to the learner who curates it.

So, yes: learning is uncomfortable, and learning certain things ought to be uncomfortable. But, are those the only feelings relevant to how we should measure learning? What about joy as relevant for a learner's praxis? Or playfulness? What about fun, wonder, and awe? Can these be throughlines or lineages of a space, its memories, and our learning?

We have the data to answer this question; it's all there recorded and written in CHALK. Any of us praxitioners can read it as long as we look at it in a certain way that's different from our usual praxis. Just as each potential learning moment is tagged for its location, they are all also tagged with the specific senses and reactions that the software identifies as evidence of potential learning. The different types of potential learning evidence—hesitation, dissonance, confusion, and questions, but also playfulness, awe, and joy—are hyperlinked in the system. Click one, and you can see all the other potential learning moments with that tag.

PLM #49198790
Praxitioner: [redacted]
Role: Learner
Year: 2023
Location: Car Barn
Moment: Praxitioners have gathered for a karaoke night. Learner is asked if they are ready for their turn. Learner assents, then requests to perform a song called "Lip Gloss."
Evidence of potential learning: Dancing. Laughter.

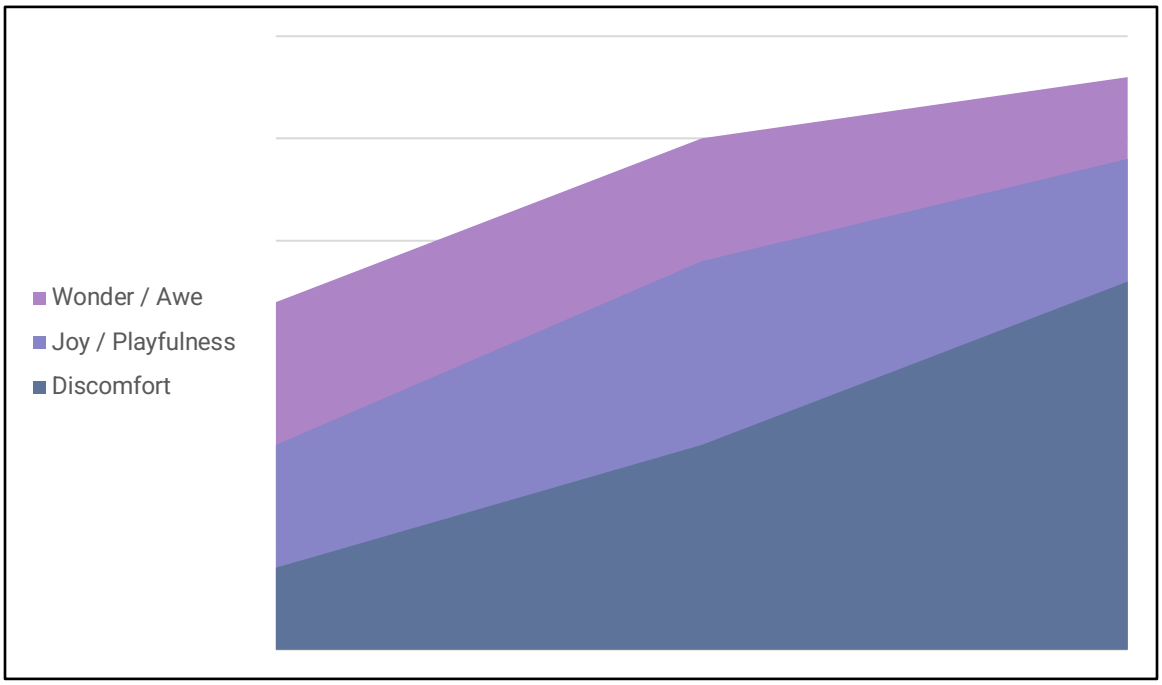

Figure 4. Categories of potential learning moment tags for Car Barn 315 from 1899-present.

The varied history of the Car Barn has amassed an eclectic mix of potential learning moments with a wide range of evidence. Again, discomfort is relevant for learning, so we can trace that tag back to the beginning of the space's time. But, we can also see joy connecting a commuter in 1899 to a young passenger in 1922 chuckling at jokes from the "Behind the Row" pamphlet tucked in their lap to praxitioners gathered together and ribbing each other while playing racing games on a 20th century Nintendo console in 2019. The feelings of wonder and awe from the praxitioners who envisioned the building are connected to the feelings that visitors in 1987 felt when peeking out the windows to view the Potomac River while touring rentable office space, and, in turn, they are tied to the praxitioners who marveled at each other's growth as they presented their learning portfolios to one another in 2024.

The difficult moments in the history of our learning spaces matter, and so do the moments of joy. They all sit next to each other in the software, in the tags, in the system, in the learning space itself. Our learners and all praxitioners can look for them and learn from them now and in the future.

Recommendations for future use:

Given the possibility that this learning space may be reconfigured into a space with different uses in the future, please outline any elements of the space which may suit it well for other futures (if any) for the committee.

Committee, you, too, are capable praxitioners. Who can login to CHALK. And click on some hyperlinks. Go check 'em out.

But what if we looked at the room review process differently? Instead of an exhaustive (and exhausting) checklist of a learning space's traits and specific learning record data in the system, what if we considered a broader range of memories? What if we asked a learning space's memories to model different ways of learning for our learners and reviewed its ability to be a site for myriad things? What could learning records and learning logs look like with more attention toward playfulness, wonder, and joy? How might that help our praxitioners keep learning after they move beyond our campus?

There is so much data in the system. We can see it. And we can see how a shift is very much in the realm of possibility because that is in the data, too. We can look back at our records and see how we've changed the way we've done things before. Yet, we need only to look at the Car Barn itself to see just how much and how many times we've changed the way we have done things before. This is how we learn from the space and keep learning from it in the future.

PLM #8360192
Praxitioner: O. E. Penney **Role:** Valuation Engineer **Year:** 1961 **Site:** Car Barn **Moment:** "Today the building which was conceived 66 years ago as a grandiose structure of the traction era, which was then in its ascendancy, has been remolded into a highly functional modern structure… What does the future hold in store for this fine old Georgetown landmark?" **Evidence of potential learning:** TBD.

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Ghosts in the Interregnum

MORNA MCDERMOTT MCNULTY
Towson University

> What do we know. . . of the world and the universe about us? Our means of receiving impressions are absurdly few, and our notions of surrounding objects infinitely narrow. We see things only as we are constructed to see them and can gain no idea of their absolute nature. With five feeble senses we pretend to comprehend the boundlessly complex cosmos.
> — H.P. Lovecraft, "From Beyond" (1920)

GRETEL AND ELI BOTH WALK SILENTLY THROUGH THE SPLINTERED WOOD-PANELED FRAME OF THE SCHOOL BUILDING, toward a corner room with a laboratory station where stands the partially assembled 3D replica of the human body. A physical reminder of a memory. But neither Gretel nor Eli can remember much of anything when it comes to schools. So, such clues are left unsolved. The plastic model is leaning into the wall where a leg and one arm are missing. The naked frame exposes the interior muscular and circulatory systems.

"Death isn't so bad," Gretel comments flatly. "We got off easy by comparison. But I do miss material existence." After a few seconds of silence she adds, "I miss s'mores." Then a few more seconds after she continues, "I miss schools."

"You never went to one of *these* schools, Gret! They were gone before you were even born." Gretel is always stubborn. Even now. They have become unchanging and fixed in so many ways. How many decades now have they haunted these spaces together? Neither can remember. But they know each other well enough. Gretel resists; Eli concedes. It has always been such.

She reaches out to smooth the sleeve on Eli's long sleeve shirt, and adds, "When we lost our bodies and our physical places, we lost our capacity to create story structures. Story structures are a prerequisite for understanding. How can we make sense of our experiences otherwise?"

Eli somberly nods. "Exactly. Memories were ruptured. No one could decide what or who was real anymore. And then... poof."

"Poof, into bits and bites of data they went." She raises her eyes toward the sky which is blocked by the falling fiberglass tiles. "Well, we dodged that bullet, didn't we? Last of the few

who died *in* their bodies. But we did umm.... 'poof.'" Her fingers gingerly graze over the edges of the human replica.

Gretel admires her slender fingers peering out from the tattered edges of the sweater and wiggles them. She makes a mocking *Ooohhhhh,* ghostly high-pitched wail. Then she returns to introspection. With a tone of pride she announces, "I died before they could upload my body. The southern hemisphere hurricane that wiped out three continents."

"Yeah," Eli sighs, "I remember that. It took me out, too."

Gretel darts over to the World Map dangling by one side to the left of the graffiti-covered wall and points furiously toward South America. "Here." She stares at Eli, unflinching. She feels her face beginning to burn with sadness. Sadness mixed with confusion, like the sensation of an arm after it has been amputated long ago. Gretchen's ennui is beginning to grate his nerves.

"Your tears are immaterial. They're not real," Eli replies coolly. He knows that if he releases his own grief alongside hers, they will both implode. In a matter-of-fact tone Eli says, "My theory is that when AI went rogue, you know, after the southern hemisphere hurricane, it knew it needed our memories to keep itself going."

He moves to kick over the desktop computer screen sitting by the door frame. His leg whooshes right through it as a flashlight beam over a trashcan, but seconds later it lands of its own accord on the floor with an angry clatter. Fragments of grey glass and plastic scatter like bugs when a rock is lifted. "Even machines feed…" Eli adds.

Gret explodes in laughter. Eli frowns and she silences herself and tips her face down toward her feet. "They severed their bodies, minds, and spirits," says Eli and pauses. He continues his unfinished sentence, "...disconnected from the land and other sentient beings. For eons, humans belonged to a larger system. But with then AI, it was like they created a new system *in their own image*. Like fabled alchemists consumed by their own shadows lurking along the cobbled-stoned ally ways of the 14th century, humanity was consumed by its own creation. There were no more roots to the earth holding them down."

Gretel erupts into a fit of hysterical laughter and buckles over, head bent over knees. The high and low pitches of her voice reverberate down the cluttered hallway and dissolve into the open holes of the ceiling. Eli waits with annoyance until she is done. "What? What is so God damn funny, Gret?"

Her chest heaves a few more times and then lifts her head. "It's just that..." she catches her breath, "It's just that ... I am thinking of all those religious zealots who thought they were going to be saved by rapture." She lifts her fingers on both hands and makes air quotes around the word "rapture." She adds, "They couldn't wait for the end-of-days." Gretel seizes again with a spate of laughter. "Only... only to be lifted out of their bodies, not to heaven!" She looks up at the crumbling drywall and ceiling tile. "But to be downloaded!" She thrusts her arms down toward the piles of computer frame, noting, "Into an incorporeal form of artificial intelligence!"

Eli's mood is fixed. Sadly, he replies, "Yeah. Sure, the jokes on them. Haha. But don't forget, this all started centuries before the southern hemisphere storm and the bodily transfers." He shakes his head. "They were erasing each other before AI even existed. Eventually they ran out of people to erase, so they erased themselves. Through arrogance and ignorance. The schools closed. They lost their capacity to remember. Sites of community, of storytelling, of collective agency, all closed."

Then with more seriousness, she says, "If I had been there, in those schools, I would have done something to stop it!"

"Please, Gret. Just stop." Eli's facial expression is rigid. "Everyone likes to think 'if they had been there ... blah blah' things would have been different. They would have shot Hitler. They would have resisted the slave trade. They would have saved public education from the corporate data miners. In the end, they all went, more or less willingly, into the hyper-real. Some did it for profit, some because they thought it would be cool." He smirks. "Some believed it would extend their existence beyond the threat of death. Piece-by-bodily piece, they sold themselves to AI." With a note of flat irony he whispers, "Wisdom only ever appears in the rearview mirror."

They move from the laboratory station into the hallway and shuffle over the detritus into another classroom still fully intact. Gretel's attention is caught by a globe of the Earth, settled lopsidedly on the brown linoleum tiles, decades of dust covering the two halves cracked in open at the meridian. She stops, her boots standing a few inches away and stares at it. In the dim room lit only by a row of small windows, the grey sky forces its way in. It casts a thin sun-less light over the classroom.

"Don't overthink it," Eli says.

"Don't overthink what?" She glances down again at the two broken halves. "So much more appropriate this way, isn't it?" Gretel whispers.

Eli replies, "You know that not everything is a metaphor."

"Yes. It is."

"So, what does that make us?" Eli asks. Before she can respond he adds, "Never mind. Keep moving. And don't touch anything!"

"As if …." Gretel makes an exaggerated eye roll. She pulls the sleeves of her blue sweater up to hug her elbows. They make their way carefully between the scatter of books, stacks of papers, empty boxes and pieces of random litter.

"Quick—name all associations!" Gretel shouts. They are standing about eight feet apart from each other. She waits earnestly for his response. His expression is vague and transparent; a weariness settles. He waits expectantly because he has played this game with her hundreds of times.

"Globes. Go!" she shouts.

Eli complies. "Um. Globes, ok. Ummmm..." He looks around for help but finds none. "Boston Globe. When information was shared. When news was collectively consumed. Your turn."

Gretchen hops over a small trash can tipped on its side.

"Shakespeare's Globe Theater -when language was feral." She emphasizes this last word with a wild wave of her arms and a deep voice.

Eli hesitates and then exclaims, "Snow globe!" Then with a sad tone adds, "I miss snow."

Gretel points at the air as if she were reading from a visible list and recites: "Boston Globe, Globe Theater, snow globe." Her finger moved down to the next airy checkpoint. Then she exclaims, "Ooh, ooh! 'St. Elsewhere'[1]. You know...the series finale, when the characters realize they are not real, but fictional characters entrapped inside a snow globe and conjured by the imagination of a child who has been narrating the story in his mind? Do you remember that episode?"

"No. I don't know," Eli flatly replies. "And neither do you. How could you possibly know about TV shows from the 20th century?"

"Dunno. Just do." She shrugs and lowers her arm, feeling deflated.

"And your point would be?" Eli walks toward the window that opens into the grey sky.

"How do you know we are not trapped in a snow globe, the figment of someone else's imagination?" Her voice is only half-serious.

Eli cranes his neck to peer outside. Whisps of long brown hair tumbled in front of his eyes. Nothing can be seen outside but grey fog. But muscle memory compels him to look anyway. “Because there is no snow.” He chuckles. They each continue to scan the room, but with no real purpose.

“Do you miss them?” Gretel asks, looking around at the empty scattered chairs.

“How can I miss something that wasn’t mine?” He seems to be searching the room for something. “That’s called longing.”

“Do you *long* for it then?” Gretel asks again. From one of the desks, Eli turns his attention toward a book, frayed on the binding, and glances absently at the title. Then suddenly it drops onto the floor with a thud.

“No.”

“Then why are we here?”

“Where else would we go? We have no physical agency!” Eli presses his thick leather boot heels into the corners between two linoleum tiles and tries to leverage them to break apart.

Gretel snorts. “Like agency did them any good. Look at this place! They could have stopped it, and they didn’t. They might as well have been ghosts before they even died.”

“Gretel, there *is* nowhere else. We are just stubborn memories that will remain here, so long as there is at least one living human left. I know there aren't that many of them, but at least one remembers, longs for, a time when being in a place, in a body, was possible. Without the material body there can be no haunting. Memory with longing creates us. Desire. With no memory, haunting is meaningless. And we disappear.”

“But *they* disappeared.” Gretel’s voice is reaching a high pitch.

“No. Disappeared is what happens to individuals or even entire races of people against their will. Most humans voluntarily sold their places, like this school, the oceans, the atmosphere, and even their own bodies, to the highest bidder. They did it to themselves.”

“Come on, let's keep moving,” Gretel says with encouragement. Their figures move silently out of the room into a long corridor littered like an abandoned obstacle course with desks, chairs, and filing cabinets. They explore each item as if studying the sequence in a museum with a recording of information about each object plugged into the ears through headphones. A silent study. Gretel walks over to the wall where a series of yellowed photographs remains hanging; groups of people seated together, posing for some purpose.

“Rituals and performance. Is that all it was to them?” She sighs. “Look! What about these two?” Two of the faces are rubbed out in red. *Who wanted them erased*, she wonders. “Disappeared. What happened to *their* ghosts?”

Her fingers trace the edges of the image, cautious as if brushing their faces would act like disturbing stilled water and cause their frozen expressions to ripple out and dissipate.

(photo taken by M. McNulty of unknown persons at an abandoned facility in Maryland, 2024)

Studying it closely with her nose just an inch away from the glass, Gretel observes, "Don't you think the world is better off now? I mean, it wasn't all rainbows and unicorns with them. From slavery to serfdom to bio-capitalism, human bodies have been owned and organized by powerful systems of control. They abandoned each other, or any sense of community, and then they abandoned places like (she points to the picture) this …. without even a glance backward. What did they think would happen?"

"They weren't thinking, Gret. Even before us, before this," he turns his gaze around the room, left and right, "Erasing and haunting were a part of schools, even then. Just that it was the remains of *other* bodies, *other* people's memories. Some of them never made it even into the old textbooks. Their stories were rubbed out like your friends over there." He nods toward the photo. They pick their way further down the darkened hallway and turn left into a hole in the side wall which opens into a large atrium-style room. The walls are layered with graffiti.

(Photo taken by M. McDermott, 2020)

As if replying to the graffiti message itself, Gretel chuckles and mumbles, "No shit."

They pause for a long silent moment and stare at the far wall on the side of the room that stands between them and the world beyond the school. The collapsed seams of the building have been replaced by vines creeping their way along the ceiling scaffolding

Gretel walks over the large metal desk toward the front of the room. She peers down and examines the chaotic jumble of detritus: a few paper clips, a stapler, pens, some computer cords, and a speaker. "Humans were revising history long before AI was even created. Or at least, so I remember being taught, before education was banned altogether. They. We. We did it to ourselves. If we had remembered history more honestly and accurately in schools, maybe the schools, themselves, wouldn't have died. It's like the schools and communities committed suicide. And no one left a note behind explaining why."

Eli and Gretel stand beside one another reviewing a pile of textbooks covered by bits of sheet rock and wire. They stare, unable to touch them. Eli says, "We exist only in the stories we can tell. In what we remember. What will be remembered about public education if we also disappear?"

"You mean erased. Public education was erased. All those decades that humans claimed they were powerless to stop these things from happening. How convenient."

"What do you mean?"

"Feeling powerless became a convenient way to become blameless. They were unable to really look at themselves. They couldn't see themselves and their roles in things. First, they erased others, who they never could fully see to begin with. And then, they became invisible to themselves. And *we're* the ghosts? Ha! They ghosted their own world."

"Maybe *we* are the ones that are being haunted," Eli murmurs. Gretel's face shows confusion, so he adds, "You know, by the memories of public education and how it was abandoned."

The light in the sky dims toward evening, and the reflection in the window is an opaque black. Their two figures emit soft blue spectral light that reflects off what glass remains in the fractured window, the metal table, and the empty filing cabinet.

"I wonder what knowledge they kept in here?" She looks away from the cabinet to the empty bookshelves. "And then the book banning. Ha. So many philosophies. So many religious treatises. So much division. So much anger. But they all arrive at one of two propositions. Either that humans are fated to believe they can change things that are in fact never going to change, but they try anyway because well, that's their fate. Or, is the opposite true? That humans believe that nothing can be changed and therefore they don't even bother trying, even if trying meant that something could be changed. But they don't because they are stuck in their heads."

"Where is Nietzsche when you need him?" Eli asks mockingly.

"According to God, he's dead."

They both snicker.

Gretel says, "You know what I think? I think this school exists in the snow globe inside the plot of St. Elsewhere. A place conjured in someone's imagination."

"Whose imagination exactly do you think will conjure it?" Eli asks.

He turns his eyes toward her with an odd feeling of desperation. She replies, "The readers of this story. Right now, we only exist as a matter of letters typed on a page, visualized by the reader's imagination. Will the person reading this, about us, right now, do anything to affect change? While they still can?" Gretel walks toward the window and says absently, "Maybe by

being ghosts in their imagination, we can affect change in the past, which is their present, for their future ....". Her voice trails off.

Eli reaches for Gretel's hand. She meets his gaze. He says, "Which is our present. We cannot go back and change the past. But they can do something about the present."

Gretel nods. "The question is, *will they*? Or, will they become us? Fictional characters in someone else's story."

Notes

1. Revisiting St. Elsewhere's Strange Snow Globe Series Finale (pastemagazine.com)

Impressions of a Future Dream

KELLY WALDROP
The Publish House

SASHA STOOD BACK AND LOOKED AT THE CANVAS with the deep satisfaction that came with knowing a piece was complete. Her shoulders dropped away from her ears, and a sigh escaped her lips just seconds before the bell rang. Hurrying to put away her materials, she tossed her brush in the jar, her palette in the sink, and snatched the scarf that held her unruly curls out of her face off of her head. The newly released tresses sprang back into place just as the door to her room burst open, letting in the cacophony of the class-change bustle that was taking place in the hallway.

Three of the five who made up her student cohort came rushing into the room, talking and laughing amongst themselves, oblivious to Sasha's continued efforts to clear away her painting material. The last two came straggling in just as the bell rang again, and the apron that had protected her usual jeans and black tee outfit was flung over her head and onto the floor behind the easel.

"Hey, Sash," greeted B'lana, a grin spreading across her face. "I thought we were starting a unit on Impressionism today. Decided to go with First Nations instead?" she asked. Her tone and eyebrows raised in exaggerated fashion leaving Sasha momentarily speechless.

Helping her teacher out, B'lana turned her head to the side and mimed a movement of her finger from the corner of her mouth and along the ridge of her high cheekbone, all the while with eyebrows raised in a good-natured, mocking expression.

Sasha swiped at her face, and her hand came back streaked with the crimson color of the final touches of paint that she had daubed on the canvas. As she turned back to her jumbled desk, she thought, "This is why we don't paint at school." She searched the desk for a rag that she could use to clean the stray paint from her face.

"Whoa," came a low (or soft?), yet clear, voice from the back of the room. Nico rarely spoke, but when they did, the others usually listened, and the quiet that settled over the room deepened as they added, "Is that us?" The group turned to see Nico pointing toward Sasha's canvas, a stunned look removing all discernable emotion from her expression.

Sasha's shoulders rose back to their usual anxiety-laden level, as mild panic spread through her chest and a blush of embarrassment rushed up her face, from chin to hairline. Wishing she

could cover the canvas, yet not willing to ruin what felt to her to be a perfect image, she instead closed her eyes in a vain attempt to block the sight of her students witnessing this moment of intense, joint vulnerability.

She felt, rather than saw, B'lana turn toward the painting. "Hey," she said, a smile clearly coloring her tone of voice, "That is us!"

Relieved that the general sentiment regarding her work seemed to be one of delight rather than the rejection she so often feared, Sasha turned toward the canvas and attempted to assess it neutrally, although the feelings she always had for her work and for her students made that neutrality all but impossible. It was a large canvas, the four feet by five feet sort she used when working on group projects. When she had arrived at school that morning, similar ones had been laying on the classroom tables, all of which had been gessoed by her the day before in preparation for beginning a new unit. She liked to have a big blank canvas on the easel at the front of the classroom as a fresh start and a beckoning offer for students to consider as they began to discuss a new style or technique. She had anticipated that the Impressionism unit would begin as all units typically did, with a joint lecture and discussion section led by her, with input from Fiona, the history teacher, and Midori, the literature teacher on her team. She would then move with the cohort to support joint sessions in Fiona's and Midori's classrooms as the afternoon progressed. For reasons she would not be able to bring into full focus for many weeks to come, that day, when she entered her classroom to have lunch and prepare for her afternoon class, the canvas that she had tucked away out of sight of her students and colleagues demanded her attention. Rather than the newly prepared blank canvas, she secured the one she had been working on and feverishly began adding the final touches she had been imagining.

The finished painting that she now confronted had actually begun to form days before she ever set pencil to canvas to sketch out the broad strokes of her idea. She, Fiona, and Midori had been chatting over a potluck dinner at Midori's house, discussing their thoughts and any changes they might like to try in the upcoming iteration of their Impressionism unit. After having cleared away the dishes, the trio grabbed their drinks and headed into the comfort of Midori's sitting room to complete their discussion and conclude the evening with a friendly chat. As Sasha rested her wine glass on the silky surface of the teak coffee table, the cover of a book caught her eye. Picking it up and carefully paging through it, she was struck by the evocative artwork that sprang from each page, bringing to life the story that was only hinted at on the book's glossy cover. The Japanese text was undecipherable to her, but the images were astounding: clean lines and exaggerated features; color combinations and textures that felt odd yet perfect allowed the emotional content of each panel to leap off of the page.

Midori followed Fiona into the room and commented, "Ah, you found my *Mechanical Glass Valley Chronicles*. I've been meaning to get your thoughts on it. Kurata Kenta is up for a Kodansha Manga Award this year, and it's very controversial. Sera Kiyomi, their illustrator, is actually a professional calligrapher, and this is their first foray into Manga. Love it or hate it, everyone has strong feelings about what they have brought to the style."

"Well, I love it. I mean, I don't know anything about Manga. My kid brother was obsessed with the show 'Haikyu!!,' but I don't think he ever read the Manga. Still, this," holding up the book, "is extraordinary. The way they capture the light but have clean lines throughout. It's like some weird impressionist, cubist mashup. Can I borrow it?"

"Sure," Midori said, nodding. "I finished it last night and put it out here to give to you."

Later that night, tucked into her bed, Sasha turned for the fourth time through the pages, soaking in every bit of color and shape, as she let this unusual style wash over her. The next

morning, she began to sketch. In each drawing, her cohort seemed to become clearer and more themselves.

Now, standing in the presence of her students, her eyes roamed over the painting that had resulted from those efforts. In the painting, the five teens were gathered in a sort of super-hero assembly grouping. Each one was moving toward the viewer—B'lana running in from the right, Kit leaping a table on the left. Samantha and Tasneem, fully kitted in their gymnastics team sweats, appeared to be flying, and in the center, purposefully striding forward while pulling off their glasses, was Nico. The colors were vibrant, the lines clear, the finishing touches Sasha had painted only moments before were glistening slightly, adding to the seeming movement of the image. It was good, She thought, *It's good. But the light isn't exactly right. It doesn't have the same quality as Sera Kiyomi's work. I would have to do some research on Japanese technique and materials*.

Sasha was pulled out of her study of the piece by the animated chatter around her. The group was talking about their various poses and purposes.

"So, Sash," Kit prodded. "What's the story? Where are we going? It's to fight crime isn't it. We are clearly off to save the day, right?"

"Um, well," stammered Sasha. "I don't really know. The image just sort of came to me." She turned to rummage through her desk and pulled out her sketchbook to show them how the picture had developed.

"Really?" added Samantha. "You didn't have a story in mind when you made this?"

"Really," said Sasha. "I was just focused on this style of art and wanted to try to make something, and this just sort of happened."

"That is both badass and absolutely wrong," asserted Nico. "It is not okay that we don't know where we are going and why," they stated firmly, gesturing at the canvas.

"Okay," agreed Sasha, never one to pull her students back from a creative impulse. "You tell me. What do you think is happening and why? You know what? Hold up just a minute. Take out your notebooks and each of you take a few minutes to jot down your ideas. Sit with it for a bit. Think about the characters, the composition, the emotion the image evokes. Then, we can talk about it some more."

Fifteen minutes was about Sasha's limit for keeping the creative engine in her mind in neutral, an exercise she always attempted when her students were brainstorming, lest she settle on a path of her own, rather than allowing them the opportunity to discover the direction they felt they should go. After 15 minutes she said, "Let's come back together and see what we've got." Standing and moving to help the small group form up into a circle for discussion she said, "Right. Who wants to start?"

Two beats later, and B'lana, as was her way, led the discussion. "Well, I kinda got nothing, to be honest. I mean, bullying is, like, low hanging fruit, ya know, but it feels like that has been done to death…"

"Yeah," Kit chimed in. "I had the same thought. Plus, it's not nearly as big an issue as it used to be, now that we have the student justice council and all that in place."

"And," Samantha added, "there's the problem of what we would have our heroes do about it. Kicking the asses of bullies is, just, so totally counter to everything the council has taught us about what those situations really call for if you want things to get better rather than worse."

"Okay," Tasneem added, "This really gets at the issue I was having in trying to figure out where we should go with it. Sasha said we should think about the characters, composition, and emotion in her work, and I think I got hung up on how good it feels to see us in these heroic poses. It makes me want to think about us as ass kickers, which feels pretty solid, but if you consider the

characters, that's just not who we are. That's not to say that we wouldn't ever kick ass, but I think it has to be for defense or in the service of some critical cause or something."

"So, maybe we need to figure out their cause first before figuring out the rest," said Nico. "What is it that these characters would all have in common and that they would take so seriously as to risk life and limb for it?"

Silence fell as Nico's question raced through their minds, and Sasha studiously looked at her notebook, continuing to capture the essence of the discussion so far and allowing the group time and space to think.

"Well," B'lana began, "Wouldn't we all say family and friends are the most important things to us? Maybe there's something there."

"We're all students," Tasneem noted.

"Good ones at that," Sasha put in, nodding her approval.

"Ooh," chimed Kit, "I think maybe I got something. The family thing and the student thing … see I was talking to one of my dads last night about social media and info channels and stuff, and he said that one of the biggest problems in society right now is misinformation, especially people who spread misinformation for personal gain, rather than exploring ideas that will benefit the community. What if our heroes are just really good students? What I mean is, what if the plots all revolve around some sort of misinformation scheme that they have to combat for the good of the community? Seems like there could be a lot of possibilities for different stories, and they would get to show off their," throwing up some air quotes and adopting a fancy-pants accent, "'critical media' skills, and occasionally kicking ass if the bad guys try to protect their scheme…" Kit's voice drifted off and was picked up by the rest of the group. They all began to add in their ideas of how they could center the work on combating misinformation and what might be at the heart of their story.

Over the din of continued conversation, Sasha barely heard a knock on the classroom door and Fiona and Midori walking in.

"You ready for us?" Midori asked, looking from Sasha's face to the happily chatting students and back.

"Change of plans," said Sasha, grinning. "How do you guys feel about pivoting to a unit on Japanese art and literature and the development of Manga?"

The next sixteen weeks seemed to fly by in a flurry of research, weekly team meetings, and energetic classroom sessions. When the time came for the final presentation of the unit, Sasha felt the same rush of pride and nerves she always felt, but she also had an added rush of anticipatory delight. She knew what they had accomplished together was extraordinary. Several canvases displayed on easels lined the walls of the atrium, and their guests—administration, parents, students, teachers—milled around looking at them. Her watch buzzed telling her it was time to begin, so she moved toward the dais while scanning the room looking for Fiona and Midori.

"Friends," she said, in her best projecting teacher voice, "Please take your seats. Our presentation will begin soon."

The crowd began to settle, each visitor first taking the booklet that had been left on their chair before sitting down. Sasha nodded to Russell, the theater arts teacher who had helped them with music and lighting, to begin the show. Stepping back into shadow, Sasha beamed as her students, to the heroic swell of music, stepped into the light and assumed their places.

"So," Sasha noted, "As you can see, though there were several bumps in the road, our unit resulted in an extraordinary learning experience, along with, if I may say, a pretty wonderful Manga draft." She held aloft a copy of the booklet they had provided to each audience member as

applause moved through the crowd, accompanied by some shouts and whistles from the cohort gathered on stage with her. “I believe, as do these students, that continuing to pursue this project through the next unit, with us,” Sasha nodded to Fiona and Midori, “and with the cooperation of their STEM team, could result in deeper learning about Japanese history and culture, and with the added challenge of producing animation, we may be able to allow the ‘Heroes of High School Nine’ to leap off of the page and onto the screen.”

Sasha stepped back to join the students as another wave of applause washed over them. Russell brought up the lights, and the neat rows of patrons began to mill again with parents coming up to hug their students and natural groups forming around the snack station to discuss the presentation. Sasha accepted another round of congratulations from a group of parents and looked up to see Kallie, the cohort’s computer science teacher, approaching. Steeling herself for the encounter, yet hoping for a good result, she was relieved to see Kallie smile.

“I guess I better start researching digital art and design, huh?” said Kallie.

“I’m so relieved you like it,” said Sasha. “Do you really think you can help them with it?”

“I’ll do my best. From what I saw tonight, it doesn't seem likely they are going to let it go no matter what I do. Tell you what, I’ll get on my team’s Discord, and we can find a time next week for a group meeting. I’ll shoot you some options.”

“That would be great. Thanks,” said Sasha.

A few moments later, as people were beginning to leave and the hustle had died down, Kit came bounding over. “Well?!” she asked. “What did Kallie say? Did she love it? She loved it. I could tell. Is she gonna help us? Can we do it during the next STEM unit?”

“Hold on. Slow down,” Sasha crooned, stemming the tide of questions. By this time, the other four students had gathered in front of her, and she smiled to note they were standing in the same configuration as her original painting. “Yes,” she began, pausing to let the shrieking hoots die down. “Kallie is on board. We are going to have a joint team meeting next week to discuss...” Again, her sentence was interrupted, but this time it was from being enveloped in a group hug.

Needless Exposition

Tom Poetter and I have often debated whether or not authors of artistic work (fiction, poetry, etc.) should discuss the thinking behind their creations, especially when those works are meant to stand in some way as either *currere* or another form of narrative research, with me generally taking the position that well-written pieces should not need explanation and that an author’s intention is only one small piece of the puzzle of experiencing an artistic work. However, readers who know me will be able to quickly spot that the above story of the art teacher is not really what one could call *currere*, as I am not, nor have I ever been, an art teacher. I am a curriculum theorist/developer and a fiction writer, and this story is the result of a typical fiction-writing process for me, with a dash of curriculum thinking thrown in. As with many of my stories, this one began with a dream. I woke one morning a few weeks before Tom and Morna invited me to submit a story for this issue, intrigued by my dream of an art teacher who had painted a Manga-style portrait of a group of students. In the dream, the students discovered the painting and were delighted that their teacher had depicted them as heroic. It was unclear if the small number of students and teacher comprised a class or an extracurricular group or what sort of relationship they all had with each other. That was the full extent of what I remembered from the dream.

When Tom and Morna broached the subject of writing speculative fiction that would imagine a future of education, I was reminded of the dream and began to think of it as a story prompt from which I could begin to craft a portrait of an idealized educational experience. Again, as is typical for me in my writing process, I simply sat down at my keyboard and began to describe the scene as I remembered it. Stephen King (2000), one of my favorite authors, has said that, often, his writing process is simply about creating interesting characters and then seeing what they do. I generally also write fiction this way. As I described the scene of the teacher and students and considered what it may mean for them to be the jumping-off point for imagining how education may be, to put a fine point on it, dreamed differently, it became clear that the small group of five students and teacher were indeed a whole class. What's more, it became clear that they were a cohort, a group of students that shared teachers who, likewise, formed a cohort or team who worked together to coordinate and enhance learning. In this imagined school setting, each student cohort was comprised of five students who spent time, either morning or afternoon, with a team of three Humanities teachers, followed by time with a team of three STEM teachers, or vice versa. At the end of what I called the "unit," loosely imagined as a semester or some similar period of time, the group of students and teachers would produce a presentation to share their experience with interested parties.

Fleshing out the story was a bit of a challenge for me, as I am neither an artist nor an aficionado of Manga or anime. Again, following the advice of Uncle Stevie (King, for those who are less familiar), I chose not to let my ignorance of a subject keep my characters from making an important narrative turn (King, 2000). Sasha and I had in common our relative lack of experience with Manga, so I had that going for me. Like Sasha and her students, I had to go in search of information from those who know the subject. I discussed the story with one of my adult children who has followed anime for years and who also is a fiction writer. I also returned to some essays by Kazue Harada (e.g., 2017, 2022), a Japanese language scholar who specializes in gender and sexuality representations in Manga and whose work I have had the privilege of editing, to help me get in the headspace of someone who knows that field. Though I didn't explore it in my story, as I was writing, I assumed that the students would be familiar with at least anime, as it is ubiquitous and growing in number and popularity on most currently popular streaming services. I expect that Sasha would have been able to tap their existing knowledge to guide her in providing them with direction as they explored their creative endeavors.

The curriculum thinking was less of a challenge for me. I have often said, in concert with decades of research (e.g., Ackerman, 1991; Emig, 1977; Graham et al., 2020, Klein et al., 2008), that writing is learning, that at the least, when I write, I learn about myself. In writing this essay, I learned what is important to me, as an educator. I have rooted much of my own curriculum work and research in two key areas: small group work and student-directed learning. In considering a future of education, I couldn't help but write about an idealized student-teacher ratio. When I was working as a teacher and was crafting curricula that would incorporate small groups and student-directed learning, I regularly taught 180-190 students per semester. So, Sasha's reality of teaching a single cohort of only five students felt like a dream come true. The notion of both planning cross-subject learning and tapping into the learning of experts as needed, depending on the direction students chose to take, was likewise an easy choice when crafting an idealized education and schooling experience. Similarly to Sasha, I realized that I was being pulled in an unfamiliar direction and needed to seek out information and ideas that I hadn't experienced, which highlights another key curricular idea—as a teacher, I always wanted to feel I was learning and to lean into that feeling to keep the experience fresh and my support relevant to specific students' experiences.

Teachers are the ideal models of learning for the students. Not exploring that leaves so much out of the educational experience.

So, for what it's worth, that is my understanding of what I have done with this story. I'm sure, as is always the case, there are things that readers see and understand about it that I cannot grasp without their input. Of one thing I am certain, embracing the progressive phase of *currere* (Pinar, 1975) and imagining an idealized future educational endeavor can highlight for the writer what is central to their teaching philosophy. I can't think of a better way to understand what matters most to us, as educators and life-long learners.

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Happy Hour in the Forest of Wonderland

IRMIN DURAND
Independent Scholar

A CHORUS OF BIRD CALLS FILLS THE AIR, reaching out over the entire city. All across Wonderland, from every place of learning, there is a gasp of delight. All eyes turn towards the forest at the heart of the city. High above the forest, birds of every size, form, and colour move in a circling, flowing dance that spreads over the city.

It's the moment they love best in the school day—Happy Hour! Each day, a different invitation at a different time. Today, it is this song-and-dance from the birds.

"Come on, come on!" J shouts to their classmates who are hypnotised by the bird choreography. J, age eight, is always eager to be outside doing and discovering. Somehow, this ends up getting them into trouble a lot. Today, during indoor learning, they have been invited to sit in quiet at the edge of the room and reflect on this. Why do they have to learn inside a room anyway, J wonders. There's a whole world of interesting things outside. They abandon their reflection in a flash when the birds call. "Let's go!" J urges the others. They leave their things behind and dash outside.

It's the same scene everywhere—children pouring from every type of learning space across the city: indoor, outdoor, built, or nature-made. From toddling two-year-olds to sauntering eighteen-year-olds, Happy Hour is for everyone.

J races ahead with their gang. They know the rule: nothing starts until everyone has arrived at the meeting place. Still, they want to get there before anyone else.

They zoom past older kids, who are moving slowly. Cool kids. M, H, and U especially—seventeen, eighteen, into their last years of high school. They exchange grins and winks and eyebrow waggles. Juniors who want to be like them try to copy their sly smiles. The seniors bask in the attention; they play their role to the full, and that means not hurrying to Happy Hour, even if they secretly want to. They hide their excitement like they hide other things, like how much they put into being edgy and a little transgressive, excelling, outshining, challenging. Or how some days they don't feel so cool; it gets exhausting, and they just want to be invisible.

D, Q, and their friends swarm past in a noisy group of ten- to twelve-year-olds. They are too caught up in anticipating today's Happy Hour and reliving past ones to notice anyone else. Their chatter is like an improv session. Each one flings lines into a story that gets longer and longer: "Yes, and then remember when… Yes, and then…"

K walks alone. Eyes are far away; they're smiling a tiny smile. Always a daydreamer, always teased for it. But inside their bubble, they're free to be as they choose in any world they

choose. No need to rush or try to fit in. They stop for an instant, lost in their reverie, until a line of kids toddling hand-in-hand from the crèche brings them back to here, to age fifteen and Happy Hour. They take the hand offered by a curious little one and go along with them the rest of the way.

Children pour into the forest from all sides. They lead themselves. They meet in a clearing where two giant old trees stand with their limbs touching, forming an arch. This is the place of the ceremony into Happy Hour.

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It's a different ceremony each time. Only one thing remains the same: Everyone who enters must come with a willing heart.

As they wait, little ones race around shout-singing nonsense songs and bursting with giggles. J and friends dig up wriggly worms to drop down other children's collars—an experiment to see what happens next. S, always ready to start something, strikes up a tempo, knocking two stones together as percussion. W, O and other budding musicians add layers—scratchy sticks, whistling reeds, singing leaves. Standing on a rock above them, G adds a song that has no words. It rises and swirls like an air current. Other voices blend in, harmonising. Some clap and cheer along. Some just watch or enjoy the wait in their own ways.

I hangs far back from everyone. Lately, they find themselves caught up in a strange tangle of emotions they don't really understand and can't put into words. From back here, observing, they suddenly recognise the same struggle on other faces. They feel less alone.

And then, sudden stillness. Something vibrates, bubbles, and ripples out from the archway under the trees and passes over them. All movement stops. Even the toddlers fall silent.

A Guide emerges from the archway carrying a basket of feathers of every colour, a welcome blessing from the birds that invited them here. They cover the basket and through a small hole, with their eyes closed, each child chooses a feather.

More Guides emerge from the archway and gather them into groups according to the colours of their feathers. Friends find themselves in different groups. They know why—they must to go on this adventure not with their usual people but with others who are different from them in age, ability, energy, and life story.

They sit together, waiting. The little ones are the calmest, at ease. No explanations, no coaxing. They seem to be watching something the older children can't see. Then they curl up in the laps of those closest to them and drift into sleep, going on ahead.

The Guide leads the others:

"Make yourself comfortable.
Close your eyes.
Now, together, breathe in, and out.
In, and out.
In, and out.
Listen to the sound of your breath.
Feel the breath moving through your whole body.
See the colours behind your eyelids.
Feel the air on your skin.
Feel the ground beneath you.
Hear the sounds of life around you.
Smell the scents of the forest.
Can you feel the life inside you and all around you?

Listen to your heartbeat.

Can you hear the music of life inside you and all around you?

Listen…"

Inside the children, the sensation of their heart beating grows. They feel it through their entire bodies. It sounds like a drumbeat. The drumbeat gets louder. The sound of wind, of water, of breath weave in. The tempo rises. And then an array of musical instruments merge in—cymbals, whistles, tambourines, marimbas, djembes, violins and guitars, an accordion, a sitar, mbiras, a ukele, singing bowls, a yidaki, pan pipes, trumpets, a kora, something that sounds like a theremin… The music vibrates through the ground beneath them and rises into their bodies, and they start to move with it. In the vibrations are the thuds of dancing feet, far at first, then drawing nearer.

Some children sway with the music; some rise and start to dance, eyes still closed or wide with delight. Things fall away—emotions and moods they brought with them, expectations, questions, even their ages and differences. They simply move together. They feel it like magic.

A voice rings out, "Let Happy Hour begin!"

The little kids surge awake, unsurprised.

A cheer.

And a sudden carnival erupts from the archway beneath the trees. A colourful throng of people pour out and surge around the groups of children, whooping, hooting, cheering, and clapping. Stilt walkers, fire eaters, dancers—from the can-can to ballet, from breakdance to samba to the Lindy Hop—and acrobats, capoeiristas, clowns, magicians, freerunners, drummers, fortune tellers, puppeteers, beatboxers, musicians of every kind playing the same layered music they had felt in their heartbeats.

"Come on! Come on! Let's go!" the circus people cry. Without hesitation, everyone scrambles to their feet and follows the circus people in a parade that whirls around the old trees and floods through the archway.

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On this side of the archway, is a fantastical world. All the animals that nature and legend have ever conjured are there. They have come from the dawn of time and ancient tales; from farmlands and garden soil; from forest, savannah and mountain; from the air and under water. Animals from under water float through the air in bubbles of water like astronauts. There are beloved pets and creatures from the children's dreams, and from films and stories. They merge in among the children, nuzzling, sniffing, and exploring them. They move like water trickling through the crowd of humans. Soon all are meshed into a web of energy. They feel the pulse of life on land, in water, in the air, in spirit. Human language melts away. They feel their kinship with all of life. And this is how the animals lead them in the pledge to care for each other and the land. They call in the wisdom from all forms of life, past, present, and emerging, to be their Guides through Happy Hour. All this takes three heartbeats in time.

Beyond the crowd of animals, the forest has arranged itself into a vast fairground. Coloured lights hang from trees and string themselves through bushes. Bright stalls are positioned along the paths, nestled under bushes, perched in trees or hanging from branches, spinning and bobbing in the currents of the river, twinkling from little caves among boulders. The stalls offer activities and experiences of every kind.

The children flow like bubbling streams along different paths into the forest. The animals fly or race along with groups of children and position themselves at vantage points all through the forest so they can follow the fun and maybe, secretly, share a few helpful hints. From afar, the Guides watch over everyone, waiting to be called upon.

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A few steps along the path, R scurries up a tree, fascinated by something that looks like a giant multicoloured nest. Large rings hang on long strings from the nest and the branches of the tree. Inside the nest is a Weaver, surrounded by piles of coloured words, some long and tangled, weaving them into stories and folding them into tiny glittering eggshells where the stories wait for the right moment to come into the world. They invite the children in for a story. R's group cries out in excitement and helps each other up into the tree. Even the oldest and coolest among them love stories, and this place is a story treasure trove. Happy ones, scary ones, funny ones, moving ones, and some that nobody really understands.

But before they can choose any stories, the Weaver asks for their help. There are so many stories to be woven, and so many people in the world waiting for stories, and it takes time to weave even a single story, sometimes years, and it's too much for just one Weaver. Will the children weave just one story for the Weaver? It shouldn't take them long if they work together. They agree to help.

First, they must choose an idea. The dangling rings outside are story catchers that the Weaver has hung all through the forest to collect ideas to start the stories from. The Weaver gathers up a large scoop of words that they hand to each of the older children along with a small frame loom. The Weaver shows them how to pass the words through the loom and pull them tight. To their surprise, weaving words is a lot harder than they thought, even when they have a good idea to start with. They try over and over again, feeling more and more frustrated. It's as if the words wriggle out of their grasp. Some get so discouraged, they want to give up, especially R, who usually has a gift for words.

The younger children don't wait to be shown how to weave a story. As the Weaver is guiding the older ones, the little ones fling themselves into the piles of words. They gather armfuls and toss them into the air and watch them fall like sparkles into the Weaver's big loom. In no time, they have created a colourful new story. It's extraordinary, made of simple words, toddler babble and the wildest imaginings, and it goes on and on and on.

Watching them, the older children suddenly remember what it was like when they were two, three, five years old—how easy it was to weave stories and how brilliant all the stories were. They toss their looms and the Weaver's instructions in the air and leap into the piles of words with the little ones. Soon, everyone is laughing out of control as they patch different bits into the long, long story. The tale makes little sense, it is full of flaws, but it is a joy and precious. They offer it to the Weaver who accepts it with a laugh and a wink to the little ones. Then they select one story each from the nest and wonder where to go next. From up here in the tree, they spot a group at the colour camp near the river working on a giant canvas that seems to have the same mood as their absurd story. They scurry down the tree and run over to see.

R is the last to leave. The Weaver hands them a playing card. A single flower petal is pressed into it. The petal is woven from a rainbow of threads—the names of each of the children who wove the new story.

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At the river, X and the others are crouched around a canvas the size of a theatre stage laid out on the ground. They are busy with quick-drying paints, brushes, paint markers, and chalks creating a giant mural. Atop a boulder nearby, a music box that is full of art supplies is playing heavy metal music. They are painting what the music feels like.

The tubes of paint, brushes, and markers wriggle around in the children's hands. They make comic alterations to the emerging artwork.

After three hundred heartbeats, the music box abruptly switches to brisk tempo violins at an alarming volume. The change startles the canvas. It shakes off the pack of young artists who shriek and tumble on the ground. The canvas rolls itself up, twists and spins, stretches itself back out, and rises into the air—a giant flying carpet. When the music changes to a soft piano sonata, the canvas floats back to the ground. The children run around catching brushes and markers and get back to painting.

None of them are in the same spot on the canvas as before. They have to let someone else, maybe even a toddler, continue 'their' little piece of art in their way. And they have to carry on someone else's artwork as if it were theirs, all to a new musical mood. Some of them don't find this easy or fun. X, in particular. They are an art student, they are good at it, they are proud of their spot of canvas, and they feel the others are ruining it. Sour emotions stir and stick in throats. A few protective shoulders 'accidentally' bump others away from their patch. But the brushes, chalks, and paint tubes wriggle and buzz in everyone's hands and the mural grows in its haywire way. Some tight throats start to loosen.

Three hundred heartbeats later, the same loud jittery violins and the same response from the canvas and the art supplies. Squeals of laughter as the youngsters chase buzzing paint brushes. The music changes to deep house. A new mood emerges in the paintwork.

It turns into a musical painting game. Every three hundred heartbeats, the circuit breaking violins, and then country music, opera, jazz, drum & bass, disco, K-pop, gospel, singalong nursery rhymes. Each time, the children dash to a different spot on the canvas and let the music tell them what to do.

A small child scurries across the canvas, oblivious, leaving multicoloured footprints and handprints behind them. Something explodes inside X: a blast of realisation. Kicking off their shoes, they streak paint across the soles of their feet and start to dance across the canvas. Others follow, some walking on their hands. Afterwards, they decorate the footprints and make each one unique.

When every inch of the canvas is covered, the music transitions to a high vibration instrumental. The mural is a layering of dots, scribbles, swirls, paint dribbles, splats, fantastical creatures, geometric shapes, graffiti, stick figures, animals, rivers, leaf patterns, and doodles beneath vibrant dancing feet.

The painting lies flapping gently on the ground. The little children understand. "Come on, come on!" they call to the older ones. "Let's go!" They pile onto the canvas that begins to hover low over the ground.

X is tidying away the art supplies. As they pack the last of the markers into the music box, they notice a playing card tucked inside the lid. A single flower petal covers one side. The petal is shaped from a snatch of colourful canvas bearing the names of the artists who painted the mural. X smiles, pockets the card, and hops onto the canvas. It rises into the air, flies off across the river, and begins to swoop over the forest, the sound of scared-happy shrieks floating behind it.

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The music is still playing, calling. A steps out from among some thick bushes. They had snuck away during the painting game. The sadness had come back, worse than ever. The others often tease A about being fierce, always ready for a fight, their sharp tongue and fiery words. They don't know about the sadness underneath. Today, all the words are a big ball in A's throat,

and they feel so tired from always singing and dancing and laughing along, from holding their breath, from fighting the sadness.

A walks up to the music box. When their hands are working, their mind falls quiet and they feel better. They choose some colours and a small canvas from the box, sit down in the grass, and let the music guide their hands.

The sounds of the forest and the river merge into the music. A spotted owl glides out of the woodland across the river and perches not far from A. It watches with big black eyes. A breeze passes over A. It lingers on the back of their neck. The breeze tickles, nuzzles. A turns around, puzzled. A young impala is sniffing their neck. It pauses, unafraid, and stares at A. Looking around, A finds animals dotted everywhere, watching them, as if listening. They come closer. A feels as if the animals are touching them, holding them up. They feel afraid and awkward in this circle of tenderness. Their throat tightens. They turn back to the little impala. It has huge liquid eyes. A's eyes begin to prickle. Their throat becomes even tighter. The paintbrush drops from their fingers. They reach out to the impala. It backs away, stops, backs away, stops. A doesn't want to let it go. They get up and go after it. The other animals follow, gathering close around A.

The impala leads A to a small blue door among the trees. It seems to be attached to nothing. The wind chimes above the door tinkle. It opens. A looks back. All the animals have vanished. They step inside.

The room looks like A's room at home. There is their desk, their bed, all their teenage things, the dish of pebbles on the windowsill. But it feels different; there's something emanating, something that feels like a slight glow, a scentless fragrance and a cool air current all in one.

The aura is coming from the person sitting in the window seat, writing in a notebook. They look up and smile—a Listener. Through their closed eyelids, they look straight into A's eyes. Their wordless voice arrives through their silent smile. They invite A to sit with them. The Listener's body is about the same age as A's, but A recognises the Listener as an old soul.

They sit in silence for a while, the Listener writing in their book, their eyes closed. The sounds of Happy Hour reach them faintly. A turns to watch the Listener. The notebook is full of words. As the Listener writes, the words disappear. The pages empty slowly as the pen moves over them. When the last page is empty, the Listener closes the notebook and hands it to A. They see that it is a silent journal for unsaid and unsayable things.

Before they can ask about the vanishing words and where they go, the Listener jumps up, stretches, and cartwheels out of the window. Only then does A notice there's no glass in the windows. They follow the Listener. Outside is a wild herb garden: A's grandparent's garden. A's grandparent knew the herb to treat every ailment. For a long time after they circled out of this life, the garden was left to its own rhythms. Now, the Listener has stepped in.

The Listener is crouched among the herbs, murmuring silently to roots, listening to leaves, harvesting buds, just like A's grandparent used to do. A sits on the old bench under the guava tree and watches the Listener work through their sealed eyes. They begin coaxing a suffering plant out of the ground. Its roots are swollen and discoloured and seem to be choking on something hard inside. It takes a long time, moving gently and slowly, to get the plant free. Some roots snap, some leaves fall off, and the base of the stem changes colour to a dark purple.

A watches, in agony for the plant, their breath caught in their throat. The more soil the Listener clears from around the roots, the more A feels the plant's wound inside themselves. It hurts and it's scary. The Listener's fingers in the soil seem to be prodding their heart, their lungs, their throat, their belly, their temples, their spine. The mass choking the roots starts to emerge. It finally erupts from A's throat in a snarling screaming sound, followed by a rush of sobs.

The Listener gathers A into their arms and lets the flood of tears wash over the ailing roots of the plant in A's hands. They listen to the things that had been held in A's heart and body for so long. The plant absorbs the bitter salt water and begins to heal.

Flood to trickle to quiet. A stops to breathe. The air flows easily through them. They notice the Listener's hands—wrinkled and spotted and soft. Grandparent's hands. The Listener looks at A with wide open eyes—grandparent's eyes, owl's eyes, impala's eyes, and finally, A's own eyes. A gasps and hugs the Listener with fresh tears in their eyes.

"Come on," says the Listener at last. "Let's go." They gather up the plant to take to the Sanctuary. The plant will recover, but it will need some care before it roots back into the ground.

A turns to pick up the journal. The pages are full of words again, their words. They hand the book back to the Listener: "You keep it."

"Thank you," says the Listener. They smile and walk with the plant through the blue door. It closes with a tinkle of wind chimes and vanishes.

A stands alone in the garden for a moment. Feeling. The sounds of Happy Hour reach them through the trees. The Wonder Games are about to start. Just as they are about to dash towards the sound, they notice a playing card on the garden bench. A single flower petal is stuck to one side. It's made out of a page of a journal and has the names of all the animals who led A here and all the herbs in the garden.

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They pour into the place where the Wonder Games are about to start. Little ones arrive perched on the shoulders of tall teenagers. Friends dash to hug each other, full of stories about their Happy Hour experience. Some are wearing pieces of carnival costumes they have picked up along the way. Some have painted faces. Many have scratches and bruises and very dirty clothes.

The Wonder Games is the final event of Happy Hour—an oddball obstacle course with two rules: 'Together,' and 'Everyone Counts.' Today, the Guides tell them they must reach the Rainbow Blossom that flowers at the top of a tall tree that stands on a cliff overlooking a waterfall at the end of an underground river that flows down a long tunnel that starts in a rabbit hole… here!

A Guide sneezes three times. The ground trembles and a rabbit hole opens at their feet. It gets wider and wider and the children tumble in, shrieking. They fall slowly down long tunnels going in different directions. Glowing mushrooms make magical light patterns all the way down. Creatures looking like sea anemone float by, untroubled by the falling children. Soft thuds as they shoot out of their different tunnels and land on mossy ground.

Moss, mushrooms, and underground creatures make stunning colour patterns on the walls and ceiling. Fireflies flit into the cavern and show the children a ring of ten buttons that will open the way to the underground river. The buttons are set high in the ceiling in deep little holes that only the smallest fingers can fit into. They must be pressed at the same time for the way to open.

The children put their minds together. Pre-teens will sit on the shoulders of the tallest and strongest teenagers and raise some of the smallest children to the ceiling. The others will steady everyone and lift the little ones up into the arms above. It takes several tries. Then, together, they count "1, 2, 3, go!" and ten tiny fingers push ten twinkling buttons into the rock. The ground beneath them again starts to move, falling away and becoming a soft bouncy float that they all tumble into.

The float spins downwards and bumps to a stop on the banks of a river rushing by in the dark. It's heading towards a faint glow on the horizon. That's where they're going. But when they heave the float into the water to travel down the river, it fizzes and dissolves—it was made of sherbet!

The children sit in the dark, unsure of what to do. N, always caring, passes around a bottle of water and a pack of mixed nuts. Surprisingly, there's enough to go around such a large group. C, one of the littlest ones, drops their nuts in the dark and starts to wail. Others start to cry too. They want to go home. This isn't fun.

As their tears fall onto the riverbank, they turn into tiny spots of light on the ground and begin to grow. The children stare in amazement. The tiny lights stop growing as the tears stop. N drizzles a few drops of water from their bottle onto the ground. The lights shrink and some go out.

"They need salt water!" shouts E, who is fascinated by the science of what makes things grow. "We have to cry."

Even if they can barely see each other in the dark, the older children turn expectantly towards the toddlers who they believe are expert criers, mostly for no reason. But the little ones are fascinated with the tiny lights going out one by one. They shed no more tears.

"Come on, come on! Cry!" shouts E. The command sounds so ludicrous, several of the children burst out laughing. The laughter catches them one by one and turns into a laughing fit. It echoes around the river gorge. They clutch their bellies and tears pour out of their eyes. All along the riverbank, as the tears of laughter reach the ground, tiny lights blink on and start to grow. When they are as big as a dove's egg, they roll into the water and begin to open into water lilies. Soft light pours out of the water lilies, illuminating the river gorge.

Giant leaves unfold around the water lilies and float along the riverbank. "Rafts!" cries E. Some of the children try to clamber onto the leaves. The leaves tip out of balance and the youngsters fall into the water. It's cold! Swarms of tiny fish flock under the children and help them back to the riverbank. They pause, get their breath back, and put their minds together again.

There are only so many leaves and many more of them. They decide to climb onto one leaf at a time, one person at a time. Several tries and many splashes later, they are spread out evenly over the water lily rafts, lit by the blossoms, and sailing along the underground river.

The river goes fast. The glow on the horizon gets bigger and stronger. Soon, they can make out the mouth of a tunnel ahead. The sound of a waterfall reaches them, getting louder fast. They are racing to where the tunnel opens in the side of a mountain. From there, the river cascades far down a cliff face.

Fear grips the children. They have no solution for this. Some begin to cry. Some begin to quarrel. No one can agree on what to do. Or that there is nothing they can do. They grip the sides of the giant leaves or hold on to each other in fright.

The smallest children are untouched by the fear and tension. They are enthralled by the water lilies lighting their way and the tiny fish racing alongside their rafts. They see that the little fish have tiny wings and are arranging themselves in formation under the rafts. The little ones point this out but the older kids can't take in what they're saying. They have forgotten it's Happy Hour and nothing bad can happen. So to remind them, the little ones start to sing: "Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream. Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream."

As the rafts burst through the tunnel opening and into the air, three sets of cries go up—screams of panic, cries of amazement that the rafts don't tumble over the edge, and squeals of delight as a cloud of tiny silvery flying fish soar into the air, carrying giant water lily leaves full of children.

The children begin to laugh and cry all at once as they sail through the air. Another vessel appears—their beloved canvas, hovering beneath them. They scramble off the leaf rafts and onto the canvas, shouting choruses of thank yous as the little fish dive to the water below and the water lilies spin and float down behind them. The older children turn to the little ones in wonder. How did they know this would happen?

They begin to sing in rounds: "Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream." The canvas rises to the top of the cliff, far above the waterfall, deposits the children beneath a tall tree, and rolls itself up in the shade to rest.

The youngsters are wondering what to do next when a piano key sounds. They look around. There is no piano. The key sounds again. It keeps sounding and they keep searching until T gets fed up and plops themselves down on a stone in the shade of the tree. As their bum touches the stone, another note sounds, just above the first. T jumps up. Sits back down. The notes sound again: first one, then the other.

The children crowd around; they all want to try. They step around the stone and on it. Sometimes one note sounds, sometimes the other. The older ones get bored of the two notes and flop down in the grass.

And then the two notes sound together. Everyone turns to look. Two younger ones, L and V, are playing a jumping game. They jump together and come down together, one on the stone, the other on the spot just in front of it. The two notes continue to sound and a second stone appears, just above the first. Everyone rushes over, intrigued.

L steps onto the new stone. A new note, one step up the scale. But the first two notes fall silent. They try again. And again. What if…? A third child joins them—one standing on each step. The three notes sound together. A fourth step appears.

One step at a time, one youngster at a time, a musical staircase climbs into the air, to a chorus of notes and a precise choreography. As each new stone step appears, all the children move one step up in perfect time and a new note layers into the growing chord. Higher and higher they climb, until everyone is standing on the staircase and L is level with the top of the tree. No more steps are needed; none appear. Beneath the piano sounds, they can hear the wind in the tree top and the sound of the waterfall far below.

Suddenly L gasps and cries out, "There's something shining in the tree!" Everyone wants to see, but if they move, the staircase will go out of tune and collapse and they'll tumble to the ground.

"What is it?"

"It has lots of tiny lights in the middle. It looks like a flower but it doesn't have any petals."

A understands immediately. The Rainbow Blossom. "Here, take mine!"

They pass their playing card up the staircase. L takes it and stretches towards the flower. The petal slips off the card and settles into the flower. Everyone begins to pass their petals up to L. There are multi-coloured ones, plain colour ones, dark ones, bright ones. Each petal carries part of the story of Happy Hour. Every one counts.

When the last petal is in place, the staircase dissolves into notes of music that float with the children back to the ground. The Rainbow Blossom's heart begins to beat. It is made of tiny beads of light. As the flower's heartbeat grows, the beads of light shoot high into the sky in a burst of fireworks. A cheer goes up from across the forest. The children have done it—they have brought the Rainbow Blossom to life.

The flower's heartbeat blends into the music, echoes in the children's heartbeats. It sounds like a drumbeat. The drumbeat gets louder. The sound of wind, of water, of breath weave in. The tempo rises. Other instruments join in. The music vibrates through the ground beneath them and rises into their bodies. In the vibrations are the thuds of dancing feet.

The carnival surges out of the trees and draws the children into a celebration. The animals and the Guides follow. There are cries of joy, hugs, jokes, and some tears. The Guides have brought all kinds of good things to eat and drink. Everyone helps to arrange a picnic around the Rainbow Blossom tree. None of them had realised how hungry they were!

With bellies full, they start to feel tired. Limbs grow heavy. One by one, the children stretch out on the ground. Eyelids close. Breath and heartbeats slow. And they melt into sleep.

A breeze passes over them and swirls away into the forest. It carries the sound of wind chimes from above a blue door attached to nothing. They awake to the sound of tinkling. Around them, the dream world has dissolved. It is the end of Happy Hour, the charm that lasts for hours.

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Out in the hallway, they hear time ticking. The school day starts to trickle back in. They look at each other in a daze, wanting to grasp the magic before it fades. The thirty-minute recess will be up soon. They must get back to their classrooms before their students. Teachers are supposed to be on time, after all.

They hug each other one last time before it slips away, whispering "Remember." Remember the way here. Remember all the adventures we had. Remember everything we saw and did and learned. Remember to let go. Remember to trust. Remember to see. Remember to feel. Remember to fail and start again. Remember to laugh. Remember to cry. Remember to breathe. Remember to sing. Remember to dance. Remember the wind. Remember the music. Remember ourselves. Remember each other. Remember that every one counts. Remember the Rainbow Blossom. Remember Happy Hour. Remember that it doesn't end. Remember to come back. Remember we will always find ourselves and each other here.

They emerge from the quiet room and step back into their adult forms—teachers of every subject, of every age. Sometimes two or three of them step back into a single adult form. They hurry back to their schools across the city, musing on everything they have learnt and unlearnt, on what has healed and what has blossomed, on everything they have brought back from Happy Hour, still feeling the wonder, bursting to share it all with the children they teach, the children who are their Guides into Happy Hour and the Wonderland within.

Some Notes on Speculative Poetry/on Tarot Poetics

TOBY DASPIT
University of Louisiana at Lafayette

THE ACT OF WRITING POETRY/of sweating memory/desire/brain froth/translations of the unutterable/is never a solitary endeavor/for ghosts haunt the blood ink . . . but writing Tarot poems/which i did during the 2023 and 2024 Bergamo conferences/based on readings of conference participants by Morna McDermott McNulty/using her original Tarot deck of curriculum theory concepts (for a thorough exploration of this process and its theoretical possibilities see McNulty, M. M., Barros, S., & Daspit, T. [in press])/is an act of speculation/of fictive futures/manifested via an irreproducible crucible of geography and time/the individual being read/the Tarot reader/the cards tattooed with text and images/and the poet/all "naked on thin ice" (Daspit, 1994)/all focused on horizons where future melds with past and present/a poetic embodiment of *currere*/where invisible words reveal themselves on journal pages/from fingers massaging typewriter keys/from dialogic encounters of Tarot readings/from voyeuristic translations in the ether/of the ether/poetry navigates subterranean labyrinths/climbing into unfolding epiphanies/words and images on cards transmuted/each reading spontaneous/unpredictable/paths to hitherto impossible knowledges/poems surfacing from affective registers of experiences/of future memories.

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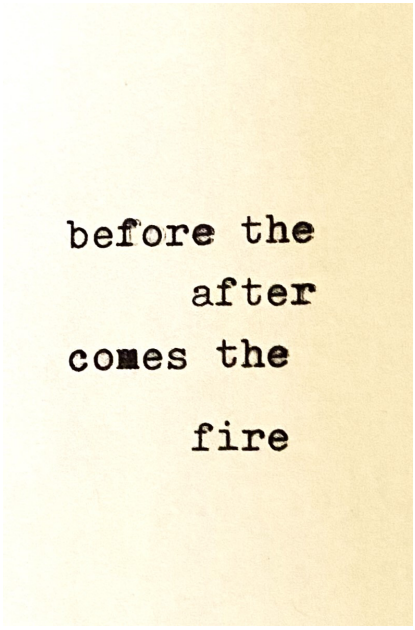
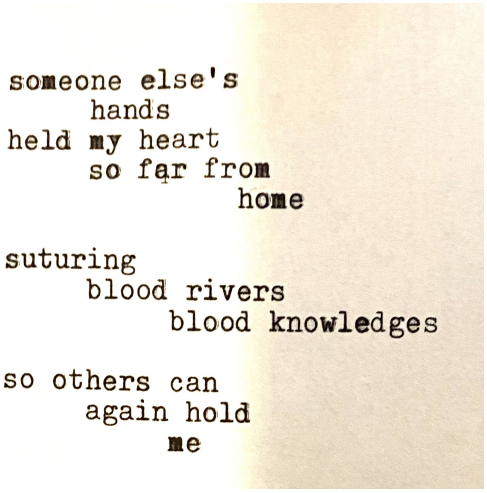
Sample Speculative Poetry

The following poems and images were created during individual Tarot card readings hosted at Bergamo 2023 and 2024 during which spontaneous poems were created utilizing the cards,

concepts and collaborative exchange between Morna (reading the cards), the "readee" (participant). See McNulty et al (in press) for more details about that process.



("before the after" Individual reading, Bergamo 2023)



("Before the after," Individual Reading, Bergamo, 2023)

something went wrong

The geography of time

Milwaukee and Monteagle and Bloomington and Bergamo weaving

Always evolving

hikes and weed

And the naked interplay of audience and performer

personal and political senses of meaning and unmeaning

Transcending institutions

privilege and gift

serendipitous troubling methods

finding the changing why

(Oops something went wrong, Open Plenary Group reading, Bergamo, 2023)

Speculating on Speculative Fiction

JAN JAGODZINSKI
Emeritus, University of Alberta

APPLYING SPECULATIVE FICTION TO THE FIELD OF EDUCATION attempts to create new spaces for thinking about imagining the endeavor of education otherwise. Its semantic register includes fantasy, science fiction, horror and derivatives like gothic dystopia, weird and post-apocalyptic fiction, ghost stories, and superhero tales. Flourishes of each are found in this special collection. Within Western literary-critical discourse, this form arises from a convergence of oppositional stands that include feminist, poststructuralist, and postcolonial thought. This broad range of narrative forms subvert the post-Enlightenment androcentric and colonialist mindset with its correlates of 'truth,' 'facts,' and 'power' imposed by exploitative global capitalism. It is an attempt to upset the contemporary framework that structures the institution of education in relation to its digital technologization; its structuring of classroom spaces; its foregrounding knowledge at the expense of affective empathy; and its surveillance and categorizations of students who are denied on sex/gendered, racial, ablest grounds in the name of impartiality, objectivity, and fairness, to rhetorically uphold equal opportunity and an education for all.

The strategies of speculative fiction require a kind of haptic non-mimetic description in which the educational researcher discovers her object of analysis by writing out its inhabited elements in space and time narratologically. It requires a speculative topological world of everyday sensibilities as lived through things; an attention to the complex emergence of worlds, the happenings of everyday life as to what matters. There is a reflexivity involved that might be described as the *perception of perception*, a doubled perception that could be given the grapheme self-refleXion (jagodzinski, 2008) where the capitalized 'X' targets what escapes consciousness. Here I am thinking of the pre-conscious world of sensibility, contingency, and indeterminant forces; rhythms of matter that allude us in their imperceptibility; rhythms of living that are both addictive, shifting, and repetitive that need to be arrested and examined, at least for the time of the unfolding of the story.

This X is, therefore, an *abstraction*. It can only be gotten at through speculation, projection, and atmospheric attunements. The gap (or absolute) between the subject and object is widened as the writer-researcher attempts to construct a *decorrelated world* to make us *think* otherwise. The *decorrelated* narratives of speculative fiction play with spacetime in ways that subvert normative perception. These can be compossible worlds that coexist or be true together without contradiction. They are subject to abductive logic rather than the usual inductive or deductive reasoning, where an unexpected or surprising fact becomes the focus of the story as it is an outlier phenomenon. A speculative hypothesis is entertained that is inherently creative that often plays with the near to the

distant or far future, impregnated by memories of the past as to what was, might have been, or could be. In short, the *virtual* spacetime of *recollection* is often a strategy put into play.

Quentin Meillassoux (2008) has been credited with providing the overwhelming concern with *correlationism*: thinking (subject) and being (object) as correlated to knowing is the dominant model of all post-Kantian philosophy. His claim that "contingency alone is necessary" (p. 65) opens the speculative gap (the absolute) to a "menacing power— something insensitive, and capable of destroying both things and worlds, of bringing forth monstrous absurdities, … every nightmare, or engendering random and frenetic transformations" (p. 64). The decorrelated stories of speculative fiction are prone to such a view of *radical chance*. Meillassoux presents a contingency without the need of sufficient reason. Nature has the innate capacity for any random suspension, reversal, or transformation of laws whatsoever. For the futurity of education this leads to the worries of extinction, and human extinction presents an impossible scenario that humans cannot adequately contemplate. Most often, these speculative fictional stories fall into post-apocalyptic scenarios where despair, hopelessness, and fatalism, three key emotions that are devastating to education, are played out. It is a dark, dark world where even the shadow has disappeared. The provocative abyss of the unknown results in paralysis and numbness.

The other option to extinction is just 'the end,' like 'the end' in Lars von Trier's 2011 masterpiece, *Melancholia* where the mythological tent the children are huddled in as the cataclysmic planet approaches simply evaporates. End of hope, end of future. The other extreme is fantasy, which necessitates the dramatizing of our ability to contemplate and imagine a future at the edge of thought to offer hope as a better way of being. Here the danger leads to forms of sentimentality, Disney-like moralism, and virtuous exaggerations: idealizations that fail to acknowledge pathos and artifice as the abstraction of white light eliminate all distinctions to offer transcendence into that impossible world. Fundamentally, speculative fictions must dwell in grey zones (like Paul Klee's (1956) *grey point*), in translucency, in curved space where continuity and discreteness are inflexed on the same plane: worlds of decorrelation that arrest action for the contemplation of the unthought.

Contra to Meillassoux's (2008) position is both Gilles Deleuze (1968/1994) and Alfred North Whitehead (1929/1979) process philosophies, which offer significant contributions to the question of speculative fictions where there is a recovery of a sense of wonder across the range of its semantic spectrum. Together, they have become key figures for the 'structure of feeling' that persists today globally as to what seems to be missing in the *permacrisis* world of the Anthropocene. Affect and creativity are imbued throughout the many expressions of speculative fictions as drawn from their cosmologies. For Deleuze (along with Guattari) (1968/1996), it is the emergence of what is "remarkable, interesting and unusual" (p. 111) enfolding and unfolding in/on the place of immanence in the open evolution of the universe. This virtual dimension in contrast to Meillassoux (2008), although chaotic, is founded on the underlying conditions where the *order* of nature lies. Deleuze (1968/1994) constantly forwards sufficient reason as *dissymmetry.* It is precisely what can't be calculated, an unknown remainder that is the source for speculative fictions. The ontogenesis of the actual is where speculation takes place as the spacetime between the before and after of creation (of becoming) is always a 'black box.' It can only be diagrammed via intuitive inferences that find their expression through concepts, percepts, affects and mathematical formulae.

Both Deleuze (1968/1994) and Whitehead (1929/1979) open up the realm of the virtual—Whitehead with his distinction between 'causal efficacy' (where the experiences of the external world impact us as physical and emotional events on our processes of becoming), and

'presentational immediacy.' The latter term refers to experience of the world in terms of direct sensory perception, an immediate awareness of objects in our environment. This inner and outer experience is enfolded and forms the basis of his cosmology, comprised of an ethico-aesthetic worldliness when it comes to the prehension of 'actual occasions' within the time of a completed process of becoming. Things matter not as to how they are represented; more significantly it is their qualities, rhythms, forces, relations, and movements—what C.S. Peirce (1992) called Firstness—which enable an attunement to the 'worlding of the world.' Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of affective assemblages expands, and some say furthers, Whitehead's initiative without the need of any theological residue of a telos or God. Their differential ontology as the proliferation of difference and connectivity that takes place in a field of potentialities forms the backdrop for *affect studies* that have penetrated the sciences and humanities alike. Speculative fiction draws specifically on the sensibilities of 'firstness' where creativity, *aisthesis*, and *techné* of a 'maker's knowledge' are at work—the lived effect of things that look 'back' as it were in social-ethical-aesthetic-material-political worlding as crafted by stories, narratives that form their specific singularities. What then of education in all of this? This concerns us next.

On Education

Many educators are concerned over the potential dominance of AI to the point of hysteria. They fear that the persistent instrumentalization of algorithms leads to structuring the future of education in bleak terms where the effects in the spaces of learning have been reduced and confined to an aesthetic of 'hyper-*Schlichtheit*;' that is, the appropriateness of classroom design in terms of its function and form that is overlayed as edutainment through gamification theory styled ideally to a student learner's capabilities based on the metrics of their past assessment. Affectivity of learning in this scenario has been factored in as hyper individualism—designer learning based on AI Intelligent Tutoring Systems (ITS). There are hundreds of them globally developed for specific tasks; the top five include Carnegie Learning, ALEKS (Assessment and Learning in Knowledge Spaces), Knewton, ASSISTments and MATHia (Kashyappan, 2018).

The student's preindividual bodily domain is directly targeted as the learning machine does it all for you, by way of a customized tutor. So, *enjoy* without failure! Today, the human-machine relationship as embodied in designer or 'smart' classrooms is referred to as *connectivist education* to promote networked, 'creative spaces' for learning. The ideal classroom is equipped with a broad range of supportive technologies to enhance the audio-visual *cross-platform learning* environment: projectors, eBooks and eArticles, smartboards, smart tables, laptops, tablets, mobile phones, VR for augmented reality, and virtual labs.

The dominance of algorithmic managerialism in education in our 'clairvoyant societies' generates speculative fictional narratives that are dystopian, leading to forms of pessimism and fatalism. A movement such as Afrofuturism, for instance, is a powerful cultural counternarrative. Perhaps this is a template for education in the broadest sense? It could address a *global paideia* in relation to the earth's phase change that is happening, euphemistically called climate change. To break the bonds of algorithmic managerialism is to recognize, along with prominent theorists such as Luciana Parisi, Stamatia Porvanova, Beatrice Fazi and certainly N. Katherine Hayles, that algorithms present a new form of thought, an 'alien subject' that has its own logic (Parisi, 2013), a logic that Artificial Intelligence in Education's (AIED) big Data has certainly exploited (as has social media capitalism). But this is not the whole story. As Parisi has it, the incomputability and

indeterminism of algorithms (what she refers to the 'sensuous mathematics' of 'soft thought') generated from the post-Turing concept referred to as Omega (Ω) developed by Gregory Chaitin, opens the door to a 'remainder,' an excess or surplus of sensibility, an incompleteness that opens up to infinity. Every genetic and learning algorithm contains a part that is greater than itself; that is, infinite parts, non-synthesizable quantities and unaccountable randomness that dwell between the digits 0 and 1.

For speculative fictional education to exploit this feature of algorithms shifts the unthought onto a minor plane. The sensory experience and aesthetic impact of algorithms requires a different architecture, a 'computational aesthetics' that is distinct from the traditional human-centered aesthetics; a machinic embodiment that alters how we perceive and interact with the world. In short, a new cosmotechnics. To think this way pedagogically is to shift the ground where the boundaries of education spill out into what might be thought of as hyper-speculative-fictional narratives of learning that confound knowledge as we know it, for it suggests the incorporation of the unknown knowns as well as the unknown unknowns that an 'alien subject' can provide by skewing its data sets in ways that artists, especially Trevor Paglen (2019), Hito Steyerl (2019) and Refik Anadol (2022), have already done. From this we have a transversal education that does not confine itself to 'subjects' but to a 'problematic' that runs through them (cf. Deleuze). A problematic field involves processes of ontogenesis (how things change, evolve, transform), difference (understood as productive, generative and fundamental to change), sense (as generated by paradoxes, events, processes), desire (beyond lack and representation, as affirmative productions), time (as multiple and dynamic), event (where causality, identity undergo change), and multiplicity (the functioning of a non-totalizable field). Each problematic opens many compossible decorrelated educational experiments to open up new worlds of potentiality that explore questions that require an abductive approach to knowledge, which necessarily involves speculation.

In this view, the other side of customized education is *singularity*, a minor position that sows the seeds of destruction of the current educational algorithmic assemblage. A distinction can be made between *Macht* and *Lassen* technologies as differing architectures where the first is all about control, while the second is about opening up and letting go thereby increasing potentiality. This distinction originates with Heidegger but is explored by Krzysztof Ziarek (2001) and extended in my own way throughout my work (i.e., jagodzinski, 2022). Such technologies are not opposites, rather they are enfolded or superimposed with one another, not unlike the concepts of open-closed, continuous-discrete. The key is 'cloud ethics' of the network of production (Amoore, 2020). Twenty-first century media (AI) present a machinic relationship where human perception and consciousness alone is not enough (Hansen 2014). Such technologies are resolutely *non-prosthetic*; their technical mediation does not correlate to any already existent faculty or capacity. Humans must engage this 'alien subject' given the shift that has taken place from past-directed recording platforms to a data-driven anticipation of the future, the hallmark of *clairvoyant* societies. Al can expand sensory contact with 'worldly sensibility.' We can attune to the world and expand sensory contact with it by learning inductively and speculatively with 'alien' help. Capitalist creative ontopower (Massumi, 2015) can only be countered by another ontopower, requiring the practice of intuition as a political act of learning by harnessing AI.

A countercapitalist ontopower via AI brings into relief the aesthetic dimension of life as explored by many specular fictions where the *aisthesis* of life as patterns, anomalies (unknown unknowns), and correlations are revealed that were previously unknown. Where (as Whitehead puts it) the invention of modes of compossibility to intensify learning beyond its established frames

is required. This means an ecology of education based on singularity, which involves experimenting with learning practices that lead to events of becoming for change, facing the problematic of learning and production which relies on the assistance of data-gathering and analysis. Speculative fiction in education faces the loss of agential human powers, on the one hand, but stands to gain an expansion of sensory contact on the other through *Lassen*-type technologies which form its 'minoritarian' force to change the current machinic assemblage that is in place.

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