

SPECULATIVE FICTION, CURRICULUM STUDIES, AND CRISIS

AN INTRODUCTION AND INVITATION

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This is an invitation to submit new contributions to JAAACS that bring together your own work in curriculum studies, speculative fiction, and your own pathway through, with, around, and in spite of crises facing our planet and our species. In the spirit of JAAACS, you are simply asked to evoke the scholarly context from which your own contribution emerges, and to discuss the relationships in dialogue with other works in the field. Dynamic juxtapositions between recently released works and other related works are particularly welcome in *JAAACS*. For this current issue, we have brought together two highly regarded scholars who have spent a career in the vanguard in the liminal terrain of Speculative Fiction, Science Fiction, and Curriculum Studies: Noel Gough and John Weaver.

Noel Gough exploded onto the scene of curriculum studies, SF-studies, public pedagogy, and environmental education with his early publication, *Laboratories in Fiction* (1993), which made the unique pair of arguments: first, that ‘laboratories’ – in their various roles as sites, symbols, emblems and metaphors of scientific labor – are represented in numerous and diverse ways in popular media and that these images of science should be a significant part of the substance (‘content’) of (science) education; and second, that popular media are themselves ‘laboratories of ideas’ in which meanings are subjected to experimentation. With this important contribution to educational studies, and in a long career that has since followed, Gough has helped to bring into the professional and academic discourse the blurring of boundaries between ‘scientific fact’ and science fiction, helping us to understand the plentiful opportunities for developing critical understandings of problems and issues in science, technology and society that the blurred laboratories of ideas enable. This work also spearheaded what we now might label public pedagogy: popular media other than those labeled “science fiction” – pop music, mainstream popular novels and films, manga, children’s literature, games, horoscopes, and more, are all potentially richer in opportunities for education that traditional textbooks and curriculum materials that ostensibly would be optimal for such purposes.

In the essay included here, Gough reflects and refracts on his engagements with the writings of the seminal novelist and essayist, Ursula Le Guin. His serious dialogue with Le Guin's late insistence on the materiality of words and imagination clarifies "the generative possibilities of SF for anticipating genuinely 'new' materialisms, on the assumption that curriculum inquiry in times to come will require apprehension and comprehension of as-yet-unanticipated material-semiotic nodes." Thank you, Noel, for the optimism that we will have times to come!—Perhaps the complicated conversation to come, sparked by this initial 'conversation' with LeGuin and joined by subsequent contributions to this journal, will support the likelihood that such times continue to be imaginable, despite the impending doom we feel from global climate change, economic instability, systemic violence and other crises.

John Weaver, like Noel Gough, has been at the center of curriculum studies analysis and application of SF aesthetics, popular media, and pedagogy. Although Weaver is well-known for his scholarship on the need for educational studies to embrace and wrestle with science studies and technology (see, for example, his 2010 *Educating the Posthuman*, and the 2018 *Science, Democracy, and Curriculum Studies*), in the essay here, Weaver argues for attending more expansively to *Speculative*, fiction, not merely "science fiction," quoting Samuel Delaney against Delaney's own argument: "a polyvocalic politics through dialogue and an appreciation of multiple prospectives."

As you read these two essays, I urge you to reflect on the following:

- Why SF and curriculum studies *now*?
- If curriculum has anything to do with what knowledge is deemed of most worth, and who gets to decide this, then (a) why have we not engaged with SF more persistently as curriculum scholars? And (b) how might SF help us to think about knowledge, worth, deciding, and all that that entails in this historic, political, cultural, economic, environmental moment?
- If curriculum has anything to do with human experience and autobiography, then (a) how have we not been writing and reading articles here in *JAAACS* that center SF? And (b) might *you* submit an essay that sustains the conversation started here?

On that last point, the esteemed Nalo Hopkinson answers a frequently-asked question, "Why do you write science fiction and fantasy?" with:

A: Simplest answer is, because I enjoy reading science fiction and fantasy, and have since I was a child. I can come up with answers that sound more intentional than that (I'm interested in the possibilities for social change, I'm interested in the myths we tell about ourselves), but those are not why I picked [Gulliver's Travels](#) off my parents' bookshelves when I was a child. I wanted something different, and it looked promising.

The dialogue continues:

Q: But Gulliver's Travels isn't science fiction! It's good!

A: Science fiction and fantasy allow us to step outside our known reality and examine that reality from a different perspective. They do so by creating imaginary worlds as lenses through which we can view our world. Does Gulliver's Travels do that? I think it does. (Hopkinson, undated website)

This reminds me of Cathy Cohen's expansion of queer politics (Cohen 2012). If we are to ask, "What insights might be gained by centering the work of SF writers, artists, and theorists, by re-thinking curriculum theory from our so-far marginal autobiographical experiences with SF in our scholarship, curriculum practices, and reconceptualization of curriculum studies?", then perhaps we can use Cohen's attempts to center the work of black queer theorists and activists as academics and activists re-imagine the politics of intimacy. In the lecture I cite here (rather than the "scholarly more obvious books that she has written, which have received acclaim in their own right), Cathy Cohen ends with the exemplary efforts of GenderJustice (<https://www.genderjustice.us/>), a nonprofit legal and policy advocacy organization devoted to addressing the causes and consequences of gender inequality. Why? —Because: She argues that such organizations, sparked and fueled by youth who have found themselves simultaneously marginalized and embraced by communities of affiliation, are positioned to "start to build new futures." We might find in works of SF what Cathy Cohen has found in her expansive conception of queer.

I urge the readers of these essays to continue the conversation. I invite you to submit your contributions, combining your own work in dialogue with Weaver, Gough, and others, as we start to build new futures for curriculum studies, education, theorizing, and humanity, in harmony with our planet. As you ruminate on what such a contribution might entail, in text, image, video, sound, or other format, I offer further resources that I believe should be part of this conversation:

- First, Sun Ra's (1972) profoundly insightful "documentary" film, *Space is the Place*. Sun Ra puts forth his (musical and autobiographical) treatise on white power, the need for Black voices to take leadership in new futures, and the urgency of "alien" perspectives to confront the planetary crises of our time.
- Next, Karen Anijar's (2000) *Teaching Toward the 24th Century*. Anijar examines the aesthetic, political, economic, social, cultural, ethical dimensions embedded in curriculum, engaging with curriculum as a performative assemblage, studying the public pedagogy of xenophobia and anti-immigrant rhetoric that flows across and within the world of SF and the border crossings of immigrants in the Southwest of the US, the entrenchment of the Eurocentric canon, and the challenges of what has now come to be called "new normativities" that reinscribe

power structures that incorporate marginalized populations within an already damaged and faulty social system.

- I also strongly recommend Ken Schneyer's SF short stories, "Levels of Observation" (2014) and "Selected Program Notes from the Retrospective Exhibition of Theresa Rosenberg Latimer" (2013). "Levels of Observation" uses excerpts from assessments that are employed at various points in a lifetime to construct what might be a narrative, or perhaps might be a curriculum *about* assessment? As we read "From the Primary Level Placement and Tracking Assessment, administered at age 7," "From Form 29-J-7, Post-Observation Log, Variation 7," "From the Nomination Questionnaire for the Outstanding Service Medal," and more, we might piece together a story of our own, or try to find in our minds those excerpts that were not included in the text. Schneyer's Nebula Ward nominated "Selected Program Notes..." could be read parallel to Elizabeth Ellsworth's (2005) *Places of Learning*. Both Schneyer in "Selected Program Notes" and Ellsworth in *Places of Learning* are interested in non-school places of learning, while remaining deeply concerned with the experience of the learning self. Together, I propose, they explore in ways that can be juxtaposed, what it might mean to think of pedagogy -- not in relation to knowledge as a "thing made," but to knowledge in the making. The faulty narrator, the resistance that is at once the problem and method of learning, the purloined dream of knowledge known, are wrapped up in the works of Schneyer in ways that might provide an SF expansion of Ellsworth.
- Further, I recommend consulting Jessica Langer's (2011) *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction: An Introduction*. Devour this one in tandem with a re-reading of Maxine Greene's (1973) never-outdated *Teacher as Stranger*, as foils for one another. Sublating the trope of the bug-eyed alien analyzed and appropriated in new and innovative ways by Sun Ra and Anijar, both Greene and Langer offer us new languages for building Cohen's notion of a queer politics, something that embraces the instability of the postcolonial and the speculative as a strength. The SF-curriculum-politics-education-practice-queer-speculative starts a new project capable of including a wide variety of texts and voices, including those characterized by hybridity in genre. As Langer writes,

Its instability does not put it in a position to topple and shatter. Rather, its edges have been blurred and smudged, and it has shown itself flexible enough to include the subversion, both generic and ideological, that postcolonial science fiction represents. (Langer, undated)

SF/Curriculum would, in this way, best be understood as a changeable, flexible set of practices and discourses, an assemblage itself of academic/grassroots movements and technologies. For me, SF is not an experiment, nor a metaphor for curriculum; it is an isomorph (Appelbaum

2008). The present is a history of possible futures. The limited framework or standpoint of a curriculum, a work of SF, a public media interface, is/are at all moments the point of expansion and critique. Yes, curriculum is in this way performative rather than performed (Butler 1988).

Follow this link to consider a type of contribution to a sustained conversation of SF/Curriculum: <https://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/jaaacs/information/authors>. There you will find several options for situated explorations of contemporary literature relevant to the field of curriculum studies. *The New York Review of Books* serves as a general model in the sense that NYRB essays generally evoke the scholarly context from which a text emerges, and discuss the work's relationship to other works in that field. Dynamic juxtapositions between recently released works and other related works are particularly welcome.

Consider one of these common genres of JAAACS contribution, and feel free to explore new forms as well:

- A critical review essay places one or more new works of literature relevant to the study of curriculum into relationship with the existing curriculum studies field.
- Theoretical Analyses share most of the attributes of the critical review essay, but do not necessarily focus on literature that is new to the field.
- International Dialogues decenter the North American field by introducing traditions of educational and cultural criticism from beyond U. S./North American/Anglophone traditions. These essays may be informed by what some now refer to as 'alter-global' understandings and values and, in contrast to the above forms, may be situated in relation to diverse socio-political contexts.
- Multi-vocal Response and Discussion pieces are written by a group of scholars who have positioned themselves into conversation with each other to varying degrees.
- Speculative Essays are relatively brief, interdisciplinary "think pieces" sparked by an author's philosophical, conceptual, or imaginative interest in some dynamic educational phenomenon or experience. Although it may draw on a rich variety of texts and artistic sources, the speculative essay is motivated by a desire for hermeneutic understanding or illumination rather than analytic engagement with published works in the field, as is the case with critical review essays and theoretical analyses.

More information is found in the above link to information for JAAACS authors. For the upcoming special section to emerge from this provocation, please:

- Contact Peter Appelbaum with questions or ideas at appelbap@arcadia.edu.
- Submit your contribution for blind review through the JAAACS submission system by April 2020 for expected publication in our Fall 2020 issue.

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