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Storytelling in Troubled Times: What is the role for educators in the deep crises of the 21st century?

Keri Facer

To be an educator today is to be confronted with an urgent question: how is what and how I am teaching adequate to the times we are living in?

In asking this question as a university professor living in Europe, I am not denying that for some of us, living in the early 21st century in western countries is in many ways pretty darned good. The slow and painfully fought for gains of the last 100 years in terms of widening democracy, civil rights and women's rights and the development of more inclusive understandings of disability and sexuality affect all of us daily, even if such gains are far from fully realised and fully secured (Judt, 2010). Global warming means we had a sunny summer, even if there was less birdsong, plants withered and water was lightly rationed. Similarly, living in a country where antibiotics function well, where there is good dentistry, where excellent infrastructure ensures clean drinking water and easy travel, has advantages over other times and places, albeit that such infrastructure remains fragile and increasingly under threat.

In what I am about to say, then, I am not claiming that our times are the worst of times, particularly for those of us writing and reading publications such as this; nor, however, are they the best of times, particularly for those still living with the violence of colonialism and in the wreckage of contemporary capitalismⁱ. Such a claim is not necessary to recognise, nonetheless, that we are living in a period of intense turmoil and disruptive change that may soon radically impact on all our lives and is already shaping the lives of many of our students and communities around the globe.

To consider just a few of the complex issues the world is facing today: A set of economic structures demonstrably failing to 'recover' from financial crises caused by debt bubbles alongside speculative exploitation of resources by an increasingly small global elite (Varoufakis, 2018; Sayer, 2014). Democratic practices creaking in cultures of instant, mass, peer-to-peer communication mediated by commercially protected algorithms owned by large corporations (Morazov, 2010). 19th century concepts of national citizenship being confronted by mass and increasing migration caused by violence and environmental erosion (Castles & Davidson, 2010). Globally aging populations and the rise of Artificial Intelligence raising fundamental questions about the nature and future of work. The beginning of an era of digital and bio-augmentation, genetic manipulation and increasing dependence on other forms of synthetic intelligenceⁱⁱ – all challenging core conceptions of what it means to be human (Tegmark, 2017). And alongside all of this, the gradual accretion of carbon in the atmosphere that is already producing more and more climate disruption, extreme weather and massive impacts on infrastructures, livelihoods and food and water supply (IPCC, 2018). Change we have of course faced before as humans, violent and disruptive change has been experienced by many, but change on an interlocking, global scale at the level of the molecular to the planetary and change that is happening, at least in atmospheric and technological terms, at an exponential pace, is unprecedented.

But these times are not just characterised by trouble, they are also and equally characterised by ingenuity and exploration, by invention and reinvention of old ideas. This invention is already happening: in the exploration of new (and lost) forms of economic organisationⁱⁱⁱ, in learning from knowledges that were once disregarded as irrelevant – the knowledge of indigenous peoples, of enslaved civilisations and traditions, of women (Dussel, 1996; Weatherford, 2011; Peirotti 2011). It is happening with the development of new forms of work and care and family structures^{iv}. It is happening in the creation of new materials that radically disrupt our ideas of what counts as 'food'

as well as citizen-led reclaiming of public spaces to support food security^v. And it is happening in communities, social movements and with individual activists who are seeking to experiment in the creation of new ways of living (Steffen, 2006) at least some of which is also supported by structures of global collaboration and governance from the World Social Forum to the United Nations. The scale of innovation is also shifting, from a dependence on national governments, to an increasing recognition of the potential of cities and communities to incubate new ways of living (Barber, 2014; Katz & Bradley, 2014; Wendler, 2014; McFarlane & Soderstrom, 2017; Hou, 2010).

This is also a time of educational experimentation. On the margins, beyond the walls of the institutions that have come to dominate our conception of what counts as education, as well as within pockets of mainstream institutions, there are practices springing up that are characterised by a radical exploration of the knowledge, pedagogy, relationship between mind and body, and between the self and society required to live in the complexity of current conditions^{vi}.

So – these are troubled times, but they are also times of creativity, generosity and exploration in which experimentation with new ways of living is ongoing. Given this context, what is the role of educators?

I have been exploring different responses to this question with schools and universities, with policy makers, museums and galleries, technologists and activists, for about 20 years now (e.g. Facer, 2011). In this essay, however, I was invited to think about the question specifically in relation to literacy and literacy education^{vii}. In making this response, however, I recognise that I am not a literacy educator or English teacher, nor is this my main area of research (although it was my first discipline and the study of discourse remains central to my work). What is presented here, then, is a view from *alongside* literacy education rather than from its centre. It is not a set of recommendations for pedagogy and practice (colleagues wishing to encounter exemplary practices of literacy education in conditions of environmental crisis, for example, should turn to Sasha Matthewman's work (Matthewman 2014/2017), or in time of technological change, to the well documented multi-literacy traditions). Instead, this essay is intended as a provocation to reflect upon how we think about and frame the broader problem of imagining and making futures in education today and to explore how storytelling in particular may play a generative role in that process for both educators and students.

Indeed, my answer to the question above is to say that our responsibility as educators in these times, wherever we are working, in schools or in universities or in communities, is to support our students to think with hope and with rigour about the sorts of futures that are being made today; and to enable them to care for, imagine and make liveable futures in collective dialogue with others whose futures are also at stake.

In the remainder of this essay then, I want to explore what it might take to create educational practices that are adequate to this intention; namely: letting go of some of the stories about education and the future to which we are wedded; drawing on transdisciplinary fields of anticipation, temporality and decolonial studies, as well as educational philosophy and social psychology which have insights to offer to this inquiry; finally, understanding and working with the distinctive contribution that stories and storytelling can offer to the practices of imagining and making liveable futures.

The stories we need to stop telling

To open up some space for thinking about this responsibility, I want first to start by talking about a set of stories that tend to shape how we think about the future in education and the way in which these impede the intention I outlined above.

Education is deeply enmeshed with the future. At an individual level, everyday dialogue in schools is inflected with a language of the future. Think of how often educators talk of students' 'potential', ask them what their future plans are, help them to make 'good choices' in terms of the 'options that will keep open' for them. At a political level, the great debates are fundamentally future-oriented – between 'progressives' and 'conservatives'; at scholarly level, it is between education understood as 'reproduction' or as 'prefigurative practice' – debates that oppose competing visions of how futures are and should be produced in and through education. Throughout this, there is a deeply Utopian seam that lies like a trace through educational thinking and drives educational reforming zeal from politicians to educators to parents (Lewis, 2006; Halpin, 2003; Mllojevic, 2003; Webb, 2009).

There are, however, patterns in these ways of talking about the future which I have described elsewhere (Facer, 2016), drawing on Anticipation studies and sociology of the future (e.g. Poli, 2010; Adam & Groves, 2007) as narratives of *optimisation*, *colonisation*, and *contingency*, which are profoundly unhelpful in enabling students (and educators) to engage with the future rigorously and hopefully. To briefly summarise:

The narrative of *optimisation* in education is the one in which the future is presented as knowable – consider, for example, the imagery of the 'knowledge economy' or 'fourth industrial revolution' that has dominated the last two decades. This knowable future is then translated into an educational imperative to ensure that young people are skilled up for an assumed future of technological dominance and neoliberal competition (Facer, 2018). The relationship between child and the future is presented as one of adaptation to a particular inevitable set of events and optimal choices are assumed to be those that will best ensure success in those forecast conditions. The future here is neither open nor subject to serious critical scrutiny.

A narrative of *colonisation*, in contrast, assumes that the future is an empty space that should be transformed into a particular desirable future through the actions of young people in making and sustaining that future (Mllojevic, 2003; Gough, 2002). Here both conservative and progressive educators align: in both cases, particular social relationships, ways of living in the world and organisation are presented as desirable but not yet secured and the means to secure them is through educating young people to also share these values. The future here is seen as open only in so far as it complies with a particular narrative predetermined for students by adults.

The third narrative of *contingency* embraces doubt and anxiety. This is a narrative in which uncertainty about the future dominates responses to contemporary change. Here, the future is seen as radically unknowable and such uncertainty is assumed to be dangerous and frightening. In this narrative, the function of education is to act as a talisman to ward off dangers – if only children are educated, this narrative goes, they will be able to survive whatever happens. Or at the very least, will be able to survive better than those without education; positional competition and a race for accreditation ensues. Such a future cannot be a resource for hope and defies any critical examination of what it takes to ensure liveable futures.

There are fundamental weaknesses to each of these narratives: the first optimisation narrative positions the future as knowable, an untenable claim given the complexity of open social and planetary systems in which radical disruption and novelty are inevitable. The second narrative positions the future as a desired end state to be achieved by action in the present - in itself such an aspiration can be useful given that Utopias and ideation have an important role in opening up

critique and attention to how the present might be different (Levitas, 2003). However, as Gough has argued, to ask students to frame their education around the development of values and capabilities necessary to produce a future world that is envisaged *for them*, by educators and adults, many of whom will not be living in that future, is ethically dubious (Gough, 1990). Finally, the narrative of contingency fundamentally fails to recognise the inadequacy of education alone as a force for human flourishing. It treats education as talismanic, while underplaying the role of material forces, whether military power, democratic structures, a free and trustworthy media, or available water and fertile land, in creating liveable futures. Worse, it encourages education to be seen as a distinct and separate social function from civil society, investigative journalists, scientists, climate campaigners and others with whom educators would necessarily need to form alliances in order to create security and wellbeing for students. Above all, this last narrative of talismanic education produces exhaustion – if education alone can save the world, then only educators can help. No wonder teaching is tiring.

Tyson Lewis usefully describes and problematises a fourth narrative, associated with Romantic education traditions but increasingly available to neoliberal discourses, of the relationship between child and future, namely that the child should simply be ‘who they are’ or ‘all they can be’ (Lewis, 2016; see also Biesta, 2006). Such a position might be seen as a useful corrective to those I have already outlined in that it seemingly respects the integrity and autonomy of the child as well as the openness of potential futures. However, as Lewis observes, such a narrative risks either condemning the child to stasis – to being who they are at the time of the educational encounter *and nothing else* – or to the relentless and exhausting search for fulfilment of potential as a form of self-exploitation within a society that sees them only as ‘human capital’. Lewis’s response, drawing on Agamben, that education should invite students to be ‘less than they are’ is generatively counter-intuitive. It implies embedding in an educational system a students’ right to refusal of futures envisaged for them by others or by their own talents, a right to retain a gap between future possibility and present reality, and to continuously explore that space of possibility.

Nonetheless, Lewis’s corrective remains highly individualised and the suspended state of study that he proposes as an alternative to neoliberal discourses of openness is underdeveloped as a tool for understanding the lived relationship between the student and an ongoing physical world in creative and destructive turmoil. In other words, the physical and material constraints, the interdependence of self with others, are absent in this framing. As such, a different set of conceptual resources may be needed to provide the foundations for thinking about the educational relationship between the child and the future.

Resources for new stories: thinking about temporality, the richness of the meanwhile, loss and hope

If we want to untangle ourselves from these familiar narratives and begin to tell different stories of the relationship between young people’s educational experiences and the future, I want to suggest that there are generative resources to be found to complement educational philosophy which has dominated these inquiries to date. We can find these in the emerging transdisciplinary studies of temporality and anticipation, in feminist studies of science and technology, in anthropology, in the ideas and practices emerging from decolonial theory, and in social psychology.

Working in the richness of the meanwhile

The fields of anticipation and temporality studies for example, draw attention to ‘the future’ as a distinctive temporal phenomenon. They take the future seriously, not as a rhetorical device to incentivise action in the present, or as another world to dream about. Instead, they encourage close attention to how humans live in, conceptualise and experience time and temporality. Here, a critical

distinction is drawn between Time as a universal linear constant defined by physics in which time is (we currently think) irreversible, and Temporality as a lived experience of time that differs between individuals, across cultures and practices (Hoy, 2009; Birth, 2012; Adam, 2004). In particular, these studies draw attention to the complexity of 'the present', presenting it as a rich temporality made up of overlapping, highly diverse temporal experiences, not all of which are visible or fully realised. See for example, De Sousa Santos analysis that draws attention to the sociology of absences and emergence, which is an important corrective to the idea of the richness of the meanwhile as pertaining only to presence (De Sousa Santos, 2016).

Here, scholars draw our attention to human temporality as non-linear. In other words, while physics separates out past, present and future as separate states that relate sequentially to each other, with the present a vanishingly small instant, the human subjective experience of temporality is radically different: ideas of the future shape what is experienced in the present, the experience of the present shapes ideas about the past, the reading of the past informs ideas of future possibility^{viii}. This present can be experienced as an instant or as a long duration, from the instantaneous 'now' to the longer 'nowadays' or 'our times'. It is, in the terms of Anticipation studies, a 'thick present', extending across different times and space, with multiple non-linear relations of causality (Poli, 2017).

If human temporality is non-linear in the sense that past, present and future impact on each other, however, this does not mean that the physical world operates in the same way. Rather, the physics underpinning both carbon accumulation and computer processing speeds is determinedly non-linear *in mathematical terms*: in other words, they are characterised by exponential growth which builds in certain physical legacies for the future. The idea of the thick present, therefore, binds together both subjective human temporalities and the sometimes-inconvenient material trajectories of physical time without collapsing them into each other. It recognises, therefore, that there are multiple and different spaces of rationality that operate simultaneously. To capture this, I find it helpful to reappropriate Ian Bogost's generative attention to the richness of the 'meanwhile' (Bogost, 2012) to encourage attention to the multi-layered, entangled, dense networks of activity and experience ongoing at any one time. Paying attention to the richness of the meanwhile, I propose, is an important first step in living with the complexity of current conditions and opening them up as a potential resource for interrogating the different futures that may be emerging from them.

Let's take a short diversion:

It's 7am, on the flagship radio programme in the UK, John Humphries, the esteemed political interviewer is talking to the Chair of the House of Commons Select Committee on Climate Change about the failure of the government to stick to its commitments on carbon emissions. They discuss the legal implications of what will happen if the targets are not met. In the next item Nick Robinson reports on the wildfires blazing and burning the peat on Saddleworth Moor, outside Manchester, firefighters are working around the clock to subdue a blaze that has been burning after the driest spring and summer on record. The next item discusses whether internment camps for migrants should be built in countries around the Mediterranean basin. No connections are made between these stories.

Other stories on other days are not being connected. Deforestation in Brazil, Flooding in Somerset, Hurricanes in Florida, a dustbowl of farmland in Africa, a hundred migrants drowning in the Mediterranean.

Donna Haraway points out that we have been here before in failing to join the dots, to make the connections between our actions and others. She draws (Haraway, 2016) on Hannah Arendt's analysis of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, and Arendt's observation that Eichmann simply did

not think, did not make the connections. Arendt argued that in this thoughtlessness lay the ‘banality of evil’ – the failure to connect, to make the link between self and others, to understand responsibility. As Haraway puts it, *‘here was someone who ...could not cultivate response-ability, could not make present to itself what it is doing, could not live in consequences or with consequence’*.

Paying attention to the richness of the meanwhile means making connections between self, others and the multiple contemporaneous overlapping stories that are unfolding in different temporalities at the present time.

The anthropologist Anna Tsing exemplifies how one might start doing this (Tsing, 2015). She takes as a focus for study the Matsutake Mushroom – a highly scented and flavoured mushroom that is a delicacy in Japan and she explores its many and multiple forms of existence at any one time. She starts with the history of the ruined forests in which the mushrooms thrive, pointing out that this is an organism that only grows where previously natural forests have been destroyed. She explores the highly precarious but autonomous forms of labour that are emerging to harvest this mushroom. She explores the web of networks and exchanges that translate the mushroom from the forests into high end stores and Japanese business meeting rooms. In so doing, she encourages attention to the interconnections between lives and economies and ecologies. She encourages attention to the species and economic practices that are growing in the ruins of the current economic and ecological crisis. She focuses on the way in which working practices that are dependent upon a recognition of vulnerability, inter-dependence, friendship, mutual aid and contamination are emerging in these conditions. In so doing, Tsing locates the individual actor in a mesh of relations and disrupts 20th century fantasies of the rational autonomous economic actor and or the heroic autonomous revolutionary. Living in the richness of the meanwhile, Tsing teaches, means becoming alert to and living with our connections and dependencies and responsibilities.

Challenging the narrative of progress

Temporality and Anticipation Studies also teach that relations with ‘the future’ are far from universal and need to be understood as a culturally differentiated experiences (Adam, 2004; Birth, 2012); in other words, different cultures operate with different archetypal narratives of change which may be more or less helpful in confronting our present condition. The Anglo-American reliance upon a narrative of ‘progress’ premised upon increasing technological development toward the shiny uplands of the future, for example, is reframed in these accounts not as a universal experience but a particular temporality. Decolonial theory and southern epistemology (Dussel, 1993; De Sousa Santos, 2016 among others) for example, demonstrates how the story of ‘progress’ is built upon violence and exploitation and exclusion of other temporalities. Such studies also suggest a critical failing of this narrative, namely that in conditions of crisis – such as the financial crash or the slow climate catastrophe – intellectual and material effort is focused towards working out how to get ‘back on track’ to the previous upward trajectory of economic growth rather than exploring alternative trajectories. An uncritical adherence to this story underpins, for example, the continued attempt to position ‘sustainable development’ as a meaningful response to carbon emissions – as though sustaining existing social arrangements within some limited constraints will have the effect of achieving the transformative changes needed to realise carbon neutral societies (Lotz-Sisitka, 2015).

Rather than remaining wedded to a universalising singular narrative of time and change and attempting to ‘keep on track’ with modernity, then, richer underpinning concepts of time, development and change are being proposed as scholars turn to both feminist and indigenous knowledge traditions. Here, plural temporalities are proposed that underpin a different set of relations with the future: one that recognises, for example, a mutual and reciprocal responsibility to

past, present and future generations^{ix}; one that is premised not on future trading but on the principles of trust and reciprocity through gift giving and exchange (Adam, 2004); one that is attentive to temporality as cyclical, drawing attention to the cycles of the year, of harvests, of new moons, birth and deaths, growth and decay; or that makes visible the co-presence of multiple times by working in the 'long now'^x.

Seen from these perspectives, from within these different stories, the current crisis in the narrative of western progress might be re-envisioned as a phase in a cycle, a fork in a road, a dip in a wave (Inayatullah & Galtung, 1997). Equally, it could be understood as a moment of death and rebirth in which questions of care become central: what needs to be looked after gently, what allowed to decline, what stewarded and protected, what matters, to whom? It can also be re-envisioned as a moment of alertness to new realities that may be emerging in the cracks of the current situation, to the moment of change as a foundational shift to different sets of social relations nascent or emerging in changed conditions (Amsler, 2015).

Shifting from a narrative of progress in which the relationship with the future is one in which the aim is to 'get back on track', to one that takes seriously the potential of crisis to be seen as a moment of change or rebirth or transformation, however, is not simply a cognitive task. Rather, dealing with a rupture in the existing narrative of modernity, and the consequent changes that might ensue, means addressing the emotions of fear, loss and hope.

Working collectively with fear, loss and hope

Letting go of old stories and creating an openness to the possibility of new ones is an emotional and affective labour that requires attention to processes of grief and loss, as well as hope and fear. Work such as this engages with hope not as a form of magical thinking that enables us to run away from contemporary and historic realities, but as state that is achieved precisely through acknowledging fear, failure, loss and grief.

Attending to the emotional labour of working to make different futures is coming into focus in environmental movements, where the process of addressing climate change is becoming understood as a grieving process, a moment of loss from which new ideas about different futures can begin to be imagined (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). Relatedly, decolonial scholars are inviting attention to how such emotions might be acknowledged and respected through the concept of 'hospicing' one civilisation that is causing harm, to its natural end in order to 'midwife' new possibilities^{xi}. Such a language foregrounds the affective nature of working with and thinking about the future.

Such ideas are finding form in projects such as Sue Porter's 'Walking Interconnections' which built dialogues between disabled people (who had experienced the loss of a particular, anticipated way of living) with environmental activists (who were looking for ways to address the grief of the loss of a civilisation and the need to adapt and change)^{xii}. The wisdom of both groups in facing and confronting the reality of loss, and in developing not solutions, but workarounds, tentative steps, creative adjustments that are both joyful and necessary, is made present and powerful in this work. Similarly, Lotz- Sisitka and colleagues, describe practices of embodied 'transgressive learning' that bring together actors from different settings to work through dissonance and conflict, grounded in the contradictions and tensions of specific places, as a mean to open up new paths, not as solutions, but as provisional steps to readjusting a complex system (Lotz-Sisitka et al, 2015).

This attention to the emotional and affective aspects of thinking about and working with futures is poorly understood. Social Psychology is beginning to make some inroads, with experimental studies suggesting a powerful role played by emotions relating to the future in effecting change in behaviour

in the present. Baumgartner and colleagues (Baumgartner et al, 2008) for example, distinguishing between ‘anticipatory emotions’ – feelings of fear and hope about a particular future circumstance, and ‘anticipated emotions’ – expectations of future feelings such as satisfaction or disappointment. Interestingly, these studies suggest that it is the anticipated emotions – the expectations of future happiness or disappointment, that more actively inform behaviour in the present. Notably, the expectation of future positive affect future happiness or satisfaction - only informed behaviour when it was associated with a perception of positive actions that could be taken to achieve this – in other words, emotion, expectation and the perception of agency are entangled.

This relates to Ojala’s (2016) analysis of how ‘hope’ is taught and experienced amongst students and young people. Here, she discusses how ‘hope’ can work both as evasion from reality and as motivation to action despite and because of attention to problems and obstacles. The latter, defined by Ojala as ‘critical hope’, can be understood as the development of robust, powerful ideations of possibility in the full knowledge of the difficulties and complexities of reality. David Hicks (2014) describes this as ‘grounded hope’. It is a critically important concept and recurs in a number of different fields.. It has echoes, for example, of what the philosopher Ernst Bloch calls ‘educated hope’ (*docta spes*). In Bloch’s critical utopian perspective, this describes the process of holding a vision of a particular idea of a better world alongside and in productive tension with a recognition of the highly flawed conditions within which we are living and that, for now, impede its emergence (Bloch, 1995; see also Levitas, 2003). Hope, from this perspective, is not an escape from reality, but an urgent incentive to become dissatisfied with and work through the present to create conditions for a better reality. Ojala’s ‘critical hope’ also resonates with what cultural sociologist Margaret Archer describes as ‘spontaneous meta-reflexivity’, a form of internal conversation that enables the individual to hold in balance a values-based personal project alongside attention to the rapidly changing realities of contemporary society (Archer, 2012). It also connects with what legal scholar Roberto Unger describes as ‘negative capability’, a process of ‘allying the imagination to the will’, that recognises the surplus of possibility in the present (see the earlier discussion of the richness of the meanwhile) and allies this to a persistent denaturalisation of the present through a practice of experimentation (Unger 1987/2001). In all these processes, the purpose of hope is not the naïve envisioning of a blueprint or promise that will become miraculously enacted in full, but the recognition of the slow process by which hope combined with experimentation will, in Bloch’s terms, open up a new ‘front’ of possibility (Amsler, 2015; Dinerstein, 2015), or in Unger’s terms, will ‘disentrench’ existing arrangements, to open up new realities.

Ojala, however, demonstrates that such critical hope is built not only through cognitive reframing activities (such as seeing where there are possibilities at different scales) but also through what she calls ‘existential hope’ – where there is an expectation that others will also act. This existential hope, she demonstrates, is built on trust in others; a trust that can, critically, be grown through experience and encounter with difference and through shared action. Both trust and hope, she points out, are premised on uncertainty, they are not givens; both are built not by eradicating uncertainty, their grounds cannot be guaranteed, but by cultivating practices of collective understanding and trust in others. Equally David Hicks (2014) argues that grounded hope can be built by drawing attention to community connectivity, and to the ongoing resourcefulness of both nature and human communities.

Taken together, these studies from very different fields – critical disability studies, decolonisation studies, philosophy, social movement theory and social psychology, make clear the critical importance of encounter with difference and collective action as a means of confronting the emotional and affective challenges of working with and on futures, and of creating ‘critical’ or ‘grounded’ hope.

Such collective action, however, needs to be extended from human collaboration to, as Tsing and Haraway suggest, the encounter with other forms of life and being. Haraway describes such practices as ‘making kin in the chuthulucene’ while Andreotti (see also Andreotti 2015, 2016a, 2016b) describes this process as follows:

the best way I think we can talk about it is allowing the land to dream through you, so allowing the imagination to open to the collective entanglement with things, and not thinking it’s an individual task. It is something that comes through you. Indigenous people would say it’s through your ancestors, but the ancestors are not only human, and they are not only those who have come before. They are also those yet to come, because it’s a cyclical thing^{xiii}.

Latour, explores these ideas through his idea of the Earthbound, of humans and non-humans, individuals and networks entangled, emplaced, embodied and located in and through relations with each other (Latour, 2017). Zoe Todd argues that these ideas are not new, but are central to the work of indigenous theorists and traditions who have been building knowledge of these entangled, embodied and emplaced ways of being for millennia (Todd, 2016). Trust, critical hope and existential hope, then, can be thought of as being nurtured not only through encounter with difficulty, with difference and with collective practice but also, urgently, with the rich, complex systems of land, air, water, plants and animals in which we are entangled and which foreground our interdependence with the ongoing, powerful processes and entities of the planet with which we are living.

Foundations for working rigorously and hopefully with the future

On this basis, we might think of the capacity to work rigorously and hopefully with the future as being encouraged through two practices:

- **an ontological practice:** this means working with an understanding of reality as comprised of multiple interdependent and co-present subjective temporalities that are experienced differently in different cultures; of the past, present and future as sites of excess possibility only some of which have been or will be realised; and where human ideas of past, present and future inform each other and create effects in the present. This understanding of reality acknowledges the interdependence of human and material, animal and planetary systems; such systems and beings operate with *different* timescales that are not subject to the desires of human subjective temporality. This multi-layered ontology can be captured in the idea of the ‘richness of the meanwhile’, which surfaces the multiple, interdependent and non-human centric nature of reality lived in a thick present of inter-acting pasts, presents and futures.
- **an affective practice:** a practice of recognising, attending to and working with the emotions generated by ideas of the future - hope, fear, loss, anxiety, desire – and exploring how these inform and are reciprocally shaped by action in the present. This practice builds on an understanding that ideation and hope are important tools for making visible the surplus of the present – what might be different, what could have been otherwise. For such hope to remain critical rather than escapist, however, requires attention both to the emotions of fear and loss that may accompany potential disruptive changes, and to the experience of working with others whose hopes and experiences may be conflicting or complementary. Such collective encounters ensure that the ideas of the future that are used as a basis for building hope recognise the complexity of experiences of the present while building knowledge and trust of others as a powerful emotional resource to enable action.

These foundations therefore generate an **educational imperative**: For educators, this ontological practice necessarily challenges linear developmental theories of education as well as simplistic accounts of the influence of ‘aspiration’ on activity. Instead, it locates the work of the educator in a distinctive temporality that holds past, present and future in tension, in which the job is to pay attention to how to put into play the different resources of the three temporalities – the future-oriented capacity of imagination, the present-oriented capacity for action and encounter, and the historical resources of knowledge and experience. Elsewhere, I have called this a ‘pedagogy of the present’ (Facer, 2016). Deborah Osberg takes this further; in her framing of education as what she calls ‘symbiotic anticipation’ she argues that it is precisely the creation of conditions in which temporality is up for exploration, in which the co-emergence of child and world is put into play, with no guarantees or intention other than a pull to create the new together, that characterises the phenomenon of education (Osberg, 2017; see also Lewis, 2006). Here education is understood as the very site in which the radical as-yet-unrealised excess of the present in both the world and the child, is made visible. Attention to this excess necessarily reframes the past as it has emerged and the future as it will emerge, as partial realisations of what might have or could happen. Things could/can always be different. Such an observation is foundational to the educator working in troubled times.

Storytelling in troubled times

How these ontological and affective practices and educational responsibilities are translated into educational practice may take many different forms across different subjects. It is possible to envisage, for example, both disciplinary and interdisciplinary curriculum organisation, to envisage school-based and informal education that might work from these foundations. What is clear, however, is that unlike calls for ‘Futures Studies’ or ‘Futures Literacies’ as discrete subjects (which have often been marginalised within schools), the different disciplinary traditions can be seen here as providing rich materials and resources for the encounter with the surplus of the present and the multi-faceted nature of reality. Indeed, harnessing and playing with the different frames that structure attention to reality – historical, linguistic, scientific, geographic, numerical – for example; or paying attention to the different stances toward the future for collective action that they encourage – stewardship, experimentation, critique, modelling; all will arguably be central to the practice of developing a deep understanding of the surplus of the present and the future, and for the practice of building critical hope. Alliances, therefore, can be built across disciplines, recognising their limitations, moving beyond them.

Within this wider transdisciplinary encounter, however, one distinctive role of literacy education, which I understand here specifically and contentiously as the form of educational practice that engages with *stories* and the processes of *storying* the world, becomes clear. That this is not the general understanding of ‘English’ education, let alone ‘literacy education’ is painfully evident at the moment as Matthewman (2014/2017) makes clear. My aim here is to make a normative argument, rather than describe present reality.

Stories are, fundamentally, ways of playing with time. They are accounts of causality and consequence, they are spaces in which things happen that cause other things to happen; working with time is central to the process of storytelling:

Time is not a strictly literary category, yet literature is unthinkable without time. The events of a story unfold over time. The narration of that story imposes a separate order of time (chronological, discontinuous, in medias res). The reading of that narrative may take its own sweet time. Then there is the fact that literature itself exists in time. [...] Time, in short, shapes literature several times over: from reading experience to narrative form to cultural

context. In this way, literature can be read as a peculiarly sensitive timepiece of its own, both reflecting and responding to the complex and varied history of shared time (Martin, 2016)

The importance of stories in working with rich and complex temporalities, then, is not so much in the content of the narrative – for example, of time travel or of historical encounters - as in the process of storying itself, in inviting attention to change, causality, relationships, inter-relationships, unintended consequences, complexity, emergence and to all the multifaceted subjectivities, provisionality and their relationships that make up a moment of time and its evolution. Such complexity draws attention to the necessary ignorance of characters to understand and comprehend, at once, the different subjectivities that co-exist at any one time; and to their abundance and inter-relationships. Stories, moreover, make visible the surplus of the present. As Bruner argues, the role of literature is to *'render the world less fixed, less banal, more subject to recreation [to] subjunctivise, make strange, render the obvious less so'* (Bruner, 1986 :159).

Stories can also be particularly good at drawing attention to the richness of the meanwhile, to making connections between simultaneous lives being lived at any one time. Consider this from Dylan Thomas, at a relatively small scale, colliding the different lives being lived on a single beach in Wales:

'The young man, in his wilderness, saw the holiday Saturday set down before him, false and pretty, as a flat picture under the vulgar sun; the disporting families with paper bags, the bronzed young men with chests, and the envious white young men in waistcoats, the thin, pale, hairy, pathetic legs of the husbands silently walking through the water, the plump and curly, shaven headed and bowed backed children up to no sense with unrepeatably delight in the dirty sand, moved him, he thought dramatically in his isolation, to an old shame and pity; outside all holiday, like a young man doomed for ever to the company of his maggots, beyond the high and ordinary, sweating, sun-awakened power and stupidity of the summer flesh on a day and a world out, he caught the ball that a small boy had whacked in to the air with a tin tray and rose to throw it back.

The boy invited him to play. A friendly family stood waiting some way off, the tousled women with their dresses tucked in their knickers the bare footed men in shirt sleeves, a number of children standing with a tray before the wicket of hats. 'the lone wolf playing ball' he said to himself as the tray whirled. Chasing the ball towards the sea, passing undressing women with a rush and a wink, tripping over a castle into a coil of wet girls lying like snakes, soaking his shoes as he grabbed the ball off a wave, he felt his happiness return in a boast of the body, and, ' Look out , Duckworth, here's a fast one coming', he cried to the mother behind the hats. The ball bounded on a boy's head. In and out of the scattered families, among the sandwiches and clothes, uncles and mothers fielded the bouncing ball. A bald man, with his shirt hanging out, returned it in the wrong direction, and a collie carried it into the sea. Now it was mother's turn with the tray. Tray and ball together flew over her head. An uncle in a panama smacked the ball to the dog, who swam with it out of reach. They offered the young man egg and cress sandwiches and warm stout, and he and an uncle and a father sat down on the Evening Post until the sea touched their feet'

That passage is an exercise in communicating and experiencing the richness of the meanwhile. It is an exercise in simultaneity. You can see something similar in the famous opening to Don De Lillo's *Underworld* or Chapter 2 in *A Tale of Two Cities*. You can see Virginia Woolf attempting to make visible this complexity of temporality and subjectivity of temporal experience throughout her novels. But even without modernist experimentation, stories give access to the depth and complexity and wonder of what is going on at the moment, to the connections between lives lived in different time

zones. Learning to read for this, learning to notice such contradictory simultaneity, is an exercise in learning to think, in Donna Haraway's terms, by making the connections, joining the dots.

Making stories is a way of giving birth to new possibilities that could not previously have been imagined and a way of sharing these ideas with others. Haraway talks of the importance of 'worlding' as a practice of what she calls 'SF' – a combination of storytelling, creating string figures, speculative fiction and science fiction that she proposes as a means of working out how to invent and live in the complexity of the current world (Haraway, 2015). Powerfully and with the experience of someone who has fought to find a voice to speak and live in different ways, Audre Lorde (1985) talks of writing poetry as a means of coming to know one's own hopes and fears. She envisages poems as '*sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas*' that enable ideas to be voiced, tested and then shared for collective expression: *Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before*'.

It is not enough to foster a culture of individualised narrating of future desires however – that way lies a neoliberal fantasy^{xiv} - rather stories need to be written and rewritten and told and retold in collective and challenging encounters with other students and other voices from the different worlds we are living in if they are to be resources for epistemic and critical hope^{xv}. The old traditions of storytelling as a collective practice, as oral tradition and public improvisation is a form of collective inquiry and play with the possibilities of the present and the openness of the future. Forum theatre and theatre of the oppressed, as well as traditions of improvisation, and oral storytelling invite students literally into the stage as public actors, collectively authoring new narratives (Sullivan & Lloyd, 2006; Johnstone, 1990). A simple game of consequences, collectivised, becomes a collective practice of working through hopes, fears, dreams and negotiating the competing desires for the future that are always, necessarily present.

Making, telling, listening to and reading stories in education, then, is not trivial, rather, it is a deadly serious business of identifying and articulating desires, hopes, fears and dreams for the future and engaging with the rich complexities of the present. As Marcuse writes, this is education as serious aesthetic play, an '*effort to break the power of facts over the word, and to speak a language which is not the language of those who establish, enforce and benefit from the facts*' (2002, pp. 447-448 quoted in Lewis, 2006). This is storytelling as utopian practice, enabling the identification of desires for better futures, uncovering the richness of the meanwhile, and exploring the embodied fears and hopes and loss that are required to make liveable, complex, collective futures.

To conclude

We are living in troubled times. As I write the IPCC has just published a report saying that we are way off track in the changes that need to be made to keep within the just about tolerable limits of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere (IPCC, 2018) An avowed admirer of military dictatorships who describes the birth of his daughter as a moment of weakness, has just been elected president of Brazil. The Living Planet Index has just reported that earth has lost half of its wildlife in the last 40 years (WWF, 2018). A caravan of thousands of migrants fleeing war, political persecution and hunger are trying to find a land that will offer them peace and employment, and armies are being mobilised to welcome them (Mindock & Riotta, 2018). The 70-year European peace project looks increasingly fragile as nationalism rears its head (Meyer-Resende, 2018).

In these conditions, it is tempting to return to the old stories of education. To see education as a site of preparation for whatever futures we envisage as a result of this particular historical moment (war, chaos, business as usual); to see education as a site onto which we can project the futures we want,

hoping that young people will be able to make them for us even as we fail; or to continue advertise education as a fetish that promises individual positional advantage in an increasingly dangerous environment. To return to these stories would be a mistake. Even under these conditions, we do not know what future will arise. To see education as the site through which we address ecological or democratic crisis is an abdication of the responsibility of us as adults today, even as they are already acting (see for example, Steffen, 2018). It is not our children's responsibility to fix the climate, it is ours, and it needs to be addressed in the next 5 years if any notion of intergenerational justice is to be maintained. Nor is young people's education, alone, going to ensure their long-term wellbeing if other conditions that sustain liveable futures, democratic practices and viable economies are being eroded. These three old stories do not work.

Instead, as Deborah Osberg captures in her image of education as a practice of symbiotic anticipation, we urgently need to defend education as a practice in which different futures from those that we currently imagine can be brought into being in the encounter between young people and a changing world of real physical and planetary constraints as well as abundant resources of creativity. It is (potentially) a place of freedom and encounter with difference, a unique space in which the new can come into the world in dialogue with the old. And in this practice, the way we tell stories and support students to tell them matters. Outside schools, the urgent need for new stories is being met by a growth in movements seeking and making new words for different futures such as the Dark Mountain group or the School of Myth and Storytelling. Inside schools, we cannot teach storytelling as though this is a spectator sport. It is through telling their own stories, learning to identify and trust, in Lorde's terms, their as-yet unspoken desires and hopes and feelings and to weave these stories together with those of the material constraints of the planet and others living in very different conditions, that students can build the capacity for critical hope;

For us as educators, whether working in schools, colleges or elsewhere, I have also found over the last few years, that this sort of work also means finding resources to support our own imagination and to work on our own emotions as we think about the future and the present. This means, as it does with students, deepening our own understanding of the richness of the meanwhile and building our own critical and epistemic hope by creating alliances beyond the walls of the school and the university. Here, Ana Dinerstein's work on the practical art of organising hope and the grassroots projects that it is spawning across Europe, is particularly powerful (Dinerstein, 2015).

It is possible to begin to create educational spaces in which the surplus potential of the past, present and future are visible, in which new ideas are generated, in which the experience of living in complex material and planetary systems that decentre the human can be acknowledged. Such spaces will not immediately feel like exemplars of a new future that escapes the limits of the present, nor should they. But they will be understood as spaces where hope and trust might be developed not as an escape from the admittedly violent times we are living in, but in and through an awareness of the other qualities that our times also have – generosity, love, anger, fear, friendship, collegiality and care - built through the collective encounter with the complexities of the present.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Nor for those in the marginalised north. It is worth noting that in the UK, the Trussell Trust gave out over 1.3m supplies of emergency food aid in 2017-2018 <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/end-year-stats/>

ⁱⁱ See also the work of the Leverhulme Centre for the Future of Intelligence at Cambridge and the Oxford Institute for the Future of Humanity.

ⁱⁱⁱ See the work of the New Economics Foundation and the global growth in co-operatives (a good summary is available here: <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/money-business/business-strategy-studies/how-italy-reinventing-the-co-op>)

^{iv} See the emergence, for example, of women-only co-working spaces that combine childcare and working facilities such as TreHaus in Singapore, Easy Busy in Berlin. In terms of more substantive experiments with work and family life, the Ecovillage movement continues to provide viable examples, <https://ecovillage.org/>

^v See for example, the development of 'meatable' which will produce meat protein without raising animals <https://www.meatable.com/> and diametrically opposed to this, the Incredible Edible movement: <https://www.incredibleedible.org.uk/>

^{vi} See for example Teamey and Mandell's year long exploration of learning initiatives attempting to model new approaches (<http://enlivenedlearning.com/category/on-the-road/>), The Ecovercities Network (<http://ecovercities.org/about/>) The Decolonial Futures group (<http://blogs.ubc.ca/towardsdecolonialfutures/>) as well as initiatives such as Walk Out Walk on (<http://walkoutwalkon.net/>)

^{vii} This essay is based on an invited keynote to the UKLA Conference in Cardiff, April 2018. The full text of that talk is available at www.educatedoptimism.org

^{viii} A literature scholar might argue that the poets got there first, pointing to Eliot's *Burnt Norton*.

^{ix} It is interesting to note that the Welsh Government established a Future Generations Commission, as a way of embodying this commitment. http://www.fdsd.org/publications/pd_lessons-from-wales/

^x This is an idea that originated with futurist Elise Boulding, referring to the 200-year-long present in which an individual might be located, defined by the time span with which they would have physical and oral connections via grandparents and grandchildren, it is taken up by the Long Now Foundation. <http://blog.longnow.org/02010/07/07/elise-boulding-on-the-200-year-present/>

^{xi} See the Decolonial Futures Collective: <http://blogs.ubc.ca/towardsdecolonialfutures/>

^{xii} <http://walkinginterconnections.com/>

^{xiii} Quote taken from an interview with Vanessa Andreotti available here:

<https://www.robhopkins.net/2018/05/08/vanessa-andreotti/> See also Andreotti 2015, 2016a, 2016b

^{xiv} Indeed, events such as "Story the Future" raise real doubts about the potential of individualised storytelling as a practice of radical or ethical transformation when allied with neo-liberal cultures of self-empowerment and self-realisation. See for example: <https://www.storythefuture.com/>

^{xv} See for example, the work of the Dark Mountain Collective, or the School of Myth, both of which are attempting to recover practices of collective storytelling. <https://archive.org/details/uncivilisation-dark-mountain-manifesto>; <https://schoolofmyth.com/>