Democracy, global transitions, and education: using speculative fictions as thought experiments in anticipatory critical inquiry

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Abstract

The purpose of a thought experiment, as the term was used by quantum and relativity physicists in the early part of the twentieth century, was not prediction (as is the goal of classical experimental science), but more defensible representations of present 'realities'. Speculative fictions, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to the *Star Wars* cinema saga, can be read as sociotechnical thought experiments that produce alternative representations of present circumstances and uncertainties, and anticipate and critique possible futures. In this paper I demonstrate how two examples of popular speculative fictions, Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965) and Ursula Le Guin's *The Telling* (2000), function as thought experiments that problematise aspects of contemporary social and cultural transformations. I argue that critical and deconstructive readings of these novels might help us to produce anticipatory critiques of possible ways in which democratic institutions are being transformed by globalisation. I conclude by considering some implications of such anticipatory critiques for generating questions, problems and issues in educational inquiry and for choosing appropriate methodologies for investigating them.

Introduction: abstracting from a Deleuzean moment

Distinction between 'arborescent' and 'rhizomatic' thinking and writing provides a useful framework for describing why and how I came to write this paper. When I wrote the abstract, my thinking about the subject matters of this paper had no coherent centre or underlying structure (and certainly not a structure with any resemblance to the orderly tree-like connections and articulations that characterise conventional Western ways of organising knowledge). Rather, my title and abstract captured a somewhat messy set of thoughts generated by the coincidence of initially separate threads of demands and desires. Put briefly, the circumstances in which I produced the abstract were as follows.

In the weeks immediately preceding the due date for submitting this year's AARE conference paper proposals I had just finished reading novel, *The Telling*, which recounts the forced homogenisation of culture on a planetary scale, and provides much food for thought for those of us who are curious about the social and cultural effects and implications of global corporate capitalism. Then, within a few days of one another, I received three unconnected requests from colleagues in various parts of the world. From Slovenia I was invited to join the editorial board of a new interdisciplinary publication, *Managing Global Transitions: An International Research Journal*, with a request also to submit a paper to one of its first two issues. From South Africa I was asked to contribute a chapter to a forthcoming book, *Education and Democracy*. I will describe the third request in more detail in the section that follows. At first it seemed to have no connection with the other events and circumstances I have described, but as my thoughts about all these matters meshed with, transformed and overlaid each other I began to imagine a conference paper, a journal article and a book chapter that would connect global transitions, democracy, educational research and my reading of *The Telling* in what I hoped might be a generative way.
Happy birthday *Silent Spring*

In May 2002, a UK colleague, Justin Dillon, posted a message to an international environmental education research listserv announcing that he had been invited to chair a discussion at the first Cheltenham (England) Festival of Science entitled *Happy Birthday Silent Spring*. As part of his preparation for the discussion, which involved the environmental advocate Jonathon Porritt and the poet and novelist John Burnside, Dillon invited friends and colleagues to share their views of best-known book. Quotes from the responses to his invitation to support his contention that ‘criticism of *Silent Spring* is relatively rare in the environmental movement’ (p. 15). For example, one ‘Australian environmental education academic’ wrote:

> My personal relationship with Rachel Carson is through a *Peanuts* (Lucy, of course!) cartoon that [my husband] gave me for my ... office door. In it she says, referring to Rachel Carson, that 'we girls need our heroes'... I do like to think of Carson as one of my heroes. Of course I have only ever dipped into the book, but its significance goes without saying... and she is a hero because she was willing to stand up against the male science establishment and speak out. We need more courageous people like that! (pp. 15-16)

As it happens, I am the husband in question, and Dillon also quotes my response to his invitation. He describes me as a ‘dissenting voice’ - one of the ‘relatively rare’ critics of *Silent Spring* among environmental educators - and my judgment on this occasion was indeed very different from my partner's:

> What I most dislike about *Silent Spring* is Carson's attempt to recruit readers to her cause by nominating herself and her implied readers as an implicit 'us' up against an implicit 'them' which duplicitously shifts identities - government agencies, town halls, farmers... *Silent Spring* is politically incoherent but feeds off conservative populism, damning government for both wasteful inefficiency and failing to enact restrictive legislation (p. 16).

I confess that I was a little surprised at my own knee-jerk antipathy to *Silent Spring* and in some ways writing this paper is an attempt to understand my response. I not only respect my partner's assessment of Carson but also agree with it in many respects. I too admire Carson for her courageous and passionate exposé of the deleterious environmental effects of chemical pesticides, and I acknowledge *Silent Spring*’s significance as a trailblazing text in ecopolitical consciousness raising. What troubles me now is my suspicion that Carson's political responses to environmental crisis were at best naive and at worst irresponsible. More importantly, for the purposes of this paper, I did not reach this position by directly re-examining Carson's text. Rather, it was an unanticipated consequence of reconsidering cult science fiction novel, *Dune*, which then redrew my attention to texts such as *Silent Spring* to which it is intertextually related.

**Science fiction and environmental reality: *Dune* and *Silent Spring***

I first read *Dune* in 1968, the year in which I began teaching high school biology. Over the next few years, I recall recommending it to students and discussing aspects of the novel that were most obviously relevant to their course. When I moved into teacher education in 1972 I listed it for wider reading in the biology and environmental education teaching methods courses I taught for several years. I found little of interest to me (or my students) in *Dune*’s several sequels, and other examples of science fiction (SF) became much more central to my work in teacher education and, eventually, to my research in curriculum studies (see, for example, ). In the course of this more recent research, I became aware of the
growing academic interest in literary studies of science and the relevance of these studies for my own work.

Early in 1996 the Society for Literature and Science listserv circulated a call for expressions of interests in contributing to an international sourcebook on the contemporary literature of nature. The editor, Patrick Murphy, anticipated a 250,000-word volume of over sixty chapters covering the major geographic regions of the world as well as national literatures within those regions. However, he also welcomed suggestions for other types of contributions and I offered to write a chapter on science fiction as environmental literature. I did this for two reasons. First, I was challenged by the prospect of writing a chapter of publishable quality in a scholarly discipline (literary criticism) in which I had not previously published. Second, I was familiar enough with the literature of what was beginning to be called ecocriticism that emerged in North America during the mid-1980s (including periodicals such as The American Nature Writing Newsletter from 1989, and the journal Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment from 1993) to realise that SF might not be regarded as a form of nature writing by many of its practitioners and critics. For example, 'Taxonomy of nature writing' includes no references to fiction at all, let alone to genres such as SF (see table 1). I thus saw the production of my chapter as a deliberate intervention in the 'greening of literary studies' that complemented my long standing interests in exploring the educative potential of SF in disciplines where it is still relatively undervalued.

Table 1: 'Writing About Nature: A Spectrum' (Lyon, 1996, p. 278)

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When I revisited *Dune* in the course of writing my essay for the sourcebook, I was less interested in its 'relevance' to high school biology and science than with its 'ecocritical' qualities. As a point of departure, I began by referring to description of an ecocritic as 'a person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action' (p. 69). Although I wanted to focus principally on the distinctive features of SF as environmental literature, I also thought it would be prudent to draw attention to what it shares with more conventional forms of nature writing:

For example, homages to solitude and wilderness, accounts of rambles in remote areas, and other reflections on experience in nature can be found in specific works of SF, such as meditation on scrub oaks in *Always Coming Home* (pp. 239-41) - an exemplary exercise in heightened attentiveness to nature. Furthermore, SF usually responds to the same cultural imperatives that motivate other nature writers, as demonstrate by devoting a whole chapter of their comprehensive history of SF to 'the flight from urban culture' that characterized many of the genre's most typical works between the 1890s and the 1920s. Similarly, Frank Herbert's novel (1965), *Dune*, which he dedicated to 'dry-land ecologists, wherever they may be', can be seen to reproduce what calls the 'discourse of apocalyptic ecologism' (p. 104) generated in North America during the 1960s by books like Rachel Carson's (1962) *Silent Spring*.

I also pointed out that, as a response to an environmental problem (in this case, massive desertification on the planet Dune), Herbert's story also displays some of SF's least admirable stereotypes, such as the assumption that virtually all problems are amenable to technical solutions (although *Dune* tends to emphasise appropriate and environmentally sensitive technology rather than high-tech gadgetry for its own sake). Less defensibly, given the novel's rhetoric of holistic approaches to environmental problems, Herbert invests much of the political power to intervene in *Dune*'s ecology in an individual, Paul Maud'Dib, an extraordinary and increasingly autocratic frontier hero (another SF stereotype). This hero is (of course) male, and *Dune* explicitly reproduces many of the patriarchal discourses that are so disabling in attempts to resolve social and environmental problems alike.

According to Ellis (1990), Herbert hoped that *Dune* would be 'an environmental awareness handbook' and admitted that the title was chosen 'with the deliberate intent that it echo the sound of "doom"' (p. 120). Ellis (1990) also demonstrates that the apocalyptic representation of ecological balance in *Dune* is 'constrained from coherence by its narrative reproduction of the discursive formulations of the science of ecology in mid-century America... and these discourses' instabilities' (p. 106). Ellis does not suggest that *Silent Spring*'s apocalyptic representation of the impact of chemical pesticides upon North America's ecosystems was a direct influence on *Dune* but, rather, that both books are symptomatic, in their discursive
formations, of key features of scientific representations of the USA’s environmental status during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Dillon’s request to comment on *Silent Spring* triggered my suspicion that it shared a degree of political naivety with *Dune* - that both books were (to paraphrase Ellis) similarly constrained from coherence by their narrative reproduction of the discursive formulations of democratic governance, civil society and citizenship in mid-twentieth century America and these discourses’ instabilities. Indeed, the more I thought about this possibility, the more I became convinced that, for all its limitations, *Dune*’s narrative location within the SF genre allows Herbert to deploy a set of generic expectations that enable him to explore the political implications of ecological crisis more creatively and critically than Carson does.

Carson argues that ecological disaster is imminent but fails to suggest any program of political action or power redistribution that might avert her doomsday scenario. She indicts both governments and chemical companies for both their actions and inactions but her engagement with political power arrangements degenerates into anguished and repetitious hand wringing about the effects of insecticides:

> Who has made the decision that sets in motion these chains of poisonings, this ever-widening wave of death that spreads out, like ripples when a pebble is dropped into a still pond? Who has placed in one pan of the scales the leaves that might have been eaten by the beetles and in the other the pitiful heaps of many-hued feathers, the lifeless remains of the birds that fell before the unselective bludgeon of insecticidal poisons? Who has decided - who has the right to decide - for the countless legions of people who were not consulted that the supreme value is a world without insects, even though it be also a sterile world ungraced by the curving wing of a bird in flight? The decision is that of the authoritarian temporarily entrusted with power; he [sic] has made it during a moment of inattention by millions to whom beauty and the ordered world of nature still have a meaning that is deep and imperative (p. 121).

This passage simplistically equates control with tyranny and individualistic authoritarianism - hardly an enabling analysis of political power in the US of the 1960s.

Although Herbert’s exploration of the political choices facing the inhabitants of Dune are focused on the dilemmas confronting an individual, he actively interrogates the relationships of power, control, responsibility and foresight through Paul Maud’Dib’s constant agonising about the ways he is being elevated to the status of Messiah and his fears that by assuming control of Dune’s future he will become a tyrant. In *Dune*’s sequels, this ecopolitical theme is subordinated to portrayals of cosmic conflict - banal space operas comparable to the most recent additions to the *Star Wars* saga. But the first volume is rescued from such banality by its persistent engagement with the politics of *responding* to ecological crisis. Moreover, this engagement is made accessible to readers by the relatively obvious implicit parallels that can be drawn between the history of Dune and the history of the US.

In other words, returning to characterisation of an ecocritic, I would argue that although Carson’s *Silent Spring* is ecocritical to the extent that it depicts the effects of culture upon nature, celebrates nature, and berates its despoilers, but that it largely ignores or oversimplifies the possibilities of ‘reversing their harm through political action’ (p. 69). However, this is precisely what *Dune* offers: a dramatic rehearsal of possible human responses to ecological crises and catastrophes.

I do not want to make too much of this particular (and serendipitous) comparison. There is no shortage of ecocatastrophic literature from the era of *Silent Spring* and *Dune*. I personally believe that J.G. Ballard’s stories of the earth in ecological ruin, such as *The Drowned World* and *The Drought* surpass *Dune* in literary and ecocritical merit, although neither
enjoyed the latter’s mass popularity. I could also have made much more direct comparisons between books on similar themes, such as *The Population Bomb* and *Stand on Zanzibar*. My purpose is to draw attention to the different qualities of texts drawn from different genres that deal with similar ‘big issues’ in particular times and places and to caution against investing all or most of our interpretive efforts in those that come with labels such as ‘non-fiction’, ‘documentary’ or ‘educational’ rather than those which are categorised as ‘fiction’ or ‘entertainment’.

makes a similar point in her archaeology of textual representations of nonlinear dynamics (‘chaos theory’) in literature and science:

> different disciplines, sufficiently distant from one another so that direct influence seems unlikely,... nevertheless focus on similar kinds of problems [at] about the same time and base their formulations on isomorphic assumptions.... Different disciplines are drawn to similar problems because the concerns underlying them are highly charged within a prevailing cultural context. Moreover, different disciplines base the theories they construct on similar presuppositions because these are the assumptions that guide the constitution of knowledge in a given episteme. This position implies, of course, that scientific theories and models are culturally conditioned, partaking of and rooted in assumptions that can be found at multiple sites throughout the culture (p. xi).

As a curriculum scholar, I am interested in how the different qualities of these texts from different disciplines might best be deployed by teachers and learners. And I would argue that, although every text must be judged on its individual merits, SF stories often are more hospitable to educational purposes than ‘non-fiction’ texts because they are open-ended ‘thought experiments’ rather than assemblages of evidence, arguments, and foreclosed conclusions. Books such as *Silent Spring* and *The Population Bomb* are a mixture of rhetorical forms but typically include: sermons, moral exhortations and reprimands, didactic instructions, indictments and arraignments, cases for the prosecution, ‘scientific evidence' and conclusions, conclusions, conclusions, all characterised by foreclosure, by the author's assumption and assertion of a rhetorical dead-end (guilty, QED).

Much SF is not foreclosed. In *Frankenstein* asks: what if a young doctor creates a human being in his laboratory...? In *Dune*, Frank Herbert asks: what if massive desertification threatens a planet very like Earth...? As writes:

> The purpose of a thought-experiment, as the term was used by Schrödinger and other physicists, is not to predict the future - indeed Schrödinger's most famous thought-experiment goes to show that the 'future,' on the quantum level, *cannot* be predicted - but to describe reality, the present world.

Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive (p. 156; emphasis in original).

Instrumentalist approaches to environmental education have tended to reflect and naturalise models of social interaction in which ‘rational' behaviour is assumed to follow from human actors pursuing their more or less enlightened self-interests. These approaches readily accommodate ‘instructive’ texts like *Silent Spring* because they privilege ‘scientific' understandings of environments that are assumed to be instrumental in enabling humans to pursue such 'rational' choices. Yet the extent to which knowledges are authorised, and the manner in which they are (or are not) mobilised in the form of dispositions to act (or not), might be very sensitive to different cultural traditions, values and identities. I thus agree with arguments for caution in predicting the effects of providing people with scientific knowledge of global environmental changes, such as those associated with greenhouse gas emissions:
The assumption is that increasing public awareness of global warming scientific scenarios will increase their readiness to make sacrifices to achieve remedial goals. Yet an equally plausible suggestion is that the more that people are convinced that global warming poses a global threat, the more paralysed they may become as the scenarios take on the mythic role of a new 'end of the world' cultural narrative. Which way this turns out may depend on the tacit senses of agency which people have of themselves in society. The more global this context the less this may become. Thus the cultural and social models shaping and buried within our sciences, natural and social, need to be explicated and critically debated (p. 186).

I have no doubt that Silent Spring energised and inspired many readers to become environmental activists and educators, but I suspect that many others might have been paralysed by its apocalyptic storyline, in much the same way that the threat of nuclear holocaust prompted some citizens to work for peace and others to build bomb shelters. A thought experiment like Dune invites a socially critical approach to curriculum and curriculum inquiry because it foregrounds socio-political structures and agency as well as technoscientific responses to an environmental crisis.

Of course, all of this is to be wise after the event. If I had been disposed to think about texts in the 1960s and '70s in the ways I think about them now I might have taught high school biology and science, and methods of teaching science and environmental education to undergraduate teacher education students, very differently. My concern now is what this sort of analysis means for my present practice as a university teacher and researcher.

**The Telling: a thought experiment in cultural globalisation**

Globalisation is a contemporary example of what, to borrow terms (as quoted above), we could call an 'underlying concern' that is 'highly charged within a prevailing cultural context'. We can reasonably expect that 'theories and models' of globalisation 'are culturally conditioned, partaking of and rooted in assumptions that can be found at multiple sites throughout the culture'. To understand the cultural work performed under the sign of globalisation we need to consider how different disciplines represent globalisation as a focus for inquiry and speculation and how they resolve the questions, problems and issues that arise from these foci.

I think it would be fair to say that when we present globalisation as a topic in education courses or conceptualise it as an object of educational inquiry, we tend to privilege texts from a relatively limited range of disciplines and sites of cultural production. For example, books that explicitly link globalisation and education (e.g., tend to rely on work in the economics, politics and sociology of education, comparative education, and policy studies. Scholars from other disciplines whose work is drawn upon by educational researchers again tend to emphasise areas such as economics, politics and sociology (e.g. . These works rarely refer in any detail or depth to the arts and popular culture as sites for the production of meanings of globalisation.

Studies that relate globalisation to issues of multiculturalism, postcolonialism and identity politics (including diasporan cultural identities) are more likely to refer to examples from literature and the arts (e.g. . Few education academics are likely to question the relevance of Salman Rushdie's - or, more recently, Zadie Smith's - novels to understanding the cultural identity politics of globalisation, but these works come with relatively 'high culture' credentials. I suggest that many works of genre fiction - as well as many 'low' cultural artefacts, including advertising, blogs and jokes - might be equally rich sites for exploring the wider cultural meanings and manifestations of globalisation.
I will conclude this paper by offering what call 'the invitation of the unfinished', that is, I will attempt to provide sufficient information about Ursula Le Guin's (2000) SF novel, *The Telling*, to convince you that it is worth exploring for yourself if you share my interests in the problematics of cultural globalisation.

*The Telling* is the most recent of Le Guin's so-called Hainish novels. A long time ago, humans spread across the galaxy from the planet Hain. After an initial phase of colonisation, the worlds settled by the Hainish people were left alone for many millennia. During this time, most colonies lost their advanced civilisations but developed a myriad of local cultures, religions, philosophies, and sciences. In the times of which Le Guin writes, communication and travel between the worlds has recommenced and a loose interplanetary federation of advanced civilisations, the Ekumen, is developing. Representatives of the Ekumen travel to worlds with peoples of Hainish descent to learn about them and to invite them to participate in the culture of the Ekumen, if they wish. Worlds have much to gain from joining the Ekumen, but they also risk the loss of their distinctive identity. This risk is one of the thematic concerns of *The Telling*.

Sutty is a Terran of Indian descent who has travelled to the developing world of Aka to work as an Observer for the Ekumen (of which Terra is a sometimes reluctant and fractious member). She is a specialist in language and literature, and has come to Aka to supplement the original studies of those subjects done by the first Observers, who made contact with the people of Aka some seventy years earlier. When she arrives, however, she discovers that there is little for her to study. During the time that she has been travelling to Aka, the traditional culture whose ideographic writing and literature she had studied has been displaced, brutally suppressed, and completely replaced by a technophilic society that has enthusiastically embraced 'The March to the Stars'. Differing local spiritual practices and different dialects are deemed subversive, and Sutty is surprised to learn that she might be the only person on Aka who can still read the language that was written only a generation before. The ever-polite leaders of the Corporation that governs Aka do not permit the representatives of the Ekumen to travel outside the new cities, which have been constructed and settled since the first contact with the Ekumen (imagine your impression of US culture if all you could ever see were government buildings and shopping malls).

Sutty unexpectedly receives permission to travel upriver from the capital, Dovra City, to the old provincial town of Okzat-Ozkat where she looks for survival of the older culture about which she has learned. Starting from hints and vestigial signs, she gradually finds her way into the unofficial, traditional culture of Aka, which still survives and, to an extent, thrives in those parts of the world, and the parts of daily life, that are most difficult to police. Sutty cautiously immerses herself in this culture and she has no trouble finding out about the yearlong and lifelong cycles and patterns of feasts, fasts, indulgences, abstinences, passages, and festivals. These observances, which seem to resemble the practices of most of the religions she knows anything about, are now subterranean, hidden away, or so intricately and unobtrusively interwoven into the fabric of ordinary life that the Monitors of the Sociocultural Office cannot put their finger on any act and say, 'This is forbidden'.

The question, for Sutty and for the novel, is how she and the Ekumen might help to 'save' this culture whose destruction was inadvertently precipitated by the Ekumen's arrival on Aka. Long-time readers of Le Guin will note some similarities between this story and some of her earlier novels of cultural contact, especially *The Word for World Is Forest* in which the people of a pacifist forest culture are threatened by Terran imperialism, and *The Left Hand of Darkness*, in which a Terran Envoy from the Ekumen to the planet Gethen must learn the ways of Gethenian culture, shaped by the world's harsh environment and its people's unique ambisexuality, if he is to succeed in his mission or, indeed, survive it.
A challenge that Le Guin faces (and I believe overcomes) in *The Telling* is that of avoiding polemic writing. Le Guin is writing about a subject that moves her greatly, as she was in *The Word for World Is Forest* (written during the Vietnam War). Her affections (and, through her, Sutty's affections) are clearly with the traditional culture of Aka, as they were with the traditional culture in *The Word for World Is Forest*, in which she succumbed to the temptation to demonise the Terran imperialists. In *The Telling*, Sutty begins with this sort of hostility towards the leaders of the Corporation, personified by the Monitor who tracks her activities in Okzat-Ozkat, but she herself recognises that hostility as self-destructive and self-defeating. Her struggles with her own hatreds and self-doubts are as important to the novel, and as subtly rendered, as her discovery of Akan culture.

Sutty struggles are in part located in her past and the historical baggage she brings from Terra to her work on Aka. She grew up in a period of severe religious repression on Earth, and her life has been indelibly marked by the tragedy of religious warfare and terrorism. These experiences shape her view of Aka, and she must learn to deal with them if she is to deal fairly with the Akans themselves. Again, Le Guin handles this serious psychological theme without heavy didacticism. The complexity of Sutty's background and its influence upon her struggles and development as an Observer present a convincing vision of the difficulties and the opportunities of contact between vastly different cultures for the people whose selves are formed by those cultures. *The Telling* is compelling in its sustained artistic commitment to rendering ordinary life richly and to explaining the deep connection between humanistic learning and ordinary life. Sutty's psychic tension first begins to ease when she gets out of the city and begins to have conversations with her fellow travellers about the events of their daily lives: 'She heard about them, their cousins, their families, their jobs, their opinions, their houses, their hernias... These dull and fragmentary relations of ordinary lives could not bore her. Everything she had missed in Dovza City, everything the official literature, the heroic propaganda left out, they told. If she had to choose between heroes and hernias, it was no contest' (pp. 34-5). It is no contest for Le Guin, either, as she gives her readers a tale that never strays far from the lives of ordinary people and that never ceases to render those lives with sensitivity and delight.

As is the case with *Dune*, the stakes in the novel are high - the survival of an entire world's traditional knowledge and culture - but in *The Telling* the struggle for that survival takes place primarily within the registers of daily life, for it is the richness of 'ordinary' life itself that is threatened by Aka's totalitarian 'March to the Stars'. Cultural destruction proceeds in the novel by grand and hideous gestures, but culture survives and flourishes only in small acts: choices about what to eat, what words to use, what stories to tell. It is in this sense that the title of the novel should be understood: it asks us to see and to celebrate culture as the telling of stories that give form and meaning to everyday life.

Some readers have seen this defence of daily life as an allegory of Tibet's plight under Chinese occupation. The means of repression described in the novel are reminiscent of Mao's Cultural Revolution, and the ways of Akan telling resemble traditional Tibetan Buddhist practice. Le Guin confirm this interpretation in an interview with Mark Wilson (n.d.):

> I was really just trying to work out in fictional terms what something like the Cultural Revolution in China or the rise of fundamentalism in Arabic countries does to the people involved in it - whether it's the suppression of a religion, which is what happened in China, or the dominance of a religion and the suppression of politics, which is happening in a lot of the Arab world. These are terrifying phenomena - this stuff's going on right now, all around us. And it is something obviously that human beings are likely to behave this way given the right circumstances. So I sort of had to write a book about it.
Nevertheless, the Akan government is called the Corporation and the book's vision is as applicable to the homogenisation of culture under corporate capitalism as it is to China's cultural wars. Le Guin's thought experiment gives us rich, historicised and contextualised visions of possible and plausible futures that are rooted in the choices we face in the present moment.

Some of *The Telling*’s riches lie in what at first seem like small details. For example, almost every significant event in the book is reported to Sutty, who witnesses almost nothing directly, at any point - a little like the way we get our news of world events. Also, Aka is a world with only one continent, so that all of its peoples live on just one landmass; Sutty's reflections on the significance of this difference from Terra - and its implication for the politics of identity - are fascinating, especially in relation to her conviction that traditional Akan spirituality is not a 'religion':

> religion as an institution demanding belief and claiming authority, religion as a community shaped by a knowledge of foreign deities or competing institutions, had never existed on Aka.

Until, perhaps, the present time.

Aka’s habitable lands were a single huge continent with an immensely long archipelago of its eastern coast... Undivided by oceans, the Akans were physically all of one type with slight local variations. All the Observers had remarked on this, all had pointed out the ethnic homogeneity... but none of them had quite realised that among Akans there were no foreigners. There had never been any foreigners, until the ships from the Ekumen landed.

It was a simple fact, but one remarkably difficult for the Terran mind to comprehend. No aliens. No others, in the deadly sense of otherness that existed on Terra, the implacable division between tribes, the arbitrary and impassable borders, the ethnic hatreds cherished over centuries and millennia. 'The people' here meant not *my* people, but people - everybody, humanity. 'Barbarian' didn't mean an incomprehensible outlander, but an uneducated person. On Aka, all competition was familial. All wars were civil wars (pp. 98-9).

We hardly need to be reminded of just how deadly our sense of otherness can be. *The Telling* also reminds us that it is possible to think differently, without ever underestimating the remarkable difficulty of doing so.