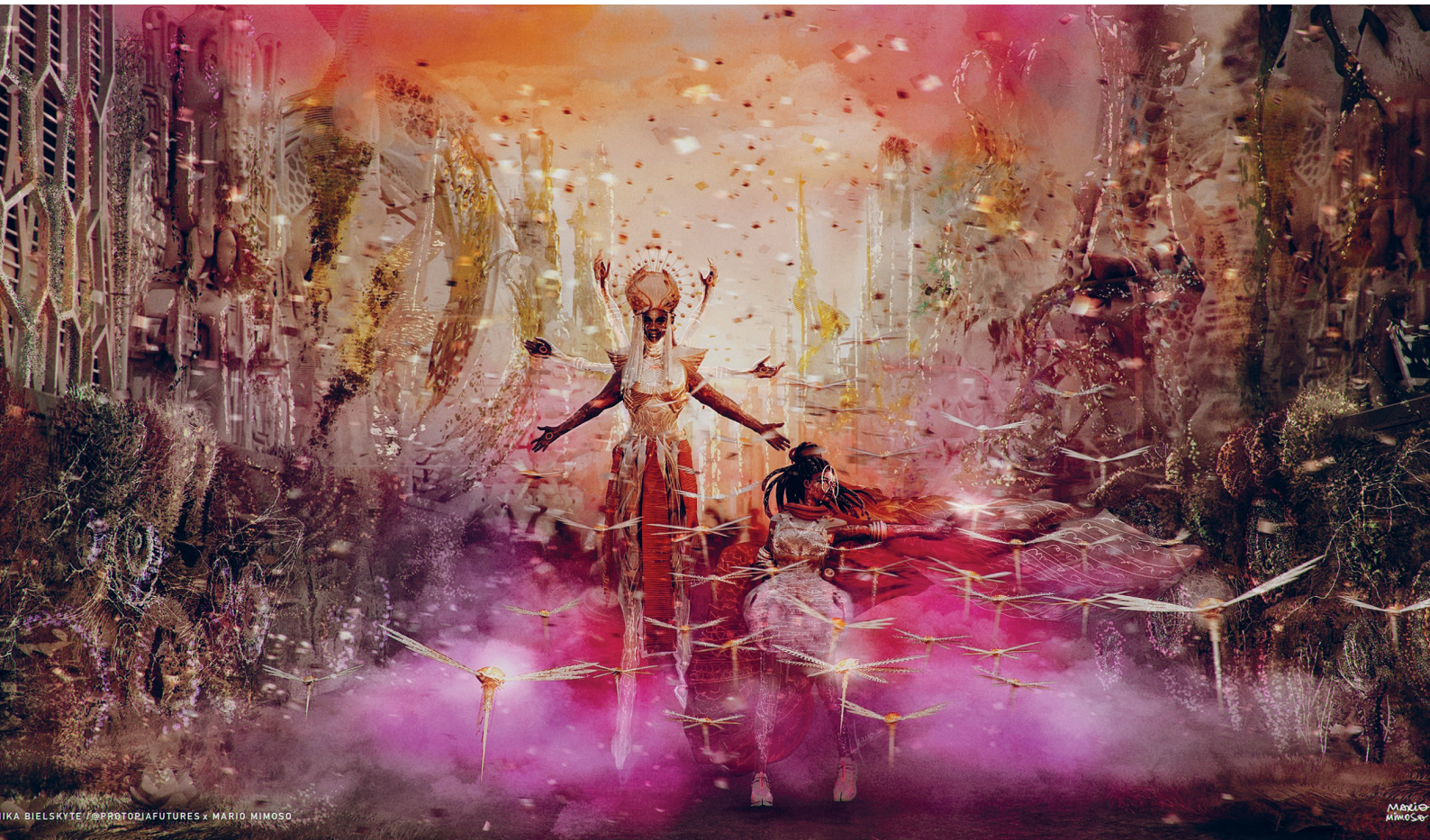


# Equitable and Desirable Futures

Gem Barton



*The research and core values set out in this chapter have been developed with direct support and critical input from Radha Mistry and Lonny Avi Brooks, and with additional love and guidance from other key voices in the field: Monika Bielskyte, Jason Tester, Meike Schalk and Aarathi Krishnan.*





## The status quo

Our rituals, behaviours and cultural artefacts today are shaped by hopes, dreams and values for the future – and yet our visions of the future are generated by the context of today. Those future visions are projected on to the majority by the privileged minority of today. The majority's today is therefore shaped by the hopes, dreams and values of the privileged for the future. But those visions of the future are projections of absence, as well as of presence. In the same way that the stories we know affect our perceptions of human nature, civilisation and culture, so does the absence of certain stories, knowledge and insight. These inclusions and exclusions forever determine, and limit, what we think or believe to (have) be(en) possible. These erasures happen every day, and everywhere, including in education.

As Caroline Barrueco demonstrates in her 2020 post on Medium, all one needs to do is image-search the term 'futuristic city' and the homogeneous gallery of near-perfect replicas of grey-blue cityscapes of skyscrapers is mind-numbing. This clearly highlights that the mainstream meaning of 'futurism' is connected to a static idea, in line with Mark Fisher's famous assertion that futuristic as a concept refers to a set of existing associations, an already existing and established set of protocols. But its static 'visual' medium is not the only problem. Its message is equally static and possibly more problematic – largely the same stories told by the same people, for the same audiences. Angelica Jade Bastién in her 2017 article for *Vulture* 'Why don't dystopias know how to talk about race?' says: 'Science fiction has long had an uncomfortable relationship with Asian cultures, which are mined to create visual splendor in order to communicate otherness ... [R]ace is relegated to inspiration, coloring the towering cityscapes of these worlds, while the white characters toil under the hardships that brown and black people experience acutely in real life.'<sup>1</sup> One Hollywood example of this obvious and completely unnecessary absence of accurate representation is the film *Blade Runner 2049*, which was poorly received by many operating in the futures space. In a 2017 Twitter storm, Monika Bielskyte critiqued it for, among other things, its 'grossly racist depictions [...] Hindi, Korean and Japanese writing floats in the sci fi city but none of the people from those cultures actually given a voice [...] We appropriate your culture but we do not want your people. That's as colonialist as a message gets for the future we make. It's NOT ok.'<sup>2</sup> Bielskyte is a futures researcher and designer working to move our popular imagination from dystopia to protopia through her protopian design framework.<sup>3</sup>

Previous left: *Protopia Dreams: Celebration – The Parade, Barcelona 2043*. Art by Mario Mimoso, world concept by Monika Bielskyte, Protopia Futures production. The aim of this collaboration was to depict a more inclusive future world, eschewing the oppressive patriarchal western culture lens, where BIPOC of diverse cultural backgrounds and gender expressions have a central role within regenerative urban fabric, and where advanced technology is utilised for creative rather than military or police-state purposes.

Previous right: *Protopia Dreams: Celebration – Before The Parade, Barcelona 2043*. This collaborative exploration is intended to challenge ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia and the resulting erasures in traditional sci-fi concept design (along with violence, conflict and isolation) and instead to depict radical tenderness, embodiment and celebration of life.



## The need and opportunities

Education has always been well placed for catalysing change – this privilege must be recognised – and being harnessed for good (this has not always been the case). Given the immediate power of depictions of the future, educators of speculative design, fictions and futures – and those responsible for the production of cultural artefacts more widely disseminated through society such as public space, architecture, entertainment, media, books and podcasts – are in an extremely privileged position. This must be given the weight it deserves. Universities, and particularly European art schools, have been places of white middle-class privilege since their inception. This has shifted somewhat in the last 50 years due to changing demographics and government policies, leading to a more diverse student population and ‘[w]ith this diversification (now threatened by the marketisation of HE), comes a demand to transform how and what is taught to designers, as well as long needed diversification of the faculty’.<sup>4</sup>

One of the ways this transformation may be achieved is through the incorporation of speculative design and futures into our teaching practices. But, like all emergent academic disciplines with great expectations and ambition, speculative design and futures too are guilty at times of extending the status quo and must do more work to break down historical oppression. There are many nuanced problems and criticisms to consider: future fatigue, future shock, academic navel-gazing with a weak appetite for real action, the dangers of utopian ideals, the links between the Italian Futurist art movement and fascism (and the dangers of this happening again), and not least that the research and development has to date been the focus of the privileged ... those who have access to education, to university tuition, those invited to participate, to speculate.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the role of the education establishments and the educators themselves are key to changing this – it is time for a more relatable, inclusive, accurate, hopeful and careful reflection of humanity to engage in equitable and desirable futures thinking. If the future is only being created by those holding power, privilege and access now, then the future will more likely than not demonstrate a regurgitation of existing ideals and norms – *more of the same*. Why would those holding the power want to actively dismantle their own hegemony? As educators, students, humans and citizens, we have a responsibility to question, challenge and disrupt this status quo.

The diversified majority (likely you) do not see themselves represented (favourably, if at all) in

mainstream projections of the future. Herein lies a spectacular problem. If you are trans or non-binary, or identify as female, two-spirited, Black or African, a person of colour, Indigenous, disabled, queer, pansexual, bisexual, homosexual, asexual, intersex, non-monogamous, neurodiverse or other, there is an exceedingly high chance that you do not see your image reflected back. This cavernous lack of diverse representation is not only a clear and yet devastating reflection of society, but its decades of absence is wreaking havoc with the collective ability to be (and feel) heard, valued, relevant and, ultimately, to imagine futures in which we exist, let alone in an equitable or desirable fashion. To put it more succinctly, if you identify more deeply with the liminal spaces of human existence, or have ever felt ‘othered’, you’re most likely not represented in a conception of the future meant to represent a more widely accepted, falsely classified as ‘mainstream’, depiction of the future.

Many laws were, and are, created to favour only certain segments of society. Many other laws were, and are, created to intentionally incarcerate other segments of society (for example, the racist roots of cannabis policies in the United States).<sup>6</sup> Many people intentionally segregate themselves from others who are different (for example, redlining).<sup>7</sup> Colonisation happens, and many are privileged as a result, which is blindly ignored in many segments of society. Little attempt is made to understand the past and learn from mistakes. People are disowned daily because others don’t like their ‘choices’ (for example, queer homeless youth statistics)<sup>8</sup>. Safety measures, medical procedures and pharmaceuticals are not tested on all genders or body types (for example, male bias for car-crash test procedures leading to greater risk of death for female drivers and passengers).<sup>9</sup> Entire generations are considered lazy and delicate, when in their hundreds of thousands they are fighting for charitable causes, while simultaneously overpaying on rent and investing in their future by attending university for huge sums of money, the increases in the cost of which, in the UK, was determined by those who caused the problems against which they are fighting (and who are profiting from their rental income). What if nothing changes and the status quo is forever perpetuated and exacerbated? What if AI and robots aren’t trained to recognise non-normative relationships?<sup>10</sup> What if we continue to code intelligent systems without making modifications for different cultural considerations, traditions and societal norms?<sup>11</sup> What if all AI digital assistants continue to reinforce the gender bias with the



female voice set as default?<sup>12</sup> What if sex education never properly explains consent, queer sex, respect or bodily diversity?<sup>13</sup> What if trans people are never allowed IVF? What if governments never revise and improve their immigration policies?

The answers to these questions (among many more) are unthinkable for large proportions of society – the impacts on citizenship, health, wellbeing, love, relationships, design, life and humanity are unthinkable ... It's as far from equitable and desirable as is imaginable, yet this is the trajectory that many of us are heading towards.

*It is time for disruption.*

There are many organisations, movements and collectives that have already begun the work towards promoting equitable and desirable futures, and this is written with sincere love and respect for those paving the way,<sup>14</sup> with a hope that we can be an active part of that surge. This is where those involved in futures and speculative design education must take a stand, be proactive, come together.

### **Core values for education**

Like all systems that span multiple continents, languages, time zones, laws and heritage, education differs in its intent, delivery, methodology and content. Transcending (and potentially unifying) these differences are the values and attitudes of the educators of pure and applied speculation, fiction and futures. These equitable and desirable futures' core values are an act of rematriation 'to restore a living culture to its rightful place on Mother Earth'.<sup>15</sup> Through tools such as speculative design, and improved learning environments, educators can offer restorative communication and healing like the restorative hubs of the 'mother trees'. As Suzanne Simard says: 'We found that every tree was connected to every other tree, and the bigger and older the tree the more connected it was. So those trees we called mother trees or hub trees. We called them "mother trees" because what we also found was that the young seedlings were regenerating within the network of the mother tree.'<sup>16,17</sup>

In developing the values and principles that follow, it is important to make the following statement:

*We acknowledge the origin story of these values, we acknowledge the privileged positions from which it is conceived – as such it is written to be living and breathing, co-created and re-created – evolving from and through the strength of the network. Born as a live ecology of equitable, diverse, inclusive thoughts, dreams, actions and practices.*

This begins with an understanding of the four components that collectively define an educational approach: culture, pedagogy, curriculum and structure.

- Culture – rituals of learning and teaching
- Pedagogy – how we teach
- Curriculum – what we teach
- Structure – the systems within which we teach

The following sub-sections look at each of these four components in more detail, identifying principles and values for education which support the development and delivery of equitable and desirable futures.

### **Culture – rituals of learning and teaching**

The change begins with a shift in mindset, to fully embody the principles and new rituals in all aspects and avenues of teaching. It requires an acknowledgment of the spaces that educators and institutions occupy with regard to power and privilege, and a move away from seeing diversity and inclusion as an attainable goal of quotas, statistics and data, but rather as an ongoing process of change and improvement. It embraces diversity from the position of liberation rather than equilibrium, a departure from the desire to establish universal norms, and an acknowledgement of the barriers to entry and access to education. It expands our definition of diversity beyond the more obvious aspects of ethnicity, gender and age to include the most vital elements such as culture and tradition. It focuses on collective humanity as a new starter position – speaking to the positive whole rather than the deficiencies. It makes a real and practised acknowledgement of privilege across all intersectionalities; recognising the power and power dynamics of belonging and visibility (being seen and heard). It discusses labels; the need for the 'right label' and being seen in the way you wish to be perceived.

### **Pedagogy – how we teach**

Borrowing from bell hooks's use of the term 'classroom' to describe the 'learning environment', here this is not meant in physical or spatial terms but is rather psychological and intellectual; the construction of the psychology of learning. An equitable and inclusive 'Experimental Realist' classroom is democratic and diverse, empathic and expectant, personal and protopian ... and ultimately queer.

**Democratic.** Profoundly respectful, collaborative, focusing on co-discovery and co-creation(?), a natural home for pure and applied futures and speculation – as there are so many possible futures, these cannot be

'taught' as fact. Acknowledging that lecturers are not the 'masters of all knowledge' and practising the honesty and transparency of the co-discovery.

*Diverse.* Able to provide for and respond to a diverse and evolving student population and to changes in circumstances with regard to speculation techniques and futures thinking.

*Empathic.* To think critically is a result of privilege; for many this does not come naturally nor is it taught, so how do we as educators nurture the ability to imagine in safe ways? There is a strong role for empathy and open discussion – educators and students need to be willing and comfortable to have difficult conversations – exploring and navigating together, without fear of judgement. Getting to know students as adults and citizens is fundamental, as is curating learning opportunities that give all students a chance to recognise and utilise their voice and unique point of view.

*Expectant.* Education institutions should acknowledge and reflect directly the extent of 'imagined environments' current (and future) undergraduate students have engaged with or been exposed to by 18 years old, when they arrive at university. This vast exposure to worldbuilding, VR, sci-fi and more in the formative design development years means that this level of critical imagined discourse is no longer reserved for postgraduate students; in many ways it comes more naturally to a younger student demographic.

*Personal.* Mediated by lived experience and understanding of others' experiences, in recognition

of the fact that successful learning and teaching is governed by personal difference, proximal development and positionality.

*Protopian.* Protopia, as set out by Kevin Kelly in the book *The Inevitable*, defines the state between the fight for survival (dystopia) and perfection (utopia).<sup>18</sup> Monika Bielskyte, founder of the Protopia Futures [Framework] takes a '... significant departure from the original framing of "better futures" via the route of technological innovation to proactive prototyping of radically inclusive futures that shifts the gaze from technological panaceas to focus on future cultural values and social ethics'.<sup>19</sup> If speculative design is the tool, then scenarios (or narratives) are the main unit of study. Those scenarios are constructed to allow for the discovery of futures as a 'possibility space' through asking questions (as opposed to a more modernist approach to design, which is about solving a single problem) – meaning all stages of that process must be diverse and 'protopian'. Experimental Realism as pedagogy deploys protopian principles and aims to encourage protopian futures through student projects.

*Queer.* 'Queer resists definition because it forefronts its relationship to normal and other, rather than defining itself based on any presumed essential characteristics of its position [...] queer shifts in relation to the gaze of the normal.'<sup>20</sup> In the same way that protopia rejects the binaries of utopia/dystopia, speculation rejects problem/solution. Acts of queering in the educational context open up new avenues of thinking and practice that go beyond the narrow confines towards making space for equitable and desirable futures.



*Blade Runner 2049*, dir. Denis Villeneuve, 2017: the hologram companion Joi, manufactured by Wallace Corp, is tailored as the perfect companion in the dystopic sci-fi 'boy designs girl' scenario, with the tagline 'Everything you want to see. Everything you want to hear.'



Serengeti Cyborg,  
Solen Feyissa, 2020.



## Curriculum – what we teach

This is not so much about representing all facets of diversity but rather to suggest: what is the source of truth; where do we look for it and how do we ensure plurality in this? When scenarios are presented as *fait accompli*, this can cause harm rather than be enabling. An equitable curriculum presents and critically dismantles the ‘canon’, teaches a decolonised history curriculum, develops awareness of elements of diversity and global issues, and introduces a history of futures across cultures and media. It addresses allyship and accomplices in dismantling white supremacy, and issues of EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion) as fluid and ever-changing, rather than a ‘target’ or ‘statistical goal’. It encourages students to develop awareness of each other’s cultural and learning differences, relating this experience to the world of work. It goes beyond immediacies of diversity to also occupy spaces of culture, heritage and tradition, directly facilitating project work and processes that discuss and embed and speculate on future tradition and culture. It represents diverse voices in the taught content as well as the paperwork (decolonising and diversifying the curriculum) – if those voices do not exist then this fact should be acknowledged and unpacked in class. It covers both pure futures and applied futures, and honours/leverages the past visions of the future – contributions and erasures, including ancestral intelligence.

## Structure – the systems within which we teach

This includes systems such as admissions processes for students, hiring and promotion processes for staff, access to facilities and support, diverse teaching and assessment techniques, recognition of the financial costs of creating a more diverse and equitable education experience, and making sure that the administrative and organisational processes used and the learning and teaching approaches adopted are consistent, accessible and fairly applied to all. These are typically mandated by upper management, boards of governors and university executive boards, and are not within the immediate control of the educators themselves.

There is much that can be done, and much to do – the responsibility lies with many, but the power lies with few. So, if you are in a position of power afforded by your privilege – gender, race, identity, profession, class, ability – do what you can, whenever you can, as often as you can. And educational environments must consider adopting the core principles defined to rebalance the system. Do the work, push the binaries, challenge your institutions, challenge yourselves, speak up, listen hard, ask more questions, read more widely, engage with queer theory, lead by example and acknowledge your limits.



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