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## Writing Stories of and from the Future: Fostering Personal and Socio-Political Action

Nicholas Wood and Anneke Sools

### Introduction

The chapter takes the shape of alternating viewpoints and considerations on using stories of and from the future as vehicle for personal and social change. Our respective views are illustrated by experiences of the two authors. Clinical psychologist and science fiction (SF) writer Nick/Nicholas Wood focuses on the writing of his debut novel *Azanian Bridges* and how he weaved in his experiences with a patient (the unfolding ‘Sibusiso’s’ story). Narrative psychologist and SF enthusiast Anneke Sools draws on examples from her research on how personal narrations from the future (Letters from the Future) guide present thought and action. All in all, our respective viewpoints and experiences can scaffold ideas about changing the self and the future for individuals, and potentially larger groups, such as whole communities. Together, we propose ways forward for promoting the creation of stories that embrace the struggles

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of now, but also potential ways of building alternative, hopefully more meaningful and communal futures.

Drawing on narrative theorists Brockmeier (2013), we argue that stories of and from the future (like all narrative) constitute “a psychologically fundamental practice of meaning construction, a practice which cuts across the putative divide between fiction and nonfiction” (Brockmeier, 2013, p. 7). In other words, the mind does not ‘mind’ whether a story is ‘real’ (i.e. happened in reality) or imagined (i.e. not yet happened); it perceives imagined story characters and situations as real (Schiff et al., 2017). In this ability lies the potential to create new experience to the extent that stories differ from the past; for as long as past experiences are repeated, newness cannot take effect (Sools et al., 2017; Squire, 2012).

From this view, psychology could benefit from a change in perspective from looking at what *is* (and at how current experience and behaviour came into being) to what *could* and *should be*. Such a psychology that is interested in “the possible as an emerging field of inquiry” (Glaveanu, 2018) changes focus from the question of factual truth of an imagined future (whether personal or collective) towards its psychological relevance, that is, how meaning of the “not yet” (Bloch, 1986) is constructed through stories (which can be more and less ‘fictionalised’) by both author and reader. We will contribute to this call for psychology as the inquiry of the possible by offering reflexive ways of writing of and from the future. Such writings not only enable “becoming aware of it [the future] and actively exploring it” (Glaveanu, 2018), but can also be used to “depict, rehearse, motivate, interpret and evaluate” (Sools, 2019) personal and socio-political action. To this end, we will focus on writing that is future facing as an act for both personal and socio-political change.

## Why Write Science Fictional Differences?

- (a) *Nick*: So, why do I write? And, even more specifically, why am I writing this? The short answer is because I want to both make sense of the world—and to try and write a better world into being. And this book—proposing ‘new ideas for new times: a handbook of innovative community and clinical psychologies’—seems to me to be about stretching the boundaries of the psychological profession, to engender positive and progressive change.

I write genre fiction—and not just any genre, but science fiction (SF)—a form of fiction that has long been looked down on from more ‘literary’ circles. Growing up as a privileged white young male during apartheid in South Africa, however, reading science fiction offered an escape from a pending militarised future to reinforce the iniquitous status quo. Most importantly, though, science fiction is premised on a crucial question that needs constant asking, as it moves beyond the constraints of ‘accepted reality’: ‘*What if things were different?*’ I knew—and from an early age—that there were alternatives to the grand narrative of apartheid—which was why the censors were such a powerful force within State officialdom at the time.

SF faces forward, proposing alternative models of the future—different ways of living, organising and being within the world. Because such models may function as a threat to the status quo, it was no accident that a number of SF novels were banned for periods in South Africa—such as Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land*, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Anthony Burgess’ *A Clockwork Orange*—alongside more overtly political novels challenging apartheid (McDonald, 2009).

Implicit within one of the central questions of SF is the realisation that things can be different from the prevailing system—and seeking this difference can be a worthwhile, if difficult, goal. This was the aim of the political Struggle during apartheid, or as Nelson Mandela eloquently put it, at the end of the 1964 Rivonia ‘Treason’ Trial:

*I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.*  
(Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2007)

(b) *Anneke*: I am interested in the transformative potential of the question *what if things were different?* For this purpose, I give research participants the instruction to imagine travelling with a time machine to a desired situation in the future. Consequently, they are asked to imagine this future situation as if already realised and to write a letter from that future back to the present (see Soos, 2020, for a more in-depth discussion of the theoretical and methodological landscapes in which this methodology is embedded). This *Letter from the Future* exercise originates from a life review course for older persons with mild depressive symptoms (Bohlmeijer, 2007). I modified the instruction for research purposes, and

over the years I refined the instruction and tailored it to various contexts (health, education and upbringing, employment, politics), research questions (e.g. imagine a personal future with a universal basic income; a desired future with chronic illness; a desired future in the face of precarious working conditions), and settings (university, schools, psychiatric clinics, forensic care) and for both individual and group settings (Sools, 2020; Sools et al., 2015; Sools et al., 2017; Sools et al., 2018; Sools & Mooren, 2012).

The idea behind the *what-if* question is that it taps into desire—a desire for things to be different. This may appear superficially in keeping with the (Hollywood) notion that you start off with someone wanting something ('motivation')—and the story is about their muddled struggle to obtain that thing—with eventual success and/or failure (Booker, 2004). Desire is sometimes equated with appetite, or taste (Salvatore, 2016), and often linked to (problematic) sexuality and to addiction, a phenomenon associated with automatic responses luring us into (socially) undesired behaviour (Hofmann & Nordgren, 2016).

However, desire is something much more profound than mere motivation and can be constructive rather than destructive (as in the case of addiction). Abensour (1999) argues there is a need to learn how to desire and how to desire differently. Desires have been used by a media saturated with consumption ideals—you can become fulfilled, by what you buy. The point is not to assign 'true' or 'just' goals to desire but rather to 'educate desire', to stimulate it, to awaken it and to open a path for it. Abensour (1999) continues: "Desire must be taught to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all *to desire otherwise*."

Desiring differently requires the imagination. The prime example here is the pivotal role of women suffragettes imagining a future where women could vote. If we can't imagine things differently—which seems to be the imprisoning intent of the phrase 'there is no alternative'—then we are trapped to repeat and survive the present—something which the austerity agenda appears intent on engendering (Psychologists Against Austerity, 2015). For imagination requires the freedom to play and think—scarce resources indeed, when survival can be the sole and enervating focus of just meeting basic human needs.

An example of an economically scarce situation is Greece with historically high unemployment numbers. In a focus group study, we asked young unemployed adults with tertiary education who were participating in an employment programme to imagine and reflect on a desired future (Sools et al., 2017). We analysed how focus group participants construct together an

inescapable reality where they either don't know what they want, are not educated on how to discover their own abilities or do not know how to pursue their desire even when they would know it. The only person in the focus group with a more positive view on the possibility to know and pursue one's desires is perceived by the others to be 'living in his own bubble'. In this bubble, he is thought to ignore the "standardized paths" provided by society that the others construct as inevitable (Sools et al., 2017, p. 328). These reflections on stories from the future show the intricacies of desire: the focus group participants both endorsed and perpetuated the enlightenment discourse of growth and self-enhancement while at the same time demonstrating a sense of loss and powerlessness of how to live up to that ideal in an economically truncated discourse of desire.

## What Is the Ground, for the Seeds of Stories? The Importance of Context

- (a) *Nick*: When I was training as a clinical psychologist, South African psychology at the time was a predominantly white and western affair, and the emphasis was on individual models of therapy; learning the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—at that time, the third of what now feels like an endless iteration; and the emphasis was on writing case reports and research in 'objective scientific' fashion. It was with some relief I joined a nascent organisation called the Organisation for Appropriate Social Services in South Africa (OASSSA), as they recognised psychology in South Africa was, in fact, a tool to enforce an individualised status quo and that there could be no mental health without social justice (Hayes, 2000). What I had also learned from my earlier time as a community worker was that engagement within larger, collective communities—rather than individuals in sanitised clinic rooms—held the best key to maximise chances for lasting and positive change. Clinical psychology (CP) needs a community focus if it is going to challenge the socio-political context of mental ill health (Cain, 2018). And it also needs stories and books. Books of all sorts. *So where do the seeds of a story come from?*

From 'real' life: I met 'Sibusiso' (nom de plume) when I was a young intern psychologist (trainee) and he was brought to me, for 'therapy', during the State of Emergency in the mid-1980s in apartheid South Africa. Sibusiso was a significantly depressed young man struggling with his college course. I was

initially told (by a white supervisor) to ‘fix’ him with the newly emerging Beckian CBT. I was loath to jump in with this, however, and argued I needed to immerse myself in Sibusiso’s story first. Chimamanda Adichie (2009) has warned of the dangers of a single (African) story and who was I to colonise Sibusiso’s experience with yet another western model? So, I read, on politics and amaZulu (e.g. the plural noun for the Zulu people) culture amongst other things.

As the years rolled by—after ‘Sibusiso’ had become well and left the hospital—I came to realise his story and struggles were still relevant for those facing racism and mental health issues in the west, when the austerity agenda and Donald Trump loomed large. I wrote my SF novel *Azanian Bridges* (2016) within this looming and impending shadow. Fiction is transforming what has been into what might be.

- (b) *Anneke*: In what I have come to call ‘FutureNowExperience’ workshops (Sools et al., 2013) where people write and share a *Letter from the Future*, I found how difficult it can be for them to write differently about their unique experiences. Previous exposure to books, films and popular media provide templates to structure one’s personal story. Ideas about what a ‘good story’ is play a role as well, as anticipations on what others expect and may validate. This became apparent in, for example, workshops I hosted with undergraduate students in a psychology programme. These students are crafting a self (Goffman, 1959) that is perceived as ‘normal’, ‘logical’, ‘realistic’ and ‘coherent’ while simultaneously demonstrating depth of character. Protecting the self by taking measures to minimise disclosure to peers (which may be highly relevant in students’ phase of identity development) comes in conflict with the rewards of fuller disclosure and trying out alternative self-presentations. Such rewards include a sense of pride, courage and a desire to be known by others.

The creation of a safe space for the exploration of self beyond standardised cultural, social and narrative templates is of great importance in the pursuit of an education of desire. Recent political and societal changes (e.g. drop in student financial support, increase in achievement culture and less room to fail) find their way into student stories from the future as many of them showed distress and some envisioned much shorter time horizons than some years earlier (end of the course rather than end of their studies). These short time horizons reflect narrowed subjective space dominated by anxiety. In this context, a single workshop session has clear limits to the process of stretching the imagination. However, I noticed how the act of writing and reading aloud a

letter to a supporting audience provides a means to imaginatively rehearse the future in a safe way before acting out this future in real life (Sools, 2020). In one of the workshops, a young man who portrayed himself as introvert surprised himself with the big dream he had written down of wanting to live his own life without bothering too much about what others thought of him.

Perhaps even more important for the education of desire is that writing may be the act of listening to the stories of others. The role of witness (i.e. listening *with* rather than hearing about) to the stories of others can open new perspectives on self, for example, fellow students telling about alternative ways of dealing with achievement anxiety. The very act of hearing some students stretching the time horizon further ahead to years after the study instead of to the end of the course was illuminating to many. Listening to others helped to foster empathy for struggles self and others experienced, hence growing awareness into our “common humanity” (Butler, 2004). By hearing the stories behind surface appearances helped students to (re)gain a new sense of respect for each other.

## The Story Seeds Are Sharing What You Know— And Learning Too

- (a) *Nick*: I decided to fictionalise ‘Sibusiso’s’ story because his voice had stayed lingering within me over the years, along with the realisation that racism has remained pervasive but dangerously covert, despite the memory of apartheid dissipating from cultural memory (Wood & Patel, 2017). The other main character, Martin, was a clinical psychologist. Now that, I know. (For an overview of clinical psychologists in fiction, read Goodwin, 2017.)
- (b) *Anneke*: The building blocks of fiction are life experiences and our experiences with others and the world around us—writers mix and match the best they can to disguise characters, but no character is ever a naked creation. And I had wanted to give voice to ‘Sibusiso’—someone I met and came to know over weeks and, eventually, six months of talking and even playing together in ‘therapy’, someone who, it turned out eventually, had been badly damaged by a violent political system, for daring to try and make a difference.

I eventually asked ‘Sibusiso’ for his understanding of his difficulties. “I dropped a pencil,” he told me gloomily, after a long hesitation: “A girl picked

it up and gave it back. But I could tell from her look that she had bewitched the pencil—and me.”

*Amafufanyana*. One word capturing the central theme in the small but illuminating story ‘Sibusiso’ told me—but only in our third sessions, after trust had been built to a degree. *Amafufanyana*—the isiZulu term for bewitchment or possession. A different story indeed from western psychopathology—and one that I was going to respect, not erase with ‘cognitive restructuring’. This was the start of our ‘building a bridge’ across the existential chasm between black and white under apartheid. A bridge across the shared river of life—the Umgeni River in my book—also required a solid storied base to be established on both sides first.

I could tell Sibusiso was torn—his cultural heart believed he was ‘bewitched’, but his ‘modern head’—his words, not mine—was both sceptical and afraid of my judgement. Knowing I had so much power to contest or validate his stories, I opted for validation of both ‘organs’. He had clearly been split by the assertion of his own more indigenous voice—and why should ‘heart’ and ‘head’ be a choice, when they are so often in messy conflict anyhow?

I suggested a traditional healer might also be helpful. He was both relieved—and worried. It turns out he wanted to see us both. So, by month three, ‘Sibusiso’ was well set with a *sangoma* (traditional healer) and increasingly conversant with CBT. So, to *Azanian Bridges*:

The bridge starts with just one young man.

*Silence...*

*Silence shrinks an already small room and I stare at the young man who will not talk, wondering how I reach out across the space between us, how to make his words flow. He stares across to the picture on the wall behind me: his eyes are hooded; his body is slumped. The room is a tight box of peeling institutional yellow, mould-flicking corners of the ceiling, the narrow walls groaning with a history of mad voices ... or so I've been told. The young man's head is cocked: as if he's listening. Perhaps the voices in the wall have overwhelmed him. Me, I've never heard them, sitting as I am on the right side of this small square desk, panic button comfortably within range on the wall next to me.*

*“What do you hear, Sibusiso?” I ask, normalising his experiences, just in case.*

*He flicks a glance to my mouth, as if unsure that's where the voice has indeed come from, but his eyes scan back behind me.*

*How indeed to build a link between us?*

(Wood, 2016, p. 31)



- (a) *Anneke*: In smaller workshop settings, with ten or less participants allowing plenary sharing of the letters, I always participate myself to create equal relationships between host and participants. This practice forces me to relate to participants and to engage personally with the topic of the group session. Where do I imagine finding common ground with participants? How can I relate? One particularly challenging context for me occurred when I was invited to host a FutureNowExperience workshop for parents in The Hague, who had trouble raising their children in a multicultural, digital, complex world. Not being a parent myself, I wondered how I could relate to their experience. The instruction for this particular workshop was to imagine a future where their child had grown up successfully (according to their own visions of ‘success’) and how they had contributed to a successful upbringing. I used guided meditation to help participants visualise their future life intuitively and spontaneously, rather than constructing a future in a purely mental, detached way. During meditation, the idea emerged to write a letter to my imagined future daughter and express my gratitude for her birth, after having lost her little brother in childbirth some years ago. Thus, weaving my past experience into my projection of the future made me simultaneously both profoundly sad and happy.
- (b) This exercise greatly helped me to relate to the vulnerabilities and responsibilities of being a parent. However, sharing this intimate part of my life stretched the boundaries of what constituted my own hybrid professional-personal identity beyond, for example, career goals. Having shared my letter—*after* all other participants had shared their own letter—guaranteed that my letter would not dominate the workshop. Showing my vulnerability may have supported an ongoing empowerment process in this group. One of the mothers, who was initially hesitant to share her letter because of her (on her own account) lack of command of the Dutch language (she had migrated from Iran), was chosen by the group (and favoured over a highly verbal male participant) to summarise our workshop findings in the plenary meeting, where all parents from various workshops came together. She spoke with confidence and clarity and her courage was warmly welcomed.

## What's the Water on the Ground? The Impetus for Developing an Idea

(a) *Nick*: The spark for writing *Azanian Bridges* came when I was living and working

in London at the time—the original anonymised case report now yellowed by the passing of a quarter of a century. Then the so-called Tottenham Riots happened, and I was reminded of the ‘Soweto Riots’ (Uprising) of 1976 in South Africa—‘riots’ echoing across decades and places as deliberate media discourse used to take away the agency and humanity of the participants, all searching for a way to express their own oppressed and marginalised stories.

Why Azania? This was a term for the new South Africa envisioned beyond liberation—the Dream Country that awaited. (And it was eventually discarded, in a less radical naming break with the past, in post-apartheid South Africa.) By 2011, with minimal structural shifts in wealth distribution and ongoing violence, the ‘rainbow dream’ of the ‘New South Africa’ was fading fast.

And then, ‘Sibusiso’s’ long-lingering voice came back into my head. ‘*What about me?*’ he asked, ‘*What would I be doing right now?*’ (There was no way of knowing, of course. His case report was anonymised, the past effectively untraceable.) But, over the twenty-five years living and working subsequently in South Africa; Aotearoa New Zealand and England, I had become aware of the subtle toxic pervasiveness of racism and institutionalised white patriarchy. Not an easy topic to broach with white people in particular—or to facilitate an open discussion around (DiAngelo, 2018; Eddo-Lodge, 2017; Sue, 2015; Wood & Patel, 2017).

*What would Sibusiso say to this?* Right here, right now, in the twenty-first century, in a parallel universe where apartheid remains, and we can sit and relax with the characters, safe in the knowledge that this is just a book—and set in another reality too.

But, in the reality of *Azanian Bridges*, Nelson Mandela fulfils his Rivonia Treason Trial Declaration and does die, alone, in solitary confinement for his ideals, on Robben Island—and there is a white-right coup. Not a million miles away from some countries right now, where cultural wars around refugees, immigration and ‘national identity’ are rife.

## How Do We Learn to Recognise Our Common Humanity in Everyone?

Much has been written about how fictional worlds can build and hone our empathy (Dam & Siang, 2017)—but, just to make sure, I plonked an empathy device squarely into the book, as a central McGuffin.<sup>1</sup> A plot engine, driving change—because story is about change—both of our circumstances, and how we see ourselves and others.

- (a) *Anneke*: I'm never short of inspiration about which context or topic could be central to my next study on imagining the future differently. The difficulty is rather one of choosing out of the infinite possibilities the future can hold. Sometimes it is not us who chose the topic, but the topic is choosing us. A recent example of a subject matter that presented itself to me confronted me with a context (psychiatry and psychopathology) I had been carefully avoiding for many years. After being invited to give lectures to various audiences about the role of the future in psychiatry, I looked up an MSc thesis I supervised some years ago about letters from the future written by psychiatric patients in a German clinic. I started reading about the importance of hopefulness for psychiatry (Nunn, 1996). I reread psychiatrist Melges' (1982) long-forgotten work on a temporal approach to 'psychiatric disorders'. I learned about the importance of opening a space of possibility, difference and desire for people struggling with severe and enduring mental health difficulties. They are often (although the recovery movement has affected change) perceived of—and treated as—'chronic patients', without a future. I also learned about the ways these people in severe distress imagine the future: mostly akin to imaginations in other studies with non-clinical samples, but sometimes differently, poetic at times, using powerful language I found difficult to understand. The following example comes from the MSc thesis mentioned above, where one participant with suicidal ideation writes rather poetically about a moment at an unspecified future time where he enacts his experience of fear:

*That the fear one overpowers,  
motionless inwardly shattered,  
left behind, tortured, demoralized to the bone.  
Scared as a sparrow flying from the cat.*

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<sup>1</sup>An object or device in a film or a book which serves merely as a trigger for the plot.

*And yet no expression to be allowed, no fear no rage no horror...  
pushes outwards...no not that all!!!!!!*

These letters stretched my own imagination as these words almost viscerally communicate the embodiment of living in fear. Empathising with this experience requires me to go out of my comfort zone, to open up to difference (and simultaneously some hidden part of myself), again and again.

## Whose Story Is This?

(a) *Nick*: I rewrote the ending many times before I decided on the ‘right’ one.

One of the pivotal decisions was around whose voice needed to linger most in the reader’s mind. We know of the primacy and recency effect and I decided, in the end, that both belonged to Sibusiso. The start and end of the story, they are both his.

And, in a tribute to the realities of his traditional beliefs too, Sibusiso is released from *Amafufanyane*, his ‘bewitchment’, by the arrival of a benevolent ancestor, in a dream. (Dreams, in amaZulu society are often seen as ancestral messages, linked to the divine; Wood, 2006.)

How then can one write about a life of someone who has lived as if an ‘existential chasm’ away, from one’s own story and lived experiences? (Such too, as those with severe mental health difficulties, referred to by Anneke previously.)

With due care, respect and seeking feedback from cultural ‘insiders’ to try and ensure there is some verisimilitude in the telling (Shawl & Ward, 2005). And you are bolstered by the realisation that, at the heart of all stories, every-one is human. What unites us is far bigger than what may divide us (Witherspoon et al., 2007).

And, if Sibusiso was around, we may well have tried co-writing this book. It certainly felt ethically dubious that a privileged white writer should be the sole financial beneficiary from a novel about apartheid. I asked for advice from other South African writers, and I eventually agreed, with my publisher and the relevant organisation, to split the authorial royalties with a body dedicated to encouraging and fostering ‘black’ writing in South Africa, *Long story SHORT* (Masilela, 2015). Who knows, perhaps Sibusiso himself is a member?

And then I let *Azanian Bridges* loose on the world.

(b) *Anneke*: My position towards the question whose story to tell as a researcher is inspired by Ruthellen Josselson's (2004) reframing of Ricoeur's distinction between two types of hermeneutics (i.e. the study of interpretation). The hermeneutics of restoration (faith) aims to give voice to participants and is closely aligned with empowerment movement and oral history ideals. The hermeneutics of demystification (suspicion) represents critically oriented researchers interested in exposing unconscious processes (psychoanalysis) and oppressive structures (post-structuralism and critical theory). Josselson's proposal, which I endorse, is to start from the hermeneutics of restoration before moving to a more critical stance. By grounding a demystifying analysis in the actual data, this procedure helps to avoid *ascriptivism*, for example, imposing researcher views that cannot be accounted for on the basis of the data. Applied to the Greek case study (Sools et al., 2017) mentioned earlier in this chapter, this procedure can be seen in that we first tried to understand all perspectives represented in the focus group (restoration), before taking a more critical stance in which we looked for alternative positionings. The aim was not to represent the dominant narrative per se (about the difficulty to desire and pursue one's desire), but to locate the space for negotiation and difference, however small.

More generally, my research stance is critical in the sense that my interest is in understanding how cultural, historical and societal patterns shape human creativity and potentiality. Therefore, I strive to cover the variety of ways in which culture affords and constrains human potentiality. This means that I give equal weight to exceptions and to common responses. I show how emerging seeds of change are fostered or neutralised (Sools, 2012). Examples are stories saturated with illness which have seeds of well-being (Sools, 2012), stories about unemployment futures saturated with scarcity discourse containing also seeds of freedom and connection (Sools et al., 2017), stories about paradoxes holding sway over potential voters in anticipation of the Greek Referendum in 2015 (Sools et al., 2017). The commonality in these studies is that attention to the future and to novelty opens new perspectives on a narrow, often anxiety-ridden present. The idea is not to negate the present problem, but to look at the problem with new eyes, from the perspective of a different future. My dialogue is not with one particular storyteller, but with the multiple perspectives in a community and the reality that is created by telling some stories and silencing others.

## Which Stories Get Heard?

- (a) *Nick*: It was a hard slog to get published. South African publishers did not want it—‘too close to home’ as it were, from the feedback. (If any are interested, there are more details in the online interview of me by Geoff Ryman, 2017.) But being ‘close to home’ was one of the whole points of writing *Azanian Bridges*! There is a need to focus on the realities of ‘now’, if we are to shape a new future.

Geoff Ryman (2013) himself spearheaded the ‘Mundane’ movement in science fiction—which maintains SF, that is Science or Speculative Fiction, should focus on the Earth-centred, more malleable near-future scenarios, rather than pursue flights of fantasy into a distant, space-faring and less certain future. That is, it should focus on imminent realities and crises, as a form of activist ‘thought experiment’, to address the critical—and proximal—issues of the age. Streeby (2018) collates SF ‘climate fiction’ or ‘cli-fi’, as an exemplar of this. Streeby goes on to detail writing workshops being run by black feminist activist adrienne maree brown—who, like bell hooks, prefers to use lower case for her names—focusing on building an indigenous and intersectional reclaiming of the climate future, that is, via giving voice to the dispossessed and the voiceless.

- (b) *Anneke*: From a narrative perspective, the question of which stories get heard can be framed as a question of audience reception and of ‘tellability’. Tellability in narrative research refers to which events are considered worth telling (Georgakopoulou, 2006; Ochs & Capps, 2001). Stories that in content or form breach what is expected to be tellable need more work to find a receptive audience. A few years ago, convincing a psychological academic audience that researching the future is indeed scientific was quite a challenge (e.g. see the way Seligman et al., 2013, take a lot of effort to establishing the scientific credibility in their call for a “science of prospection” by demarcating it from fortune-telling). Researching the future is here not about predicting the future, but about understanding how imagining the future affects present thought and action.

A more challenging task comes into view when the transformative potential of telling stories from the future becomes central as Gergen (2015) argued in his call for a future-forming science. Imagining the future inevitably sets in motion a process of meaning making, even more than is the case when telling

stories about the past. As long as positivistic epistemology and methodology dominate psychology as a discipline, research on stories of and from the future will remain limited to explanatory research on their effects and underlying processes. My dream is that descriptive, interpretive and action research on practices of telling the future differently becomes a more widely accepted approach in psychology. Because if we want psychology to not only “mirror the past” (Gergen, 2015), but effectively contribute to more sustainable and meaningful futures, we need to imagine differently what research and methods psychology needs. Stories of and from the future provide a promising approach.

## Feedback from Our Storying

- (a) *Nick*: Out of the reviews I’ve seen on *Azanian Bridges*, one of the most interesting is by a reviewer on Amazon called Ken Arenson (2018). He liked it, referring to it as “a gripping read”. But he outlines one of his two criticisms thus:

*Also, the book’s McGuffin does not acknowledge the debt owed to our present-day fMRI and/or EEG-based machines using AI that are on the road to reproducing dream visuals. (For example, see Miyawaki et al., 2008, Visual Image Reconstruction from Human Brain Activity using a Combination of Multiscale Local Image Decoders; Horikawa et al., 2013, Neural Decoding of Visual Imagery During Sleep; Horikawa, 2015, 2017).*

Nice, I thought, a work of science fiction being critiqued for not quoting its sources. The real and ‘academic’ world intertwine again with a work of fiction—worlds collide and leak, universes mesh, reality is an unruly beast, at best.

As for its reception in South Africa, the book was favourably reviewed, although feedback appears to be mainly from white readers and reviewers. The enduring legacy of apartheid is a literary bifurcation—with black writers galvanising around a decolonising agenda given the endurance of white gatekeepers within the literary establishment (Mgqolozana, 2016).

And that was one of my intended points in writing *Azanian Bridges*—apartheid may have gone, but its source and legacy still leaks corrosively all over our current world. We need to be vigilant and active in challenging this, in our constant fight for Martin Luther King’s ‘Dream’, half a murdered century old now. Stephen Lawrence’s murder, closer to British homes is—even

though a quarter of a century ago—still bleeding. How, then, do we heal this? (Patel & Keval, 2018).

(b) *Anneke*: The audience I engage with is often different from where I originally collected data. This way the stories continue, by finding new applications and meanings. For example, recently I gave a talk based on the mentioned psychiatric patient study to an autobiographical writing group. The group consisted of volunteers who support patients in a mental health care institution in writing their life story. After the talk we exchanged ideas about incorporating the *Letter from the Future* into their autobiographical writing procedure, either at the beginning of the process (to better understand the purpose patients saw in creating an autobiography) or at the end (to help keep the life-story open to the future).

Differences became apparent in the group, concerning the value of openness to the patient's own unique experiences and how to serve them best. Based on knowledge from my own and other's research, I could help them reflect on various strategies and the pros and cons of these strategies for the values they hold dear. Based on their vast knowledge about the lifeworld of patients in distress, they could help me see what a continued dialogue with these patients, based on their letters, could look like. For example, one very experienced existential counsellor brought to the fore the importance of letters with only intentional language (e.g. I hope, I wish) and without depiction of a future situation imagined as if already realised (see Sools et al., 2015, for more details about six letter types including intentional ones). She made clear how voicing intent is an important part of the process of finding new meaning. Sharing knowledge with an audience thus served to mutually create new insights in an ongoing process of knowledge production.

## Just Doing It: Ten Steps for Turning Story Seeds into Trees

Everyone lives surrounded by stories—our sense of who we are is itself a storied experience (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001). We all carry within us the capacity to create stories. When running a story-writing workshop, these may be helpful steps to bear in mind (Bolton et al., 2006).

1. Meet in a safe space and lay ground rules of respect (and confidentiality if needed) for all the stories to be created and heard.



2. Emphasise we create stories out of events all the time, so all are storytellers.
3. If necessary, remove critical (self) censors about what is a 'good' and a 'bad' story—stories have intrinsic value, in both being made and being told.
4. Choose (or imagine) a main character (or 'protagonist').
5. What do they want to be different, from how things are now (values and desire)?
6. Plot a sequence of events to show them either achieving this (overcoming obstacles: 'happy' ending) or failing ('tragedy'). If failing, what might they have done differently to experience success? Or what else needs to be different?
7. Share stories and listen respectfully.
8. Create a group/community of stories, centring around a theme or identity, seeking positive changes, via storying them into existence.
9. Witness and celebrate new possibilities—self-publishing, internet stories and so on.
10. Keep writing—stories of hope, resistance and change.

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