Charles M. Tung

Remarks for Mission Day

Right before the pandemic began, I’d begun teaching classes on contemporary climate fiction (clifi) and ecological timescales, and I’d sketched out a short book project on scenes of instruction at the end of the world, spaces of knowledge transmission on the edges of worlds. This was before Provost Martin asked me to join the Reimagine and Revise Our Curriculum effort, and perhaps it was serendipitous preparation (perhaps not—you tell me). Here are some of the things I was thinking about and sharing with our students: In Nnedi Okorafor’s Africanfuturist young-adult trilogy, a Himba teenager named Binti is accepted to the intergalactic institution of higher-ed, Oomza University, where she discovers massive departments the size of cities, e.g., Weapons City, Organics City. You could say that the book itself is the work of a professor in Alternate History City, where efforts are focused on imagining history otherwise but situated in a universe organized around domination and its privileges. In Margaret Atwood’s fiction, one of her characters attends a corporatized academy where he takes “Applied Logic, Applied Rhetoric… Applied Semantics, Relativistics, and Advanced Mischaracterization.” Last century, thinkers had hoped for a different future. The Jesuit scientist and philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin imagined that the highest level of hominization was under way, in part because radio and television were bringing us closer to “the direct syntonization of brains,” one aspect of the noosphere that recalled HG Wells’s “World Brain,” a global knowledge apparatus that was both a collectively-authored encyclopedia and a “super university” that would stand against a “whole property-money system [in need of] revision” and a “recrudescence of sentimental nationalism” kindled by propaganda. These are familiar circumstances still, and we know what the syntonization of brains has done to our politics.

We’re at a difficult moment in our national and indeed planetary history for hope, for hoping. Bill Readings’s estimation in *The University in Ruins*, already more than a quarter century old, was that “Excellence has become the last unifying principle of the modern university, yet the discourse of excellence brackets out the question of value in favor of measurement and substitutes accounting solutions for questions of accountability.” Ronald Barnett, a scholar of higher ed, sums up a widespread feeling that “the idea of the university is at an end.” But at Seattle University, we aren’t bracking out questions of value, aren’t evading accountability, the need for accounts of how the world came to be the way it is. And we have new leadership and new directions in leadership in President Penalver and in Provost Martin, and our community is asking what does racial and economic justice demand, and how must this reckoning consider its complex intersection with other coordinates of oppression, gender and sexuality? What kind of education does a democracy require? What skills and competencies, what historical, political, and cultural understandings, are necessary to care for our common home? I see us asking the big beautiful questions about technology, ethical questions about its use, philosophical questions about the coevolution of the human with our tools, aesthetic questions about how we know and perceive differently through them. I understand what Readings was saying, and I sympathize deeply (don’t we all?) with Barnett’s fears. But I feel we are not at an end—quite the opposite. My hope for our hoping is that it is not tied to the familiar kinds of narrative about progress and innovation—the apex of history, the most developed, achieving past others, swiftly making new things, latching onto new trends, complacently fitting our students into the world—and not contributing to what the theorist Lauren Berlant called “cruel optimism.” My hope is that our hope keeps faith with the long game of education, with the vision that the university doesn’t just make new things but makes new worlds, can remake worlds otherwise, and perhaps necessarily must work to unmake worlds too.