

# Governing anticipation: UNESCO making humankind futures literate

Governing  
anticipation:  
UNESCO

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper explores practices of foresight within the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) program Futures Literacy, as a form of transnational governmentality–founded on the interests of “using the future” by “emancipating” the minds of humanity.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper draws on ethnographic material gathered over five years within the industry of futures consultancy, including UNESCO and its network of self-recognized futurists. The material consists of written sources, participant observation in on-site and digital events and workshops, and interviews.

**Findings** – Building on Foucault’s (1991) concept of governmentality, which refers to the governing of governing and how subjects politically come into being, this paper critically examines the UNESCO Futures Literacy program by answering questions on ontology, deontology, technology and utopia. It shows how the underlying rationale of the Futures Literacy program departs from an ontological premise of anticipation as a fundamental capacity of biological life, constituting an ethical substance that can be worked on and self-controlled. This rationale speaks to the mandate of UNESCO, to foster peace in our minds, but also to the governing of governing at the individual level.

**Originality/value** – In the intersection between the growing literature on anticipation and research concerning governmentality the paper adds ethnographically based knowledge to the field of transnational governance. Earlier ethnographic studies of UNESCO have mostly focused upon its role for cultural heritage, or more broadly neoliberal forms of governing.

**Keywords** Governmentality, UNESCO, Ethnography, Anticipation, Emancipation

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction: remedying humanity

In 2012, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) began shifting its foresight activities toward the development of the discipline of anticipation and futures literacy, defined as a capability or skill that enables people to understand the role that future plays in what we see and do (UNESCO, 2019). The interest of UNESCO for proposing the future as a problem to humankind and a universal category of the world was not new. Rather, the organization had formed a vital part in the broader trends of constructing “future” as a site in which the unity of humankind could be contemplated and a catalog of concrete problems for which world solutions had to be found (Andersson and



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Duhautois, 2016). Prior to the 2012-shift, however, the organization had undertaken the type of foresight and interest in future studies that had been established after the second world war, producing technologies and methods intended to have an active bearing on the future such as scenarios and forecasts (Andersson, 2018, p. 4). The new UNESCO-program instead wanted to invest at the individual level a competence to understand how to make use of the future by consciously anticipating the time to come. As such it criticized much of the technologies that the industry of forecasting and scenario planning had been advancing.

In a few years' time, the program made progress both inside UNESCO itself and more broadly within the United Nations. Since 2019, the program is intended to enlighten not only the governing of UNESCO in its attempts to transform the world. Following a decision that year within the United Nations (UN) High-Level Committee on Programmes (HLCP), based on a series of futures literacy exercises, the practices are to extend across the entire UN (CEB, 2019/6). The intention is to "futures-proof" the UN by establishing a culture of "futures-orientation" and promote "futures literacy" of UN staff (CEB, 2021). Shortly after the HLCP decision, UNESCO was given the unusual task to organize parts of a high-level Ministerial Summit that was planned for September 2020. At this digital event, which is said to have had more than 10,000 participants, future experts and self-proclaimed futurists virtually mingled with business leaders, government representatives and interested sections of the general public. As such, the program is not merely a compelling case of contemporary forms of governing, but a political project with potentially enduring consequences, and a telling example of how UNESCO as an organization attempts at gaining influence within and beyond the UN system governing anticipation, as it were.

This paper explores the practices of foresight within the UNESCO Futures Literacy program, suggesting to understand it as a form of transnational governmentality (cf. Larner and Walters, 2004; Albert and Vasilache, 2018), with the purpose of "emancipating" the minds of humanity. Governmentality as concept largely refers to the governing of governing, primarily with an interest in how subjects politically come into being (cf. Foucault, 1991; Dean, 2010). Correspondingly, we critically examine the UNESCO Futures Literacy program by answering questions about which governing rationalities propel the program, by which sorts of technology, aspiring to form which sorts of subjects and how these practices contribute toward conducting the conduct of humanity. We develop this argument based on interviews and participatory observations from the field of futures literacy as it is unfolding within and in relation to UNESCO. We start in the next section by presenting the program at large and outlining the concept of governmentality, its relation to understandings of future and earlier research of the concept in relation to UNESCO. In the following four parts we present the program as we have understood it from our empirical explorations, interpreted in the light of governmentality. In the final and concluding section we discuss our findings both from theoretical and normative perspectives.

### **Governmentality, futures and anticipation**

As a UNESCO program, Futures Literacy is an essential part of the Management of Social Transformations (MOST) Programme which is an intergovernmental science program that seeks to "improve connections between knowledge and action" in order to achieve positive changes (UNESCO, 2022). The turning point from the interests for prognosis towards anticipation within MOST was the arrival of Riel Miller to UNESCO in 2012. Coming from the world of futures consultancy and his own company—XPERIDOX: Futures Consulting—Miller brought the concept of being futures literate to UNESCO. Inspired by the work of Amartya Sen, he had been exploring the concept and idea of futures literacy as a capability, since the early 2000s, but it was not until 2012 when he started full time in Paris UNESCO

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head-quarters that the concept took off on its journey into both the UN and the broader field of futures consultancy, acclaimed to be the new brand of futurism.

The starting point for the Futures Literacy program, is the idea that humanity constantly handles and prepares for the future based on what the program terms “anticipatory assumptions”, which are the “most basic components of anticipatory activities” as they “underlie all imaginations of the future”. “Different AA [anticipatory assumptions] generate different ‘imaginary’ and ‘not-yet-existing-futures’ which includes ‘different kinds’ of future”. For the most part, these assumptions are taken-for-granted, not reflected upon. People at large are “futures illiterate” (Miller, 2018, pp. 3–8). By introducing the technique of experimenting in “futures laboratories”, humanity will have “the power of FL [futures literacy] to overcome poverty of the imagination, a world-wide scourge at the moment and develop new sources for the invention of hope, as an essential ingredient of peace” (Miller, 2018, p. 9). In so doing, the program is meant to assist UNESCO to address “the changing nature of the challenges humanity faces” (Miller, 2018, p. 96). The underlying idea for Futures Literacy is thus to move the world forwards, by introducing techniques that will assist people in becoming better in foreseeing what they want the future to entail and how to achieve that future, and thus “changing the conditions of change by learning to use the future differently” (Miller, 2018, p. 9). According to the program, key to achieving these goals is to understand what we—oftentimes without reflecting upon it—foresee and prepare for. The capacity to reflect on our continual anticipation, can be developed through experimenting, through which these assumptions are not merely becoming visible but also potentially challenged and opened up for new assumptions.

The intentions of the program are thus momentous. As Roberto Poli, a key futures literacy thinker argues in relation to former kinds of literacy, “revolution” occurs once it begins “to affect the masses” (Poli, 2021, p. 2). However far-reaching the objectives of the Futures Literacy program are, UNESCO has little funding to pursue it, reaching the masses, in and by itself. To make the world futures literate, UNESCO therefore relies on a broad set of actors, termed the “global network”. Active in this network are actors from the industry of futures studies (Garsten and Sörbom, 2020), often self-recognized as “futurists”, who specialize in emergent time. They do not work within the organization of UNESCO, but are active within academia, NGOs, futures consultancies, businesses with foresight interests and transnational organizations. Using concepts pertaining to futures literacy and the UNESCO logo, actors within the global network are meant to educate humanity by organizing Futures Literacy Laboratories. The design of these laboratories or workshops is developed by UNESCO in collaboration with the network and laboratories have been organized across the world in different settings (see Figure 1). Of particular importance within the network are the 20 UNESCO chairs in Futures Studies and Futures Literacy. They constitute (a growing number of) prominent futurists who have been granted the position in order to advance the theory and practice of using the future (UNESCO, 2021). In addition, the network also helps realize the program by financially contributing to specific events, laboratories, conferences and publications. Major contributors are the Dubai Future Foundation, Prince Mohammed bin Fahd University in Saudi Arabia, the EU-funded Climate-KIC foundation, The OCP Foundation in Morocco and Innovation Norway.

Although proponents of futures literacy contend that humankind must change its relationship to the future by recognizing its unplannable and emergent ontology, we illustrate in this paper how the initiative nevertheless constitutes an attempt in preparing and shaping the conduct of individuals, groups and populations toward the individual responsibility of anticipation (cf. Ilcan and Philipps, 2006, p. 59). Theoretically, this argument is based on the rich body of literature concerning governmentality (e.g. Foucault, 1991; Cruikshank, 1999; Larner and Walters, 2004; Ong and Collier, 2005; Miller and Rose, 2008; Dean, 2010; Bonditti *et al.*, 2017; Clegg, 2019; Busse, 2021) and the different ways in which humans are made into



**Figure 1.**  
Map showing the location of some of the more than 100 Futures Literacy Laboratories performed since 2012

**Data source:** UNESCO (2021)

**Map source:** Google

subjects (Rose, 1996, p. 240). We build an understanding of futures literacy through a framework consisting of four dimensions as proposed by Foucault and further developed by Dean (1995, 2010): ontology, which refers to *what* substance within ourselves and others that should be corrected; technology, which concerns *how* that substance is governed; deontology, which is about *who* we are when we govern ourselves and others in this particular way; and finally utopia, referring to the *aim* or goal of these activities.

In addition to the field of governmentality, we develop our analysis in relation to the growing literature on the theme of futures and anticipation (e.g. Molé, 2010; McInlay and Taylor, 2014; Stephan and Flaherty, 2019; Amsler and Facer, 2017; Flyverbom and Garsten, 2021; Brassett and O'Reilly, 2021). In contrast to the field of future studies, generally focusing on projections, scenarios et cetera, this body of literature is concerned with “the ways in which humans construct their cultural futures” (Appadurai, 2013, p. 5) potentially studying the field of futures studies and the futures industry that it is often related to. In this paper, we place ourselves at the intersection of governmentality and anticipation as fields of knowledge, by exploring practices of foresight within UNESCO, interpreted as a form of subjectification. Through these practices, individuals are motivated and moved to work on themselves, attempting a responsabilization at the individual, molecular level (cf. Rabinow and Rose, 2006). By bringing forth the assumptions, technologies, deontology and utopia of the futures literacy program, the governmentality perspective illuminates what aspect of humankind ought to be corrected and what not. As the following analysis will show, governmentality in the case of futures literacy directs attention to the ethical and political problems of UNESCO subjectification, conversely also indicating the forgoing of arenas such as nation states and transnational organizations and leaving matters like power relations and structures of inequalities aside. Moreover, within the discourse of empowerment lies a neoliberal fetishization of the individual’s possibilities to control her own future (cf. Rose, 1996; Cruikshank, 1999; Ong, 2006). Hence, by bringing in the concept of anticipation, we also add knowledge to the governmentality perspective.

Our analysis specifically connects to a set of literature that stresses the neoliberal forms of governing within UNESCO (e.g. Lerch and Buckner, 2018; Duedahl, 2020; Ansell et al., 2012).

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Seen from this perspective, futures literacy is a way for UNESCO to gain influence and become relevant in a context where and when the organization's options to influence states and organizations are limited. While most previous ethnographic research on UNESCO has been interested in the intricacies of the creation and preservation of cultural heritage (see [Langlois, 2016](#); [Meskell, 2013](#); [Bortolotto, 2007](#); [Brumann, 2018](#); [Nielsen, 2011](#)), this paper then analyzes another aspect of the organization that problematizes the significance of history for the creation of the future. The way these two seemingly conflicting orientations within UNESCO relate to and influence each other remains an important empirical topic that however is beyond the scope of this paper.

## Methods

The paper draws on data gathered over five years of on-and-off studies within the assemblage of people, organizations and events (cf. [Ong and Collier, 2005](#)) that form the world of futures studies, futures governance and the futures industry (e.g. consultancies, research institutes, think tanks, academic institutions) ([Garsten and Sörbom, 2020](#)). The UNESCO headquarters in Paris constitute an important node in this field. However, the Futures Literacy program is not a territorially or formally bounded unit. It is considerably transnational and translocal in content (cf. [Hannerz, 2003](#)). As such, we are not confined to the organizational boundaries of UNESCO; rather, we focus on the interactions that take place and the ideas that emerge in the interfaces of the Futures Literacy program and its partners.

We approached this field in a state of bewilderment. We found it strange how UNESCO, an organization that we mainly associated with the preservation of cultural heritage, invested so much time and commitment in practical methods intended to detach people from cultural, economic and political legacies. Also, in contrast to what we were experiencing in our observations, in which we most of the time seemed to be producing text on sticky-notes, the aims of the program—articulated in texts from UNESCO and in interviews—appeared utopian, almost revolutionary. How could this utopia be enacted by these types of procedures, run by a network of futurists; and what were they telling us about UNESCO? Consequently, the ethnographic method we applied was inductive and exploratory, in the sense that we have from within tried to understand the ideas and assumptions on which futures literacy is based and by actively participating in various workshops with as much open interest and few preconceptions as possible for trained anthropologists. In this endeavor we were helped by the feeling of bewilderment when meeting the field. The governmentality perspective was applied as an analytical framework rather late in the process, as an answer to our puzzling ethnographic experiences.

The material combines approximately 40 semi-structured and conversational interviews and 40 days of participatory observations at futures industry events and workshops (digital and on-site) with our reading of a large number of reports, websites and other texts and our following of internal discussions among futures industry association members digitally. Observations and interviews were undertaken either collectively in a “dyadic manner” ([Garsten and Sörbom, 2018](#), p. 49) in which we both contributed and collaborated, or individually. The interviews allowed the respondent to explain what futures literacy as idea and practice implies to them, focusing on the potential of futures literacy to solve global problems. Given that futures literacy is based on the close examination of one's assumptions and ideas, conversations often evolved into our interlocutors becoming “epistemic partners” ([Holmes and Marcus, 2010](#), p. 181), with whom we could collaborate in the development of our analyses. Note that apart from Riel Miller, all informants have been allocated pseudonyms and slightly altered contexts in relation to national and organizational background.

### The ethical substance

Our first contact with the Futures Literacy program and its global network occurs in April 2018 in Boston, where we meet Riel Miller. We are at a business meeting for futurists and scholars in the field of future studies, where Miller is presenting his new book, *Transforming the Future: Anticipation in the 21st Century* (Miller, 2018). He introduces the audience to the foundational idea of what is already becoming a movement, or at least a trend, among practicing futurists. “The future does not exist in the present, but anticipation does”, he says, “the form the future takes in the present is anticipation”. He goes on to introduce the ideas of Robert Rosen, a theoretical biologist interested in understanding “anticipatory systems” (Rosen, 2012) in life and often quoted among futurists. In Miller’s account, Rosen tells us that “the definition of life includes anticipation”. Humans and all other living species foresee the future and act accordingly. As human species, we need to work with this ability, Miller says. We can have the capacity for reading the future if we train for it. It is like an alphabet, he says: One builds the capacity to read it and with that, the capacity to think about the future differently. “That is liberating. It’s an enabling of propositions. And it’s experimenting. It could be for good and bad. But it is enabling”. In relation to foresight and future studies, what is new in this understanding that Miller presented is the turn toward “anticipation” and the present (Brassett and O’Reilly, 2021, p. 3). Instead of looking forward, futures literacy looks at the present by going back in time, trying to figure out what shaped present-day assumptions of the future. For Miller and futurists honoring this turn, it entails an interest in the historical contexts of assumptions. Talking of the “colonization of futures”, they stress the need of people discovering where their assumptions are coming from and possibly developing others, in order not to be “colonized” by the assumptions formulated by others in previous contexts.

Claudia Berger—a futures consultant and a “designer in and of futures” as is stated on her page on LinkedIn working at *Toekomst* consultancy in the Netherlands, whom we met several times at various futurist events—explains in an interview how the capability of finding out the history of the assumptions you make means looking at the future from a personal viewpoint. “You do all kinds of stuff, but not consciously. But striving to use the future gives you new ideas that you could not predict. It gives you options”. Key to using the future is, thus, finding and understanding our assumptions and possibly developing new ones. A few days after the interview, we participated in a Futures Literacy Laboratory that Berger and her colleague Dirk Bakker—an economist by training, starting to work in the futures field in 1996, when he worked on forecasting business cycles and central bank activities for major international banks and their customers—organized. Participating were about 20 people on line, presenting themselves as for instance managers, business consultants, students, podcasters. As part of the laboratory, Bakker describes how an assumption is defined as “a statement that is not proven; it is not a fact. It may never be proven. But it does influence the contemporary”. He gives the example of the Earth being round, which was but a powerful assumption for a while—one that turned into a fact. In the laboratory, we work to discover our assumptions about democracy. Adrienne suggests that we assume that democracy is about participation. Someone else asks if we can assume that all people wish to be active in democracy? A third participant says that we assume democracy to be desirable, “but is it?” Dirk Bakker relates to her question, saying that “this is a strong assumption” and goes on to explain the importance of discovering these assumptions, so we can discuss them later.

Drawing on Foucault’s work on ethics, Mitchell Dean sees ontology as “the ethical substance worked upon” (Dean, 1995, p. 564; Foucault, 1984, 1990, pp. 352–357), relating to that which needs to be corrected. We suggest understanding the particular ontology of the Futures Literacy program, expressed and practiced within interviews, texts and practices such as these “labs” to be centered around human assumptions. New ways of perceiving are here coupled with new ways of acting, leading to understanding reality as always in becoming and emerging. Interestingly, in the context of futures literacy, this is also often

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referred to as “ontological expansion” (Tuomi, 2017; Miller, 2018, p. 22, 108, our italics), but in the sense that reality depends on our perceptions of it. Essentially, we say, our anticipatory assumptions constitute the ontology of futures literacy and from a governmentality perspective, the ethical substance that futures literacy proponents argue we should work on.

These assumptions can cover, more or less, any topic: our images of Christmas, oil, democracy, art, mega-cities and so forth. In this respect, practically all perceptions of human life can be rendered problematic (Rose, 1996, p. 25), thus becoming substance for a reflective practice. Reflective thoughts such as these are intrinsic to self-formation—to the agency of subjects (Laidlaw, 2014, p. 101). The UNESCO program aspires to make use of this intrinsic human capacity and set the future of humanity free by individuals reflecting upon taken-for-granted assumptions, thereby becoming agents of future projects as they are formulated today. In this context, then, responsibility for the future is given to us as “subjects”, who are to look after ourselves consciously. Concurrently, the governing of oneself along UNESCO intentions is built into these reflexive practices, potentially not setting the minds of humanity free as much as governing them at the individual level.

### The technique

The governmental ontology of futures literacy, then, directs practices towards assumptions of more or less anything in the world. The technology for both making visible and correct—or in futures literacy terms “emancipate”—these assumptions is the Futures Literacy Laboratory. The intention of the laboratory is to visualize both what participants bring into the “lab” and what is possibly emerging as a consequence of the labor involved. In these respects, the laboratories form part of what is rendered visible and practical (Dean, 2010, p. 41) by UNESCO’s foresight practices.

In order to cater to flexibility, opening up participants for any type of dreaming and imagining, the laboratories may vary in format, themes and context. In practice, most labs center around sticky-note proceedings. Participants may range from the UN’s top-level governing body to European bankers and young refugees. The themes depend on the context and the participants’ interests. Recurring themes are democracy, innovation, education, banking, decolonization and the climate. UNESCO does not generally host these workshops, as they are supposed to be undertaken within the framework of the global network of futurists. UNESCO, has however set up a number of “design principles” which defines the Futures Literacy Laboratory, describing how it is to consist of four phases.

The first two phases are supposed to be revelatory, building on exercises aimed at questioning routines and turning the tacit into the explicit, thereby revealing anticipatory assumptions. In the laboratory, *Living in the World’s Next Megacities*, held in the basement of the Paris headquarters during a conference UNESCO called Futures Literacy Design Forum in 2019, colorful sticky notes constituted the medium for separating what was termed “the probable future” from “the desirable future”, helping participants to understand their underlying assumptions. At the beginning, the mixed group of researchers, futurists, consultants and master students were asked to record their thoughts on yellow sticky notes in response to the question, “By the end of the century, how do you see the megacities? What is their probable future?” One participant, a young master’s student, wrote something positive on the subject of vertical farming. The visions from the rest of the group, texted onto the sticky notes were dark and gloomy, summarizing their concerns about pollution and climate change. In the second reframing step, the aim of which was to “disconnect participants from the anticipatory assumptions by evoking non-probabilistic and non-normative futures” (UNESCO, No date, p. 1), participants were asked to record on orange sticky notes the feelings they associated with what they had written on the yellow notes. The group seemed to share ambivalent feelings of hope and despair, anxiety and stress.

The two latter phases of the laboratories relate to futures. In the megacities lab, participants were asked to articulate their ideas for desirable futures—this time on green sticky notes. How did they want megacities to evolve by the end of the century? Not having quite understood the difference between the phases, the master's student who wrote the note on vertical farming hurried to place that note in the column for desirable futures, thus defying the color scheme. Later, participants recorded on blue sticky notes the feelings they associated with these desirable images. The laboratory organizer indicated that by using sticky notes in this way, participants had begun revealing some of the anticipatory assumptions that underlie their probable futures and that have diverted them from desirable ones. Finally, group members addressed and shared the three main challenges for reaching the desirable futures as they had written them on the green and blue sticky notes. These challenges were to be related to the “ultimate goal of education”, locating presently central actors that should be addressed in order to help realize this future.

The idea of the four phases is, then, to investigate and challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions that the futures-illiterate person draws upon when anticipating the future and to go beyond those assumptions—beyond historical accounts and images provided for instance by Hollywood or colonialists—instead finding what actors in the field often refer to as “the emergent”. In one of our conversations with Riel Miller, he described the necessity of this type of movement, between what is seen as given and what may emerge. He described how, early in his career as a futures consultant, he was intrigued and frustrated with the problem of understanding something that would emerge, drawing on historic concepts: “I was very aware of using the past . . . in particular concepts from the past to collect data in order to imagine the future”. He explained with an example:

If I try to describe the future using the dictionary of today, I'm obviously going to be missing many words. So, the challenge becomes being able to invent, notice, identify, create and accept those words and on the basis of that creativity of the universe, the creativity of complexity, open up the future that we imagine so that we see the present differently.

The organizers of Futures Literacy Laboratories try to arrange ways of going beyond such historic images, supposed to occupy our minds as taken-for-granted concepts. In the above-presented laboratory organized by *Toekomst* on the future of democracy, participants were asked to close their eyes and imagine themselves walking on a street on a warm, sunny day, toward a door that leads to the year 2040. After having entered the future through this imaginary portal, participants were asked to meet in smaller break out groups, envisioning together how new ways of communication have altered political organizing in the 2040s. In one of these, four of us met and played around with ideas on political decision-making on Mars, which, surprising to all of us, also entailed speaking with ants. Coming back to the present, by closing the breakout room, participants described how they enjoyed the experience as fun, poetic and liberating.

An alleged strength of the laboratory is how it is supposed to take “into account anticipatory systems and processes” (Miller, 2018, p. 108) and go beyond them. Participants in the laboratories are encouraged to think outside of the box. Inadvertently, we would say, the technology of the lab encourage participants to think inside yet another box, or if not a box, a rabbit hole of problematizing one's assumptions (cf. Rose, 1996, p. 25), leading participants, in a postmodern vein, to dispute what they thought they knew. With Dean's words we would say that the laboratories construct a “field of visibility” (Dean, 2010, p. 41), illuminating individual's assumptions and meant to install this form of introspection as a constantly enacted capability.

### **The subject**

If the Futures Literacy program in governmental terms is based on a particular ontology, practiced through a particular technology, it also comes with a specific deontology. To Dean



(Dean, 1995, 2010, p. 26) this speaks to the mode of subjectification, the ways we adhere to rules and norms in a given context and who we become when we are governed in this way, or in this case, when we attempt to handle our anticipatory assumptions. In working with the laboratories, the organizers are encouraging participant's skills in questioning, forming, knowing, deciphering and acting on themselves (Dean, 1995, p. 563), to become self-therapeutic subjects, continuously monitoring the self. Such ethically oriented interest towards assumptions of individuals on behalf of UNESCO has earlier been identified, but more broadly, in a historical account by Duedahl (2020), in which he argues that a form of "mental engineering" is intrinsic to the ways UNESCO attempts to realize its missions. Duedahl points to a process by which this engineering has shifted in focus from nation states and inter-state relations to individuals as agents of change (also see Lerch and Buckner, 2018; Ilcan and Philipps, 2006). It may be that "mental engineering" does not fully cover the activities of the UNESCO program of futures literacy, as these are foremost attempts based on the industry of futures consultancy and not state-based regulation (cf. Duff, 2005). Still, Duedahl's historical analysis corroborates the UNESCO turn towards individuals from nation-states. What the program especially brings is the technique for making our supposedly colonized assumptions visible—and therefore amendable—at the individual, molecular level, through self-inspection.

This is how Pedro Gonzales, one of the chairs of Futures Literacy, describes the laboratories: "A futures laboratory is a form of psychotherapy, in which you explore . . . you are trying to see into your soul". He elaborates, describing the process as similar to being in psychological treatment for years in order to find one's guiding assumptions. In the same vein, Illka Järvinen, who works at UNESCO within the Futures Literacy program, speaks of the need for the laboratories to come from a "first-person perspective". This perspective is based not on a macro-level idea, but on the belief that once individuals change their minds, rising up out of the "poverty of imagination," it will constitute the basis for an "enormous transformation" as the individual person begins to relate differently to other individuals. Relatedly, Mara Wafula, also working at UNESCO, described in a conversation how her dream for futures literacy as a competence is that it would function as:

a way for humans to communicate on many different levels—intellectual, emotional, social ones—just for them to actually create meaning together, negotiate meaning together and that would be, I believe, my dream to connect those different stories and allow people to also make stories their own and continue the story.

The laboratories are thus spoken of as conversations and a type of therapy session, in which our assumptions are under scrutiny. The reasoning behind the need for this form of therapy on a global scale is based on the programmatic idea that because no futures actually exist, they are highly uncertain. The only things that truly exist in relation to the future are our fantasies, formulated as assumptions—our tools for handling uncertainty. Because the future is "never predictable", as Gabriella Berger explains, we need to learn to live with the uncertainty rendered by the nature of things. To her mind, this is where futures literacy functions as a competence, for looking into yourself as a way of living with and acting on uncertainty.

As with the capacity to read and write, we suggest, the intended agent and bearer of futures literacy is the individual person—an autonomous, self-directing and decision-making subject who is to answer to the challenges of the world by self-inspection. Importantly, in contrast to reading an alphabet, which exists in printing external to this subject, reading the future demands that we look within ourselves, in a therapeutic manner, with futurists as therapists. The argument being that we need to examine our anticipatory assumptions in order not to be colonized by someone else's assumptions and to be able to open up and go along with what is emerging. In the future, the Futures Literacy program calls for all of us to

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be capable of undertaking this form of therapeutic stance by ourselves, with no middleman in the form of a therapist required.

Previous research has analyzed connections among governmentality, therapy and subjectification. Gayatri Spivak has argued that neoliberalism brought on epistemic changes in the way subjects are formed (Spivak, 2006, p. 115). This has been possible on a global scale because of acculturation in the home and not merely at a collective level. One aspect of these processes is reflexivity and the anxiety that follows, as reminders that we have not yet done enough ourselves, that we must improve our choices in order to lessen anxiety (Krcic-Ivancic, 2018, p. 263). Anthropologists studying different forms of therapy often stress how its efficacy depends on the affectual engagements rather than in creating understanding (Favret-Saada, 2012, p. 437). Increasing anxiety is not what the Futures Literacy program organizers imagine. To the contrary, the vision is coping with uncertainty by empowering us all, one by one. Yet, the relationship to ourselves as reflexive is part of UNESCO's transnational scheme of governing (cf. Rose, 1996, p. 24; Samimian-Darash and Rabinow, 2015) and it forms part of the construction of contemporary identities taken to be natural and normal. Through partaking in the therapy sessions of Futures Literacy Laboratories, we become reflexive subjects and, simultaneously, objects of a regime of visibility. Dreams dreamt today become cognizable and no longer lost in the fleeting passage of space, time, movement and voice but identifiable and problematized as colonized and fettered (cf. Rose, 1996, pp. 105–106).

### **The utopia**

Governing is, by default, optimistic and utopian, in the way it presupposes an end or envisions a particular and improved future (Corry, 2013, p. 95; Dean, 2010). In this, the Futures Literacy program makes no exception. It is ultimately about “transforming the future” (Miller, 2018), as the title of the program's central theoretical work suggests. The utopian idea being that once people's relationships to the future changes from that of a fated recipient to that of a protagonist and agent of change, then the locus of responsibility and possibility changes too. In turn, we suggest, this locus within individuals is the space that is supposed to be managed, governed, for the making of utopias.

Images and dreams for and of the future are therefore key to the Futures Literacy program. Humanity must dare to know what comprises its images, in order to overcome the trajectories of “exploitation” and “oppression”, as often phrased by Riel Miller. It must also cope with living with and under uncertainty. In this sense, the communicated goal for the project is empowerment of humanity and the decolonization of minds. In this utopia, the future human is open to “the emergent” and individuals affirm the complexity of the becoming rather than relying on historical truths and connections (also see Poli, 2021). Humanity's reproduction of oppression, patriarchy, sexism, racism and so on is accordingly due to a misuse of the future in which we are constantly tempted to colonize the future for coming generations by drawing on historic concepts and a longing for monumentalism.

For the Futures Literacy program, the utopia is instead detemporalized. When freed from the shackles of historical monumentalism, humanity is supposedly also freed from the pressures of imposing the consequences of involuntary assumptions onto the next generation. Instead of merely living in the present, of not knowing how to relate to and make use of the future, the human of this utopia copes with the uncertainty that characterizes the universe. As Riel Miller underscores, in drawing on the example of need for the planning of nuclear waste, “We should never have created that waste in the first place”.

Regardless of the common referencing to colonization, contenders of futures literacy rarely speak of spatial confinements that global economy and politics create and have created and how futures literacy in practice could relate to circumstances at the structural level. This

avoidance rather involves a push for something authentic, felt at the individual level. At the Design Forum in Paris in 2019, Izai Abara, one of the contributors to the program and a consultant for UNESCO, formulated this aspiration, speaking of his childhood memory of longing for Santa Claus to come down the chimney. Abara reminded us, the audience, of the absurdity of this image, of a white Santa in Nigeria, saying, “Santa never really came by”. He continued, describing how colonization was not only about the taking of artifacts, but the more tragic loss “of a different vision of the world” and the construction of a single future made elsewhere. “That is why I describe myself as a fugitive”, into the country of dreams that were not his. Abara ended his speech by stating that “Futures Literacy should be a diffraction of hope and step away from “delineality.”

In this sense, the utopia of empowerment developed within the program involves a search for futures that are more authentic, untainted by external ideological imprints of other actors. This aspiration is often described in workshops and in conversations by futures literacy proponents. As explained by Layla Odhiambo, a consultant and researcher in futures studies, when we connected after a UNESCO workshop on decolonization and futures literacy in which we had participated:

If we can, then, acknowledge also who we are, where we are and what the possibilities for the future are, we can actually create, in a co-produced kind of way, agency and communities to really think in imaginative and authentic ways about what they really want for their future, in a way that’s not constrained by this other stuff that the theories talk about [ . . . ]

The driver of this ambition to free humanity from its own shackles, to be in touch with its authentic images and dreams, is a stated recognition of failing systems. As Riel Miller and his colleagues from UNESCO often express, we cannot continue to leave a failed and colonized future as our legacy to coming generations. In their accounts, humanity needs to change fundamentally. Or, as exemplified by Riel Miller in an interview: “You do not say, let’s improve slavery. You say let’s abolish slavery”. According to this reasoning we cannot persist in fixing the systems; we need to abolish them and dream forth new systems. The technology of the Future Literacy Laboratory is the means to this end.

In designing the lab, UNESCO took inspiration from reading Amartya Sen, which opened the horizon for the mind, seeing freedom as a capability of the mind. As Gudmundur Árnason, one of the chairs of Futures Literacy, explained at the Paris 2019 meeting, “literacy is a tool for freedom”. Futures literacy and its utopian ends may thus be placed in a broader context of development ideology that seeks to empower citizens by shifting attention from the need for economic reforms to the promotion of basic individual freedoms through which they have the opportunity to define and realize their own ideas of what is good (Hickel, 2014, p. 1358). This stance is a neoliberal shift of self-optimization that rests upon an “ethos of self-governing” (Ong, 2006) and of self-enterprising (Miller and Rose, 2008, pp. 213–214). Seen from the utopian aspect, then, the tension between aiming for empowerment on the one hand and accomplishing subjectification on the other transpires. To futures literacy proponents, the term “empowerment” means the liberation of individuals, assisting them in becoming responsible for their own thoughts, dreams and steps forward. Yet, as formulated by Barbara Cruikshank, the very idea of empowerment is premised by the self-regulating process by which we “wage war against the way we govern ourselves (1999, p. 328)”. The program organizers intend to spark the engine for societal change, solving all types of global issues by waging a revolution against the order of the self and the way we govern ourselves.

## Conclusions

This paper demonstrates the underlying rationale of UNESCO Futures Literacy Program as it is planned for at UNESCO and realized by its global network of futurists from the futures

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industry. As we have shown, this rationale departs from an ontological premise within the program regarding anticipation as a fundamental capacity of biological life. Anticipation adds a new critical dimension to the field of transnational governmentality (c.f. [Larner and Walters, 2004](#)). As presumed anticipatory beings, human assumptions and imaginations of the future are constituted by UNESCO and its network as an ethical substance that can and should be worked on and self-controlled. As a program meant to mold our ways of seeing the world, this rationale speaks to the heart of UNESCO's mandate to foster peace in our minds.

The perceived need for this ontological shift derives from a general sense within UNESCO and its futurist network of the world as wronged and in danger. This appreciation is asserted by referring, for instance, to negative global trends pertaining to democracy and global economy at large, but particularly the perceived failures of the UN, lacking the capacity to improve life for all of humanity and solve the climate crisis. In the understanding of UNESCO and its global network of futurists, humanity is repeating historical mistakes and reproducing oppression. Tucked into this discourse, we find the utopia, or telos, in which humankind is freed from oppression and the shackles of history by the capacity to read the future. In this ideal world, our minds are decolonized and we are empowered to pursue any trajectory we choose. Consequently, the ontology and teleology of the Futures Literacy program postulates that as humans we start acting differently. Through the technology of the Futures Literacy Laboratory, UNESCO and its network propose that humanity may begin to realize the salience of assumptions, make use of the future and commence to overcome our lack of authentic imagination. Instead of suppressing or denying assumptions, then, they argue, humanity should learn to control them, thereby making itself reflexive and open for what may come.

In the intersection between the growing literature on futures and anticipation (e.g. [Molé, 2010](#); [Appadurai, 2013](#); [Stephan and Flaherty, 2019](#); [Brassett and O'Reilly, 2021](#)) and the ample stream of research concerning governmentality, this paper adds much needed ethnographically based knowledge to the field of transnational governance, in relation to UNESCO. By describing the strive against "monumentalism" that lies within the Futures Literacy program, we expand and complicate earlier ethnographic studies of UNESCO which have focused upon the organization's role in relation to cultural heritage (e.g. [Langlois, 2016](#); [Meskell, 2013](#); [Bortolotto, 2007](#); [Brumann, 2018](#); [Nielsen, 2011](#)). At first, the program may seem empty—merely an intention to change the world, but not in any specific direction. As proponents state, just as reading and writing can be used for any projects, futures literacy capacities can be used for any type of activity. Taking a closer look, however, this program directs attention to individuals and their individual agency. In the world of futures literacy, no structures exist; futures literate individuals and organizations are programmatically free and able to pursue any dreams and visions they may have, seemingly without the restraint of political, cultural and economic barriers. Although UNESCO intends to reform such organizations as the UN and all sorts of organizations may be active as developers, partners and promoters to the UNESCO program, there is little championing for the idea of changing the world by organizing beyond the collective laboratories. Nor do we find demands to any other actor on accountability for the crises that are said to motivate the project. The only demand is that individuals take control over their own assumptions and whatever follows will follow. Decolonization of minds accordingly begins and ends with individuals undertaking a number of therapeutic sessions. One could argue that participation in futures literacy sessions is the main ambition of the program, conveying the message that salvation from acute crises rests on individuals governing their anticipation.

By emphasizing the position that change depends on changing the minds of humankind, the project is marketable in many political corners of the world. Although it promises transformation, it poses no real threat even to the sometimes conservative and authoritarian regimes (such as Dubai, Saudi Arabia and Morocco) that are willing to invest in the Futures

Literacy program. And for those UN-members willing to endorse the program, costs are by any means neglectable. Moreover, individual conduct and comportment in the modern liberal government are directly implicated in the operations of power.

The possible achievements of this project fundamentally rely on the ability of the futures consultancy industry to assume the task of educating humanity in learning to use the future and sell the perspective that salvation lies within continuous self-empowerment and improvement, through knowing how to anticipate consciously. Seen from another perspective, by governing anticipation, UNESCO enables a market of possibilities for consultants and futurists in teaching humankind to use the futures. For future analysis, it may well be that we need to keep our eyes on this industry.

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