"The Old Stories Had Become Our Prison": Globalisation and Identity Politics in John Barnes's Science Fiction Novels *A Million Open Doors* and *Earth Made of Glass*

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Abstract: The article discusses how issues raised by globalisation are represented in John Barnes's novels *A Million Open Doors* (1992) and *Earth Made of Glass* (1998). I will argue that science fiction can work as a model for a futural public sphere, bridging the gap between the humanities and natural science, and enabling a broader public discourse about the societal impacts of science and technology.

Through the novels' protagonists, Barnes discusses matters of authenticity and identity politics triggered by the globalisation discourse of the 1990s – issues that have again been brought to the fore in the political sphere. By setting the stories in our galaxy in the 29th century, Barnes is debating, challenging, and contesting dystopian as well as utopian conceptions of globalisation in our time. Barnes's novels highlight the implications of nationalist ideologies, identity politics, and notions of authenticity.

But Barnes also shows how utopian thinking on a borderless global world and idyllic visions of a post-national society (expressed in some of the more utopian streams of globalization literature) are undermined by identity politics. In this sense, Barnes's novels are opening up a terrain for debating these issues, forming a basis for a futural public sphere.

Keywords: Science fiction, Futural public sphere, Globalisation, John Barnes, Identity politics

Introduction

Between 1992 and 2006, science fiction writer John Barnes published a quartet of novels called the *Thousand Cultures* series. This article analyses how the first two novels, *A Million Open Doors* (1992) and its sequel, *Earth Made of Glass* (1998), represent issues relating to cultural identity, identity politics, and authenticity in a globalised world. By

placing the plot in a fictional future world that is rapidly changing through boundless economic and cultural flows, enabled by a revolutionary technological innovation, Barnes makes it possible to highlight controversial issues regarding globalisation today.

After a long and exciting life, the tetralogy's main protagonist Giraut Leones is looking back on his work as an operative agent for the galactic supranational organisation known as the Council of Humanity in the 29th century. In four chronicles corresponding to the four novels of the tetralogy, he recalls how 1,228 cultures in our galaxy were connected by "the springer", a technological innovation making instantaneous space travel possible.[1] In the first novel, a young Giraut and his male friends live in Nou Occitan on the planet Wilson. They are mimicking what they have been taught is the courtly culture of 12th - and 13th-century Occitan, spending their time drinking wine, trying to write songs for the lute, fighting with so-called Interstellars, and worshipping the young women belonging to their circuit. Friendship, courtly love, loyalty, and *enseingnamen* (the ethos of courtly culture) are the guiding principles for the young men and their female friends.[2] Eventually, Giraut leaves Nou Occitan to work as a kind of cultural ambassador in the city of Utilitopia, Caledony, on the planet Nansen. His encounter with the citizens of Utilitopia slowly changes Giraut, and he starts to reappraise the foundations of his own local courtly culture.

After the outbreak of a civil war in Utilitopia, several of Giraut's new friends are killed in the struggle. The Council of Humanity's armed force restores the order. The old regime is overthrown and Utilitopia becomes more receptive to outside influences. Giraut and the Utilitopian woman Margaret (with whom Giraut has developed a relationship) are enlisted as operational field agents for the Council of Humanity, under the cover of positions as cultural ambassadors.

The Council of Humanity has two tasks. The first is to ensure that the reunion of 1,228 cultures on 26 planets is successful. Some of the local cultures that have evolved over centuries of isolation have xenophobic tendencies and oppose cultural and economic impulses from outside worlds. If necessary, the Council of Humanity will impose the reunion by force. The second task, which is classified so as not to create panic, is to prepare humanity for an external threat, a potential invasion by a hostile alien race against which humanity must have a united front. This task provides the focus of the tetralogy's plot.

This article examines the symbolic production of globalisation based on how it is conceptualised in the novels. The first section discusses the sociopolitical context of the novels. The second discusses how science fiction can be understood as a futural public sphere and how it contributes to and problematises issues concerning globalisation. The analysis itself follows in the next three sections, which discuss how questions of cultural identity, authenticity, and identity politics are played out in the narratives.

In the Wake of the Berlin Wall

Globalisation was certainly on the agenda when the first novel, *A Million Open Doors*, was published in 1992. The second novel, *Earth Made of Glass* (1998), also relates to the rise of the Internet and of utopian visions of limitless communication (cf. Mosco; Yar). Many of the issues raised in the novels are part of an ongoing debate on the social, political, and economic consequences of globalisation. The ideas expressed in the

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[1] The other two novels are *The Merchants of Souls* (2001) and *The Armies of Memory* (2006).
[2] The references to Occitan culture, or other historical cultures, are many, for example the names of Giraut's friends or the names of different cities. The geographical area where Occitan was spoken in the 12th and 13th centuries was called Provence; see also Paden (1998) and Rudin (2011).

narratives are responses to contemporary questions and could not be reduced to mere epiphenomena (cf. Persson; Megill).

After the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the global geopolitical map changed. Despite violent conflicts – such as the wars in the former Yugoslavia – Western intellectual debate in the early 1990s was enthusiastic regarding the possible positive effects of globalisation. Sabina Mihelj points to a utopian dimension in some parts of the globalisation debate that "prompted many to deny the importance and endurance of nationalism, and to promulgate idyllic visions of a postnational, cosmopolitan society". In this discourse, national states and national bonds were seen as "merely anachronistic remnants of the past", which would disappear with the global expansion of modernity. Most especially, the increasingly globalised media industry and various transnational cultural flows would eventually change old national vocabularies, and people would learn to think beyond the nation (Mihelj 1).

In contrast to the utopian discourse, part of the globalisation debate was preoccupied with questions concerning standardisation and homogenisation. Mihelj emphasises that even as early as the 1960s, academic studies on the cultural dimensions of globalisation tended to interpret global media flows as the cultural equivalent of economic and political imperialism, as American products became increasingly popular (38). These notions continued to have a bearing on post-Cold War discourse (cf. Ritzer).

The globalisation discourse, or, more accurately, discourses, are a cross-media phenomenon, and notions of a global world are created not only through lived experience but also through various mediations claiming to explain the world, as Shani Orgad points out: "Power relations are encoded in media representations, and media representations in turn produce and reproduce power relations by constructing knowledge, values, conceptions and beliefs" (25). The consequences of this knowledge and these values, conceptions, and beliefs are precisely what Barnes's novels discuss and contest.

Science Fiction as a Futural Public Sphere

Science fiction is an important "place" or "room" for discussing the societal and cultural impact of science and technology. Different activities or arenas can be aimed at opening up "something for a larger *audience*", to make something common in order to create "'places' or 'rooms' for communication and knowledge production" (Bergström et al. 15; cf. Habermas; Goode and Godhe). [3] The science-fiction genre *works* as a special technology of representation and a form of knowledge production, provoking public debates – for example on the war on terror, environmental issues, or, as in the case of Barnes's novels discussed here, globalisation. In this sense, the science-fiction genre can be conceptualised as "a terrain of contest and debate" (Appadurai and Breckenridge 6), and it contributes to "imaginative public debate about the future" – what Luke Goode and I have labelled "a futural public sphere" (Goode and Godhe 109).

Thus, as a futural public sphere, the science-fiction genre is concerned with the impact of science and technology on society. One example is the American television science-fiction series *Battlestar Galactica* (2003–2009). By using and extrapolating the present transhumanist visions on artificial life, *Battlestar Galactica* asks questions

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[3] My translation and emphasis. Original Swedish quotes: "att 'öppna' något för en större publik"; "'platser' eller 'rum' för kommunikation och kunskapsproduktion".

concerning possible consequences of creating new life through applied science and frontier technology. The series also contests the hegemonic political discourse in post-9/11 on the war on terror (Goulart and Joe; Kiersey and Neumann), while, for example, the series *24* (2001–2010) constructs, in real time, a hegemonic tale of the US bringing global civilisation through fighting terrorism post-9/11 (cf. Olsson). To contest this hegemonic narrative involves by extension a struggle regarding the problem-stating prerogative (agenda setting) – a battle between different public discourses (cf. Foucault).

Science-fiction writers, filmmakers, and fans are part of interpretive communities (Fish; Giddens; Gaonkar and Povinelli) who share their understanding of how the science fiction "text" (both the visual and the textual expression) should be contextualised and interpreted. Following that statement, I will claim that intention (the writer's message) is coalescing with processes of reception and "translation" (audiences' and fans' readings of the "texts"). Making room for public discourse in the form of a futural public sphere enables the circulation and exchange of ideas, where contesting as well as reinforcing hegemonic discourses is a key element in the knowledge production of the science-fiction genre.[4]

What if a technology like the springer was invented – what would the political, economic, cultural, and social consequences be? In John Barnes's *Thousand Cultures* tetralogy, more than a thousand cultures scattered on 26 different planets are once again connected after centuries of isolation. Through Darko Suvin's concept of cognitive estrangement, Barnes's novels, especially the first two novels in the tetralogy, interpret and discuss several phenomena that are often highlighted in the globalisation debate, such as de-localisation, acceleration, interconnectedness, global flows, mixing, and identity politics (Eriksen 8–9 et passim), even if the word "globalisation" is not used in the tetralogy.

Traitors to Their Own Culture

> It didn't look good. Five young Interstellars, all dressed in the navy-and-black style patterned on Earth bureaucratic uniforms, sneered at the four of us. All of them were big and muscular, and none were hanging back. Probably they were all dosed on a berserker drug.
>
> The smart thing, if possible, would be to avoid a fight.
>
> On the other hand, I detested Interstellars – traitors to their own culture, imitators of the worst that came out from the Inner Worlds, bad copies of Earth throwing away all the wealth of their Occitan heritage. Their art was sadoporn, their music raw noise, and their courtesy nonexistent – and spirit and style were everything. Anyone could be graceful with nothing at stake. Here was a real test of *enseingnamen*. (Barnes, *Million* 14)

A few pages into *A Million Open Doors*, the reader is drawn into a brutal fight between two cultural factions in the city Nou Occitan on the planet Wilson: the courtly culture versus Interstellars. Giraut and his friends are upset about Interstellars abandoning the neo-Occitan culture and embracing an intergalactic uniform urban culture after the implementation of the springer six years before. Interstellars "dress like petty clerks from

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[4] John Barnes's tetralogy is also part of the mega-text of the science-fiction genre (cf. Määttä). It enters into a dialogue not only with our present societal development, but also with how the science-fiction genre has previously portrayed the boundless expansion of human living space – biologically, temporally, and spatially – and galactic empires. This article, however, does not discuss the intertextual dimension in Barnes's novels; rather, it focuses on the political, social, and cultural contexts.

Earth, forget every bit of their own culture and history, imitate the lowest forms that come from Earth". Their favorite game is to consume and produce "clear-cut imitations of Earth sado-porn". For Interstellars, however, this is "a legitimate protest against the tradition", and Giraut and his circle represent "Oldstyle" (Barnes, *Million* 25–26). Initially, the reunion of 1,228 cultures – enforced by the Council of Humanity – only makes the traditionalist Giraut and his friends more dedicated to their local courtly culture, while Interstellars engage in a growing consumerism and a repudiation of local cultural patterns.

Already in the beginning of *A Million Open Doors*, Barnes depicts what is considered a double and contradictory tendency in the globalisation process – what has been labelled "glocalisation" (see e.g. Beck). With the conception of standardisation and homogenisation came their opposite – an intensification of differences or locality: "both the fetishization and commodification of exotic commodities and of cultural difference as well as local resistance to American hegemony through a reinvention of traditional culture" (Thomas 37; cf. Jameson). This double movement – the production of sameness and difference at the same time – is precisely what occurs in Barnes's representation of globalisation processes.

In the beginning of the story, the dream of a new vocabulary beyond the local, regional, or national is far away. Instead, many of the local cultures depicted in Barnes's tetralogy are expressing their cultural specificity in opposition to the uniform intergalactic culture spreading in Thousand Cultures. When the courtly culture begins to dissolve, its practitioners (re)invent tradition as a project of identity politics. Interstellars, in their turn, are shaping an identity that crosses national and planetary boundaries in opposition to local and regional cultures. They embrace an intergalactic culture of consumption, going back to the origin of the colonies – planet Earth. It is a kind of McDonaldisation of the Milky Way. This, however, turns out to be more complex as the narrative progresses. In some of the cultural encounters in Barnes's novels, forms of cultural hybridity eventually emerge, contesting both rigid local cultures and the intergalactic consumption culture.

The concept of globalisation in the late 20th century provoked both utopian hopes and dystopian fears. Yet, there were also more moderate voices: Mihelj emphasises that the theories of Americanisation and cultural imperialism after 1989 were supplemented with theories that "acknowledged that the patterns of global production, distribution and consumption of cultural products were much more multipolar and multilayered than initially predicted" (39). However, the fear that genuine cultural patterns will disappear and be replaced by a mass-produced form of uniform culture was (and is still) a part of the globalisation debate, and this is contested in Barnes's tetralogy. Jan Nederveen Pieterse claims that the idea of cultural hybridisation is not a new phenomenon, but it is still working as a strategic counterweight to cultural essentialism, especially as entities such as the nation, the state, civilisation, and ethnicity are strategically important: "Hybridity unsettles the introverted concept of culture that underlies romantic nationalism, racism, ethnicism, religious revivalism, civilizational chauvinism, and cultural essentialism" (88).

Cultural Encounters and Mixing

In *A Million Open Doors*, the question of cultural identity and authenticity is contested in the violent encounter between Giraut and his friends on one hand and Interstellars on the other, and later in the meeting between Giraut and the Utilitopians on planet Nansen. In his encounters with Interstellar and other cultures, Giraut begins to see his courtly culture in a new light, and he starts to question its problematic gender roles and cultural patterns, which are beginning to dissolve as the reunion process continues.

Disappointed with his life on Nou Occitan, Giraut follows his older comrade Aimeric and his girlfriend Bieris to the planet Nansen, which recently received its first springer. At the same time, he begins an inner journey, characteristic of the edification novel (Bildungsroman) (Jones; cf. Godhe). As soon they arrive at Nansen, Aimeric's girlfriend Bieris starts to drop ironic comments about the objectification of young women in the shallow but also brutal courtly culture. Giraut's slow awakening from an almost incubator-like existence in the courtly culture of Nou Occitan becomes both painful and embarrassing for him. He begins to realise that the courtly culture of Nou Occitan is one of the most extreme cultures in Thousand Cultures "in enforcing gender differences" (Barnes, *Million* 228). "Sado-porn", being among the first cultural imports since the reunion process, is not surprising, since a form of ritual and symbolic rape could also be found in the courtly culture. Giraut's former girlfriend Garsenda asks him whether he knows that "real, violent rape was common in Nou Occitan". Giraut realises that women generally are treated in a brutal way, and recalls that his friend Marcabru had once told him "that he had gotten a 'little ice princess' to 'open her pretty mouth and satisfy me like the whore she really was' by threatening her with his epee, telling her he would use the neuroducer to give her the sensation of having her breasts slashed off, and of being sliced from anus to vagina" (Barnes, *Million* 229).

On Nansen, Aimeric, Bieris, and Giraut intend to work in the Caledonian city Utilitopia, a Christian culture of capitalist utility maximisation and rationality – a kind of refinement of Max Weber's thesis of the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. The culture of Caledony is permeated by a Lutheran work ethic, and all citizens and "resident aliens" must work four hours a day, even if it is possible for robots with artificial intelligence to do work. Initially, Giraut suffers from the manual labor, until he receives permission to establish a cultural center – if it does not contribute to a "contamination of Caledon thought", as the authorities of Caledony put it (Barnes, *Million* 51–68, 84–87).

Giraut's ethos is changing not only in the meetings with Bieris and Garsenda, but also in the encounter with the Utilitopians attending his cultural center, especially Margaret, with whom he eventually begins a relationship. For her, Giraut admits that courtly love comes down to surface and conventions, and he feels embarrassed about what he recently thought of as only natural (Barnes, *Million* 191).

Initially, he notices that Margaret would look (less than) ordinary wherever she was, with an "oversized rump …, too-wide shoulders and small, flaccid breasts" and plain face (Barnes, *Million* 155–56). Margaret's appearance differs from the conventional ideal of beauty in the courtly culture. Barnes's portrayal of Giraut's recurring sexist gaze has been criticised in a feminist study by Gwyneth Jones, but I would claim that it has a purpose. On the one hand, it underscores that Giraut has begun to look beyond his own cultural conventions when he falls in love with Margaret. The Utilitopians he encounters on Nansen begin, in their turn, to liberate themselves from their rigid cultural conventions and to create hybrids between the local culture and Giraut's neo-Occitan culture.

On the other hand, Giraut's gaze proves that he still carries aspects of his cultural identity and tradition, despite the personal development he is undergoing through the story. He retains the taste for aesthetics, art, and beauty found in the neo-Occitan culture throughout the entire series of novels; this is reflected in how he continues to describe Margaret as ugly, even though he loves and desires her (e.g. Barnes, *Earth* 16, 114–16, 142). And until the end, he will remain an Occitan – troubadour, civilised, aesthete – and an ambassador for humanity. In the third novel, *The Merchants of Souls* (379), Giraut, with "touchy pride", notes that he has maintained a part of his culture to mark his neo-Occitan origin: "We were still the spiritual heirs of the people who had given Europe – and via Europe, much of the world – all her notions of honor, love, courage, and romance." Even if culture and identity are constructions, the affective dimension remains real.

We Need to Tell New Stories – Identity Politics and Ethnic Utopias

Throughout the novels, Barnes opens up for discussion concerns about what constitutes cultural identity, suggesting that it is a cultural construction that involves how we relate to the past and to historical narratives. It appears that (in Barnes's fictional universe) four world wars and three cold wars were fought before humankind was "reasonably organized" into 1,228 cultures on 26 planets. The scattering of what is conceived of as "genuine" cultures during "the Diaspora" is largely based on "Culture Variant History", informed only by a few remaining sources. Culture founders got permission to let myths "load in as real history", to reinvent tradition, something that is seldom obvious to those living in the different cultures (Barnes, *Million* 124, 188).

Five hundred years prior to the narrative told in *A Million Open Doors*, many of the minority cultures on Earth were almost extinct. Eventually, they decided to colonise the nearest planets in the solar system, and to integrate these planets culturally. It was then believed that neither more colonies nor contact between the planets were necessary. Cultural integration was concerned with the invention of tradition because the survivors from the wars wanted to preserve the minority cultures, which had been almost wiped out (Barnes, *Earth* 29–30). The permission to rewrite history was something Giraut becomes aware of only when he begins attending the university: "I had grown up believing that various French Symbolists and Romantics had led the American Empire and its allies right up through World War Three" (Barnes, *Earth* 206).

In *A Million Open Doors*, Giraut understands that the authorities on Nansen didn't really want the springer, since they are not interested in cultural influences from other planets in Thousand Cultures. The implanted minority cultures are attempts to create culturally homogeneous utopias. In the second part of the *Thousand Cultures* series, the implications of identity politics caused by cultural isolation become obvious with the Council of Humanity's mission to reunite the cultures. It is now not only an issue of recreating homogeneous "authentic" cultures, but also a question of preserving ethnic "purity". Identity politics in this sense does not become a way for marginalised groups in society to organise and liberate themselves from oppression, but instead becomes "identitarian" (cf. Lundahl): that is, a way of forcing people into a homogenous identity. This was an issue when the novels were written, and has continued to set the political agenda today.

Earth Made of Glass explores how a "social imaginary" – in this case collective beliefs about cultural authenticity and purity – makes alternative ways of thinking impossible. The concept of a "social imaginary" was first elaborated by Cornelius Castoriadis as "an enabling but not fully explicable symbolic matrix within which a people imagine and act as world-making collective agents" (Gaonkar 1). As Claudia Strauss emphasises, social imaginary "is becoming common in the place of *culture* and *cultural beliefs*, *meanings*, and *models* in anthropology and cultural studies" (322), and it is used in many ways by different scholars. Charles Taylor defines social imaginary as "the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (106).

As Strauss states, Taylor's elaboration of social imaginary is influenced by Benedict Anderson, and refers to "a cultural model (i.e. a learned, widely shared implicit cognitive schema)" (322). Although there are some problems with Taylor's use of the concept, it fits well into the discussion of identarian politics in Barnes's novels. Social imaginaries, according to Taylor, are not always articulated or conscious, but rather carried through "images, stories, and legends" (106). The point of discussing these social imaginaries is to

make the taken-for-granted visible (Strauss 331). This is the central issue in the second novel of Barnes's tetralogy, *Earth Made of Glass*.

On a mission for the Council of Humanity, Giraut and Margaret travel to the planet Briand, an area of one of the most devastating conflicts in the Thousand Cultures. The two implanted cultures on Briand, *Maya* and *Tamil*, detest each other, and violence between the cultures is common. Both cultures strive to minimise outside influences and are opposing the implementation of the springer, delaying the Council of Humanity's ambition to unite humanity again.

On Briand, the controversial Mayan philosopher and prophet Ix has started to proselytise. He preaches coexistence, love, and understanding between the two militant cultures. Ix soon gathers a crowd of followers from both cultures, including Margaret and Giraut. The message is quite simple: the cultures on Briand must abandon their old stories that have become mental limitations. Ix asks his followers, what "can 'really true' mean in a world where most of the past is invented anyway?"

> We are the evolved version of some culture-designer's idea of the Maya; we are an embodiment of what some mostly-European academics – motivated by their love of their own eccentric readings of the few texts, and Asian quadrillionaires, motivated by a grotesque sense of guilt – made up about the Maya. They copied Maya genes into embryos, and Maya texts into computers' memories. Then they loaded it all onto a colony ship and sent us off to be the thing they wanted us to be. (Barnes, *Earth* 270)

What Ix is pinpointing is how cultural identity has been reinvented out of a state of emergency; when citizens in both the Maya and Tamil cultures are forced to adapt to a homogenous culture, identity politics becomes a mental prison (cf. Lundahl 282–83). Gayatri Spivak once coined the idea of "strategic essentialism", referring to the idea that repressed or marginalised groups sometimes form alliances to overcome obstacles and gain advantages. The problem here, and one of the reasons why Spivak abandoned the concept, is that identity becomes fetishised. As Mikela Lundahl states, there is a risk that the members of the marginalised group forget that their own constructed identity is constructed only for a certain purpose and to achieve a certain goal (11–13).

The members of the Maya and Tamil cultures have not even produced their own identities to begin with. As Ix points out, their identities have been fetishised by culture-designers, and primarily by European academics' eccentric readings of a few historical sources. Their images, stories, and legends have built up taken-for-granted conceptions of ethnic homogeneity and purity and correspondingly stable identities. In this way, the novel represents the double movement of the globalisation process (standardisation and homogenisation followed by their opposite, an intensification of differences or locality), but also how the Western World exoticises the Third World.

In this case, this representation goes even further when the leaders in the Maya and Tamil cultures use the myths to achieve a status quo and to avoid influence from other cultures and from the Council of Humanity's reunion process (i.e. the globalisation process). The cultures on Briand are entrenched in identity politics and notions of authenticity. Leaders have kept the population ignorant of the reinvention of their history, mainly to preserve the "essence" of their cultures. In the Maya culture, priests and leaders are hiding new technologies that can prevent farmers from starving: "if they are to be real subsistence farmers, when the crops fail, they have to starve. You can't tell them that with foodmakers, nanos, and electric power you can make all the food they could possibly want" (Barnes, *Earth* 187).

A Million Open Doors and *Earth Made of Glass* depict a process of forced globalisation in which ethnic and cultural affiliation are still important, making it difficult

for the Council of Humanity to reunite the 1,228 cultures in the galaxy. As Mihelj emphasises, globalisation has hardly contributed to making nationalist thinking an anachronism of the past – something that the *Thousand Cultures* series portrays, e.g. in the drama of identity politics that unfolds between the Tamil and Mayan cultures in *Earth Made of Glass*. Instead of cherishing the intergalactic modernity that the Council of Humanity is trying to spread, the two cultures on Briand continue on the road to destruction. Not even Giraut, undergoing a remarkable development and personality change throughout the novels, can free himself entirely from his own cultural identity (which has become authentic to him). His cultural gaze permeates the novels in the tetralogy. As Mihelj notes: "In often hardly noticeable ways, national belonging continues to inform people's perception of the world, collective memories and expressions of belonging" (1).

The Ix character in Barnes's story questions the social imaginaries in the Mayan and Tamil cultures. To stop the ethnic violence, the Mayans and Tamils must take control of the narratives. Human society is based on lies, and, as one of Ix's Tamil followers puts it, "the old stories had become our prison" (Barnes, *Earth Made of Glass* 188). The leaders of the Tamil and Maya are using taken-for-granted notions of ethnic homogeneity and purity to undermine Ix's ideas of cultural exchange and tolerance, which are similar to what is often attributed to Western modernity in its most utopian form. Similar examples can, of course, be found in the Fascist and Nazi ideologies in the 1930s, where historical notions of master races and inferior people were reinforced and recontextualised.

The novels' main protagonist, Giraut Leones, has abandoned some of his courtly culture's social imaginaries, and together with many others he embraces visions of a borderless world where dialogue between different cultures is possible. For Giraut, cultural encounters are eventually seen as assets, and not as threats to his own culture. When the prophet Ix finally has some impact on the Mayan and Tamil cultures, he and his followers are assassinated by fanatics. The conflict on Briand escalates into a full-scale war. As Giraut, Margaret, and the other operational agents of the Council of Humanity's special force leave the planet Briand, antimatter clouds are destroying all life and making the planet uninhabitable for decades.

Conclusion

John Barnes's *Thousand Cultures* tetralogy is multilayered. Despite the somewhat didactic style, the story is complex in its structure. In this article, I have chosen to primarily discuss how the first two novels contest and debate issues of cultural identity, authenticity, and identity politics. The question initially set in *A Million Open Doors* (1992) – the first novel in the series – is what would happen if someone developed a technology that made instantaneous travel possible? Barnes's answer to that question is a story about a variety of cultural encounters that captures and interprets much of the globalisation debate after the end of the Cold War. (The story is also a response to the representations of large galactic empires depicted in numerous science fiction novels and movies.)

In *A Million Open Doors* and *Earth Made of Glass*, globalisation themes and issues are explored through how a young man, who is devoted to his own local culture, experiences societal change and gradually changes himself through his encounters with other cultures. In this way, *A Million Open Doors* and *Earth Made of Glass* may be conceptualised as edification novels. It is not only the reader who is distanced through cognitive estrangement, but also the protagonist Giraut, who frees himself from his cultural background and partially changes his worldview. The novels depict how humans re-create and reorient their individual and cultural identities in an environment

characterised by technological change in this case by a communication revolution that breaks hundreds of years of isolation.

As a venue for cultural and political debate, Barnes's science-fiction novels discuss, debate, and contest the globalisation process and become part of a larger discussion on globalisation in the 1990s. In this way, the novels open up a futural public sphere, enabling discourse on globalisation issues. In a critical manner, the novels contest the most simplistic features of the globalisation debate in the 1990s. Barnes is depicting a world where different cultures are influenced by each other and different levels of hybridisation occur (or are destroyed when they claim their cultural specificity). Hybridisation is also portrayed as a good thing because there is no essential culture: everything is constructed through mythical stories, but these constructions also mean something. In encounters with other people, individuals gain knowledge of other ways of thinking, grow as cultural beings, and uncover their social imaginaries – for good or ill.

The novels also transcend the times when they were written, since current political trends in the Western World and the Middle East – the refugee catastrophe, emerging right-wing movements, Brexit, illiberalism and neo-conservative notions of the nation, the presidential election in the US – once again raise issues of cultural essentialism and imagined threats from global flows, nationalism, and identity politics. In this sense, John Barnes's novels remind us that we still must learn to think beyond our nationalist vocabulary and break out of our social imaginary prison.

Acknowledgements

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