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‘It was quiet’: the radical architectures of understatement in feminist science fiction

cultural geographies
1–15
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DOI: 10.1177/14744740221126986
journals.sagepub.com/home/cgj
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Abstract

“Poisonless:a bare city, bright, the colours light and hard, the air pure. It was quiet.”

The Dispossessed, Ursula K. Le Guin (1974)

This is how Ursula K. Le Guin describes the city of Abbenay in *The Dispossessed*. It is modest and unassuming. It is quiet. This architectural restraint is jarringly at odds with predominant portrayals of the science fiction city. As noted by Graham (2016) and Hurley (2008) the future city has become synonymous with rapid vertical urbanisation, closing off alternative urban visions and the possible futures they contain. While there is a growing call for the study of sf by scholars in the spatial disciplines such as Abbott (2016), Collie (2011), Hewitt and Graham (2015) and Kitchin and Kneale (2002), the unassuming, everyday spaces of feminist sf are often lost in the shadows cast by the dystopian high rise. As Le Guin argues, these passive and participatory utopias become visible only when we ‘adjust to a dimmer light’ (1989). In response, this paper lingers in shared spaces of sf which are possible examples of what Washida Imarisha terms ‘visionary fiction’ which is sf that ‘has a relevance towards building new, freer worlds’ (2015: 4) including; N.K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015–2017), Sally Miller Gearhart’s *The Wanderground* (1979) and Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). By imaginatively inhabiting the utopian enclaves within these feminist texts it is possible to explore geographies of alterity – to adjust to the dim light and learn to cherish the quiet.

Keywords

architect, architecture, cities, design, Marge Piercy, N. K. Jemisin, Sally Miller Gearhart, science fiction, Ursula K. Le Guin

> Abbenay was poisonless: a bare city, bright, the colours light and hard, the air pure. It was quiet.[1]

This is how Ursula K. Le Guin describes Abbenay; the capital (or at least the most central) city on the anarcho-communist moon of Annares in *The Dispossessed*. It is a city of low rise buildings, utilitarian design and uncompromising open-ness. It is modest and unassuming. It is quiet.

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In her essay 'A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be' Le Guin discusses this novel as one manifestation of her wider desire to explore a utopianism of process not progress, of balance in motion.[2] In place of the startling clarity and order of the Euclidian ideal of utopia she offers negations and obscurity. A vision of utopia that is weak, passive and participatory, that perhaps 'won't look the way it ought to'.[3] It is an alternative, but one which requires work before it can be contemplated. It requires work from me before I can contemplate it. As an architect, I am possessed by an internal restlessness to make, discuss and draw. I am all gathering in and setting out. But Le Guin's gentle provocation asks me to desist, to sit for a while with the utopia that might become visible if only I can 'adjust to a dimmer light'.[4] And yet I have failed to heed her call. In my attempt to adjust to the dim and the quiet I have sought out those authors whose worlds and works contain such moments. I am all gathering in and setting out again.

This article is the product of fleeting still moments in the summers of 2020 and 2021, an attempt to adjust to the quiet while surrounded by the all too heavy silence of loss and love held at a distance. It will dwell in turn within the comm of Castrima in N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015–2017), the remember rooms in Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women* (1978) and the dining hall of Mattapoisett in Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). When replaying the stories of these novels in my mind they all seem to share fleeting moments of quiet, albeit differently textured. As I reflect on this selection of stories a year later, it is perhaps more noticeable that these are all moments of quiet set within ongoing struggles for individual and collective agency, for freedom from violence and oppression.

The spaces these novels describe are analogous to a town square, a classroom, and a dining hall. These are places of gathering, sites where collective identity is deliberated and determined, and it is here that the desire for change is mutually reaffirmed. They act as utopian enclaves, their existence manifesting the possibility of a world made otherwise.[5] As sites of acknowledged vulnerability beset by the threat of violence, the textures of quiet which permeate these spaces might be understood as a product of suppression, a subsuming of self to pass unnoticed. But I read this quiet as an integral part of that which is being fought for, perhaps an unwilling necessity but also a conscious choice to model the practices of respite and comfort. In this, these spaces echo with bell hooks' resonant ideals of homeplace, 'that space where we return for renewal and self-recovery, where we can heal our wounds and become whole', that necessary sanctuary from oppression which accommodates the gathering of community and resolve.[6]

While everyday or domestic spaces of respite and care might be overlooked as sites of resistance when compared with the vocal sites of the picket line or the protest, they can be an integral part of what Kye Askins terms 'quiet politics'. For Askins, the work of 'quiet politics' is defined by intentional acts of encounter and generosity which wilfully affirm radical belonging. These acts often take place in everyday spaces, as 'mundane spaces allow for, and demand, shifts in perceptions of Self and Other, nudging established discourses of alterity, and anticipating new social relations; they are the prosaic places in which people discover each other as multifaceted, complex and interdependent'.[7] It is this quality of purposeful quietness and understated determination which is present in the community spaces of these fictions, in these resolutely defended sites of mutual care.

Where, in our lived reality, such places of respite and recognition do not yet exist, or exist other to where we find ourselves, these novels offer imagined worlds where such utopian enclaves are not only possible but present. These novels are possible examples of what writer and activist Walidah Imarisha terms 'visionary fiction', that is sf (science fiction)[8] which 'has a relevance towards building new, freer worlds,' part of the decolonising and unshackling of the imagination from which other forms of liberation might be born.[9] Reading these texts in this light, it is possible to see that the moments of quiet contained within are not set against the fierce struggle of their

inhabitants, they are part of it. They are the spaces of dimmer light, the fragments of that which is being fought for.

This article is also a reflection on my own process of reading and the accompanying desire to unshackle my own imagination regarding built futures.[10] It moves through each text in turn, attending to the different tones and textures of quiet present in these spaces to draw out their resonant spatial qualities, to express the ways in which the hushed tones of these imagined worlds have spoken in me as an architect. It alternates between extracts of the text and my own words, in an attempt to make visible this process of reading, relaying and responding.[11] This is a method which, in its ambition to evoke the worlds within these texts, is both achingly incomplete and indelibly warped by my own desires and digressions. Rather than consider this as a failing, I will strive to express my reading as an unashamedly creative act as described by literature scholar Pierre Bayard.[12] I acknowledge that I come to these books with a specific way of seeing the world, trained and cultivated by architectural education and practice, which lures me to examine the interplay of the social and the built. So, I find myself compelled to unpick the fleeting descriptions of the built within these novels, to extrapolate from these glimpses based on my own knowledge of construction methods and science-fictional reading practices,[13] and wander through these spaces of collective congregation. These are architectures of modest radicalism, and the voice they sound in my mind is at once softly spoken and compelling. They challenge me to discard academic convention and succumb to the swells of emotion they evoke. I can only hope that the time spent on this act of writing, and the recollections of reading which run alongside it, will allow me to linger long enough in these spaces of understatement that I might adjust to the dim light and learn to cherish the quiet.

The Broken Earth trilogy: this is a place which carves out a home

> Ykka's not in her apartment. You look around, follow the patterns of movement in the comm with your eyes, and finally head toward the Flat Top. She cannot still be there. . . You see that only a few people are still on the Flat Top now—a gaggle of maybe twenty, sitting or pacing, looking angry and exasperated and troubled. . . But Ykka is here, sitting on one of the divans that someone has brought from her apartment, still talking. She's hoarse, you realize as you draw close.[14]

This is a space of quiet exhaustion.

The quiet which is embodied by Ykka as she reclines resting her worn voice, is not the crackling and heady silence of words unspoken, rather it is the slow winding down of the body once everything has been said. It has the same texture as the quiet that is present after the drilling on the road outside your house, which, having lasted all day has finally tapered off and stilled. A rest granted by the gentle absence of strain.

> The abandoned village up there is this comm's wall. Camouflage rather than a barrier. . . ."These people should've just built a wall like everyone else," you do say, but then you stop, because it occurs to you that the goal is survival, and sometimes survival requires change.[15]

This is a hidden space.

The comm of Castrima in NK Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy is beset by prejudice, violence and famine. In response to dramatic shifts in climatic conditions most communities have built walls to delineate the boundaries of their caring, to mark out who is self and who is other. The occupants of this comm have already faced the hardship of being cast outside of those walls. So, they have removed themselves from the cruelties of the surface. An abandoned settlement above conceals the tunnel which leads down into the community of Castrima below, a place of retreat and respite from

the fiercely defensive villages and towns of the surface. They use the ruins of the world as camouflage. For utopian scholar Naomi Jacobs there is a utopianism to be found in digging into the earth, the act of burrowing rather than building.[16] It is a form of construction which acknowledges the ground as a living substance to be sculpted rather than conquered. In the vast expanses of the Antarctic discussed by Jacobs, this burrowing is an act of endurance, of making or finding home within a landscape of cruel and beautiful freedom. In Castrima, this digging down is an act of endurance undertaken for the sake of freedom from violence. It is made possible by the 'orogenes', individuals who have the power to shape the earth, but it is their presence within this group which heightens the necessity of their concealment. They have been driven into hiding by overwhelming fear of discovery, driven underground in all senses of the word. Their existence is deemed so intolerable to the dominant majority that walls would not be enough to protect them.

> You stare in openmouthed, abject wonder. It's a geode. You can sess that, the way the rock around you abruptly changes to something else. The pebble in the stream, the warp in the weft. . . Within that pocket, nurtured by incomprehensible pressures and bathed in water and fire, crystals grew. This one's the size of a city.[17]

This is a found space.

Castrima is located within an unnatural crystal formation which was brought into being by the skills of a former civilisation, now rediscovered by their distant oregene descendants. While its current inhabitants can sess the means of its construction – the way it has shifted the land to create this pocket of crystalline perfection, the means to undertake such work has been lost. The geode's clarity and scale are testament to the technological control of those who went before, but as environmental lawyer and policy scholar Alastair Iles discusses, Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy is a critique of such hubristic techno-utopianism.[18] Here the human and environmental costs of ideals of technological progress are gradually exposed, and the hard cutting edges of this geode seem to echo the brutal rigidity of the former social order. This crystal chamber is both a monument to this lost civilisation's power, and a memorial to those killed by and for its construction. The vacant chambers are now reclaimed through occupation, inhabited by those more willing to bend and compromise.

> Figuring out how to reach the ground level is difficult, at first, because all the platforms and bridges and stairways of the place are built to connect the crystals. . . There's nothing intuitive about it, you have to follow one set of stairs up and walk around one of the wider crystal shafts in order to find another set of stairs that goes down-only to find that they end on a platform with no steps at all, which forces you to backtrack.[19]

This is a challenging space.

These crystal structures cannot be easily carved, cut or reshaped, and the knowledge of how to grow them has been lost. So, the inhabitants of Castrima have grafted timber platforms and rope bridges onto the monumental crystal. Rather than live within the limits of the structures they uncovered they have begun to forge a place for themselves in a resistant world. As they build bridges which span between previously isolated places, they overwrite uncompromising perfection with a network of paths that are conditional. Like the community, the bridges connect the possible, creating routes which can shift and be remade, accommodating of change and accepting of the uncertain.

> Amid the many sharp-tipped crystals of Castrima, is one that looks as if it's been sheared off halfway, leaving a wide hexagonal platform positioned and elevated near the center of the comm. Several stair-bridges connect to it, and there are chairs and a railing. Flat Top. . . By the time she reaches the Flat Top there's a small crowd already there. . .[20]

This space is up for debate.

In the very centre of the geode is a crystal whose top has been sheared off to create a town square. For the inhabitants of Castrima it is a place of decisions, where issues of survival are weighed and measured, and each inhabitant has their voice heard. This is where we find Ykka, in the wake of the community discussions which have rendered her hoarse. The tension which was held in every muscle of her body to withstand the swell of voices and raise her own voice to be heard can now be released into exhaustion. This space of discussion is not walled in or separated off from daily life but placed at its centre. It is a manifestation of a desire to create a society without the barriers, to welcome in those who had been so fiercely kept out of the spaces of power.

> She sounds so determined. It makes your heart ache, because you felt the same way she did, once. It would be nice to still feel that way. To have some hope of a real future, a real community, a real life. . .[21]

This is a place which carves out a home.

Castrima exists within our own far future. Earth has undergone seismic transformation and is now subject to unpredictable 'seasons' which bring with them plagues, earthquakes, acid rain. Each season is an apocalyptic event for those unprepared, so humanity walls itself off into small self-sufficient groups and builds for rugged endurance. It is a divisive mentality which pervades the social fabric, a way of living founded on a mistrust of others who might be a drain on resources, and a pathological hatred of those who are not understood – those like the orogenes who can influence the earth itself, who are only tolerated when subjugated and controlled.

This is a world beyond the end of the world. As sf scholar Gerry Canavan describes, novels like this dwell in the repercussions of climate emergency, continuing past the moment of crisis to consider the life that can be lived within and beyond.[22] Rather than presenting a narrative of apocalyptic finality and rupture, this vision of ongoing and present climate emergency reaches both forward and back in time to acknowledge the many apocalypses of racial exploitation and colonialism. In his work on environmental justice, Kyle Whyte reflects on notions of apocalyptic finality in relation to Indigenous persons 'already having endured one *or many more* apocalypses'.[23] For Whyte, sf and storytelling can be a way to both recognise and imaginatively inhabit the post-apocalyptic, to explore adaptation and flourishing which exceeds mere survival. As described by geographer Kathryn Yusoff in *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* which draws on Jemisin's work to consider the geophysical re-shapings of earth by extractive logics, 'the end of this world has already happened for some subjects, and it is the prerequisite for the possibility of imagining living and breathing again for others'.[24] The inhabitants of Castrima already inhabit a time past many ends of the world, and their ability to live and breathe again will depend upon further endings.

Castrima calls to those who have been cast out for fear of their difference. Its inhabitants have chosen incarceration within this buried community over death at the hands of those they love. It is an act of fear, not of hope, and one which they acknowledge will last only as long as this place goes undiscovered. But, however fleeting, this coming together creates something new. The quiet here might be a product of exhaustion but it also an indication that, just for a moment, it is safe to rest. It is a place where those who have been taught to mistrust themselves might find comfort and recognition.

The Wanderground: this is a place which strives to be better

> Clana felt gently swayed. She felt safe. She felt well-loved and excited. The rememberings were about to begin.[25]

This is a space of hushed quiet.

A silence that is not imposed, but creeps up on you nonetheless. It is the muffled noise of libraries or museums, where the weight of memory seems to ask that you tread lightly so as not to disturb the hanging dust. The carefully attentive quiet of an intake of breath before the story starts.

> She scrunched into the niche she had built for herself: a large heap of small pebbles which made a backrest and a mound of pebbles and coarse sand that curved around to rest each of her arms. . .. finding at last the magic form-fitting moment that made her suddenly completely comfortable.[26]

This is a space you make for yourself.

The remember room is a cave, a warren, a hole dug into the earth. It contains sand and pebbles which are swept into small undulations – the long-shore drift left by a multitude of children each burrowing themselves into the surface and making a place for themselves in the world. These children can see and feel their own bodily impact on this place, how they shape and change it, and how it pushes back as it slumps and slides. As loose materials are swept up in eager hands this space fosters an attentiveness to the environments being inhabited, while it acknowledges the presence of the non-human earth within these acts of recollection. As literary scholar Eric Otto discusses, the collective construction of memory in the remember rooms acts alongside the ecological spirituality of this community as integral parts of this novel's cultural ecofeminism.[27] It reflects the community's intertwined desires to challenge the oppressions of both women and non-human nature. In the remember rooms, the shifting landscape constructed by the burrowing children materialises the kinships between individuals and environments, the interrelated network of impacts, influences and mutual forms of support.

> As she absorbed every detail around her she was also aware of some of her own impatience. . .. Around her in the windowless chamber were nearly a dozen other girl-children who were digging out and settling into their places amid giggles and chattering.[28]

This is a space to listen.

This is a windowless chamber, suffused with a dim light. It is designed to be cut off from the world outside, reached only after a process of ritual bathing and preparation, open to those who are ready to listen. The lack of windows and simplicity of materials is designed to focus the attention of small children, to remove distraction. In this room, as expressed by feminist and utopian literature scholar Angelika Bammer, the experiences of the Hill Women are remembered and the community's history is formed by its own telling.[29] In sharing these stories with young people, the Hill Women hold and cherish their own lived experiences, resisting the narratives of oppression which seek to diminish or dismiss them. The focus that this space aims to instil attests to the value they place on being heard, believed and understood.

> Nova settled onto a well-worn sand pallet and was leaning against the far stone wall. Alaka picked her way carefully around the sitting and reclining bodies and knelt beside Nova. The two guides, enwrapping the whole group, also sought assurances from each girl-child woman and cat that each was ready.[30]

This is a space to take care.

Within this small and enclosed space the guides are able to attend to the wellbeing of the dozen children present, and no child is lost amongst the crowd. This care is necessary given the topics which are addressed here, the still present past that the women of this community fled from; the memories of misogyny and sexual violence, and the hunting parties which tracked those who

would not conform. Sf scholar Marleen Barr details how this novel and other 'feminist fabulations' address obscured or supressed realities of sexuality and sexual violence from within the cloak of fiction.[31] Like the stories told in these remember rooms, these spaces of fiction are a gentle yet instant reminder of violent reality. For the women and children in the remember rooms, this place is designed to gather and support them as they collectively hold traumatic memories, to acknowledge and undertake the work of care.

> She pulled a chair up and began making a memory of the kids playing in the street three stories below. Deliberately she observed the light, the texture of colors, the angles of movement. She was leaving this. She wasn't coming back.[32]

This is a space of significance.

The memories which are shared here are remnants of the cities which the women have left behind. In the surrounding rooms objects line the shelves, each a relic of this former life, accompanied by the spoken testimony of a guide who tells a story of its use. These objects and memories were carried by these women as they fled the city and are the only remaining traces of these lifeworlds for those who have no intention of returning. The object stores and the remember rooms are located beyond the settlements that the Hill Women have founded, as far again as the city is in the other direction. To visit them requires the repeated act of walking away, from the city and from the shelter of found community, a repetition of the act of finding protection through distance.

> Silence. Miraculous silken. The remembering of who they were. . . A moment for the readiness to struggle, a moment for re-commitment to care, whatever the gradual outcome would be.[33]

This is a place which strives to be better.

This room is one of many dispersed spaces scattered across the Wanderground, the settlements of the Hill Women who have fled the City. In this future version of the United States, gender-based violence and environmental damage have recently reached a crisis point. The earth itself has revolted, shifting and twisting the rules which govern life upon its surface. Mechanical technologies cease to function beyond the outskirts of the cities, and men who venture beyond the city walls are rendered impotent while they inhabit this strange new terrain. Within the cities the segregation and suppression of women has escalated to systemic brutality, but those women who have escaped have developed new psychic abilities. They wind-ride and mind-stretch, in communion with the landscape and communication with non-human beings. This is a starkly gender separatist utopia, as cultural theorist Debra Shaw delineates, with all of the exclusionary problematics and erasure of experience that any such essentialising of gender entails.[34] But, as geographer Gill Valentine suggests, it also hints at ways identity can be mobilised to proclaim common needs and goals, to reassert specific freedoms and challenge gender identity-based oppression.[35]

Those women who find their way to the hills beyond the city limits are offered mutual support and environmental entanglement, but within the city patterns of hatred and isolation persist, and the conditions for community belonging the Hill Women have established are similarly exclusionary. This may be a community where new ways of being together are learnt and gathered, but its members are those who have been driven from that which they once knew as home. In the remember rooms the persistent trauma of this violence and loss is shared and held, enmeshed within the kinship networks of this place and people. It is a place where personal pain is not denied or diminished but finds its own telling, an integral part of a future that resists repeating such acts of oppression.

Woman on the edge of time: this is a place to fight for

> The room they entered took up half the dome and was filled with long tables seating perhaps fifteen at each, mostly dressed in the ordinary work clothes that Lucient wore, the children dressed is small versions. . .The pulse of the room was positive but a little overwhelming. She felt buffeted. Why wasn't it noisier? Something absorbed the sound, muted the voices shouting and babbling. . .[36]

This is a space of muted noise.

This is not the quiet of joy repressed or stifled, but the muffled thrum of music playing next door, heard through the party wall. It is the sound of the presence of others, occasionally a stifling pressure but more often a reassurance, a passive dispelling of solitude.

> Most buildings were small and randomly scattered among trees and shrubbery and gardens, put together of scavenged old wood, old bricks and stones and cement blocks. Many were wildly decorated and overgrown with vines.[37]

This is a space to soften sharp edges.

The 'fooder' dining hall in Mattapoisett in Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, is constructed from timber and weather worn bricks. It is not made but scavenged and found. This is an architecture that has been assembled rather than built, the designs shifting as gathered fragments are carefully dusted off and repurposed. In their hands the discarded and the disregarded is cherished, and new meaning is wrought from old materials. This tangible celebration of reuse stands as testimony to the environmental attentiveness which underpins all their actions. While life in Mattapoisett does not address environmental crisis directly, as sociologist Lisa Garforth describes, it is a clear response to ecological concern and awareness.[38] For Garforth such depictions of environmental futures in sf serve to re-socialise climate science, providing us with space to argue about what matters ethically and ontologically as we confront notions of the Anthropocene. Bio-regional awareness and environmental concern are present in all facets of life in Mattepoisett, including the structures they have built. Building materials are chosen on the basis of social and environmental impact rather than financial cost, and the damage inflicted by extraction, transport and processing is weighed alongside the pleasure of those who do the work of making. So, the salvaged takes precedence over the machined finished, and the time spent on manual forms of making is understood as both craft and community service.

> . . .the scraps of melody and laughter, the calls, the clatter of dishes and cutlery, the scraping of chairs on the floor. . .[39]

This is a space with an openness of purpose.

People claim that they gather here to eat together. But as with so many collective meals, sustenance is simply the easiest excuse to be together, a reason to share time and the joyful labours of care. They talk while they eat, children play games around the table legs, and their laughter bursts through the strains of musical instruments. This is a space designed to encourage the blurring of uses, as multifunctional and everyday as a kitchen table. It resists labelling as a place of work or place of leisure and exists to support all forms of gathering and sharing. It reflects the social intent of this community which, as detailed by utopian scholars Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, imagines itself to exist outside of capitalist authority and patriarchal discourse which marginalises and oppresses both the environment and otherness.[40] Without a designation of use this is a space which resists the marginalising of any form of activity. By extension it resists the othering of any

individual who might perform that action. There is no physical separation of spaces for domestic, creative, manual, intellectual or caring labour, just as its inhabitants are not separated or defined by these roles. It is a collective space which strives for the liberation of its inhabitants.

> "The fooder is a home for us all. A warm spot."[41]

This is a space of gentle welcome.

The sweeping dome of the fooder is not a space of hard edges or abrupt angles. It emerges from the earth, as ground swell tapers up into the roof. A gentle curve allows for an internal area clear of supports and columns creating an undisrupted enclosure, and the space within is able to shelter and accommodate the entire community. This is a future where large institutional buildings; the church, university, museum and houses of parliament are notably absent, and so the size of this dining hall unwittingly bestows the spatial presence usually reserved for the seats of power. But it is perhaps telling that the most significant structure in this society offers sustenance to all its inhabitants. It has a purpose defined not by the accumulation of power, but the equitable distribution of resources. In this architectural celebration of a space for sharing, the community's social priorities are made evident. No permission is needed to enter this dining hall. Here every individual is expected and welcomed.

> On the translucent panels designs had been painted or baked in – she could not tell – in a wild variety of styles and levels of competence, ranging from sophisticated abstracts, landscapes, and portraits, to what must be children's drawings. "where did the art come from?" Luciente looked surprised. "the walls? Why from us – or some of us. . .."[42]

This is a space of personal expression.

The room is lined with the artistic outpourings of the community, some baked into the fabric of the structure and others temporarily displayed. A wild mismatch of styles and forms, the brightly coloured finger paintings of young children squirm exuberantly alongside the refined precision of skilled artists. This is not a curated exhibition but an expression of joyful anarchy, the collection and display drawn from anyone willing to share. It is a shifting and varied reflection of the creative life of the community, establishing the tangible presence of all who choose to produce such work within this place of coming together. By accommodating art from all members of the community, this display makes evident that individual worth is not defined by any measure of quality or quantity of output. Rather, creative work is recognised as a reflection of the vibrant variety of individual passions and forms of self-expression. Through this act of making space, value is conferred on these individual outpourings and their makers. But it also elevates the practice of artistic work. It celebrates any and all contributions to the creative life of the community as a worthwhile endeavour, work equivalent to any other and a necessary expression of self.

> "some you can see through and some not, because some of us like to feel closed in while we eat and some – like me – wan to see everything."[43]

This is a space of constant change.

Despite the chaos of multiple functions and myriad artistic styles, this is still a space which aims to support rather than overwhelm. It is designed to allow for individual modification with shifting panels which can create openness or enclosure. There is the possibility of choice that comes from spatial variety. Here it is possible to sit with a friend in the warmth of a corner while confidences are whispered, to gather in a group's boisterous openness, to find quiet solitude without isolation.

As the panels are relocated and shifted the space reflects the desires of those it holds. It is a continually flickering celebration of individual difference and the powerful necessity of change.

> ". . .there's always a thing you can deny an oppressor, if only your allegiance. Your belief. Your co-opting. Often even with vastly unequal power, you can find or force an opening to fight back. In your time many without power found ways to fight. Till that became a power."[44]

This is a place to fight for.

The fooder of Mattapoisett, Massachusetts is only one future possibility for the year 2137. We visit alongside Connie, a Hispanic woman from 1970's Harlem, for whom these visits to the future are an all too fleeting escape from a life where she is subject to domestic, racial and sexual violence and incarceration in an asylum. Depending on whose testimony you believe, she travels through time to be here, or she is experiencing delusional visions. Here she finds respite and support, reaching across time to Lucient to visit the spaces of child-rearing and decision-making, becoming a member of this community for brief moments. The inhabitants of this future have forged a world without the prejudice which has defined and imprisoned Connie in realities of persecution and brutality. But, as identified by utopian scholars Ruth Levitas and Lucy Sargisson, they have given up much which Connie considers central to human experience. In the dismantling of gender they have given up bearing children so that they might all become mothers.[45] They take up space, in ways that, as Karen Franck, Liz Bondi and Joyce Davidson discuss, challenge the fictions of gender.[46] These shifts in what it means to be human are both subtle and significant, and while Connie admires the quiet self-possession of Mattapoisett, it is a way of being in the world she cannot occupy while remaining herself. It is a place she cannot inhabit, but it is one she chooses to fight for.

It was quiet

I am reluctant to leave these places of gathering. They surround me with a promise of community which I yearn to make manifest. They are a long way from being the gleaming castle on the hill-top which Le Guin decries, but just like those Euclidian utopian models the visions of community they offer are similarly flawed. But they did not claim to be perfect – instead they set out to question whether we can do better. Each novel insistently places glimpses of community in direct contrast to a way of living which extemporises the inequities and cruelties of our own. Where the surface above Castrima models the fear of difference which tacitly supports xenophobia and fails to resist enslavement, the community below welcomes the outcast. Where the cities of the Wanderground rely on technological ideals of progress that overlook environmental cost and allow systemic gender persecution to propagate, the worlds of the Hill Women recognise responsibility and agency. Where Connie's Harlem overwhelms her with the combined and intersectional oppressions of poverty, racism, sexism and carceral responses to perceived mental illness, Mattapoisett recognises the needs and contributions of each individual. They acknowledge the world as it is and offer a fragment of a world made otherwise. Each is far from perfect, with its own weaknesses and negations, but it is an alternative, and one that just might be better.

In these visions of alternatives all three novels are deeply concerned with the space that an individual can occupy, and how this constructs social relations. They each take on the position of those who have the greatest struggle to be heard; the outcast, the overlooked, the oppressed, and strive to develop social and physical structures which recognise their agency, dismantling the barriers of exclusion constructed around spaces of power. They all focus on the interior world, the everyday and the domestic. Rather than architectures of dominance or display, these are buildings developed

from a concern for the life lived within. These societies strive to be non-hierarchical and so the structures they inhabit are low rise, modest and restrained. They are concerned with the ecological impact of the worlds they construct, as well as the labour of making and this is reflected in their architectures of craft and reuse. There are no cities here, or certainly not as we understand them.

The spaces of gathering in these novels reflect the ideals and compromises of the societies they contain; they manifest and support the passive and participatory. As such, they sit in startling contrast to the imaginaries of the future where the city seems almost synonymous with rapid vertical urbanisation.[47] As geographers Rob Kitchin and James Kneale note, those of us within the spatial disciplines all to infrequently venture beyond the 'approved canon' of sf to consider works explore alternate built futures and their socio-economic structures,[48] and the everyday spaces of feminist sf are all too often lost in the shadows cast by the dystopian high-rise. But to focus on these urban fictions which depict the futures we either expect or fear, serves only to ensure their inevitability by crowding out alternatives. It does an injustice to the breath-taking breadth and variety of sf visions, and leaves little room for the futures we might hope for.

For those of us in the spatial disciplines, who are all too aware of how the structures of power are written into and performed through the spaces we inhabit and design, these fictions provide critical distance to consider how we might design and construct spaces that engender and support such radical quiet.[49] While our existing built environments manifest and reinscribe existing power structures mired in extractivist practices and ongoing histories of violence and oppression, these spaces of sf provide us with ways to imagine the future otherwise. They resonate with the powerful work of design and activist practices which look to develop architectures of degrowth and social justice.[50] As celebrated by writer and activist adrienne maree brown, sf can act as a site to radically challenge pre-existing conceptions of the world and powerfully undertake the work of imagining alternatives. It can be 'a way to practice the future together'.[51] These imagined sites of radical quiet give us the respite required to consider what practicing the future together might feel like, and consider the spaces it might require of us.

So, this exercise of reading and writing is perhaps my own attempt to focus on that which I long to see, in the hope that my considered energy will support such futures to flourish, to bring into being the passive and participatory utopias present within these fictions.[52] I cannot help but read them and bear witness to what they ask of me as an architect.[53] As I read, I collect these scraps of imagined worlds, these half-glimpsed fragments of futures we might yet bring into being, relying on them as points of reference against which I can orient myself and my practice. I continually begin again, reminding myself that at the start of any design project there comes the work of gathering in and setting out.[54]

At Le Guin's prompting, I attend to the many forms of quiet which seem to form within and through these fictions, sitting with them so that I can adjust to their dimmer light. These imagined structures are quiet presences within the wider fabric of the city. They reject the authority of spatial presence visible in height or brash aesthetics and instead are modest and unassuming enough to grant welcome or concealed enough to provide shelter. The materials used are similarly muted, softened and worn. They are made from salvaged brick, sweeping shingle and bound timber, capable of being dismantled and remade again, resolutely provisional and adaptable. They are programmatically diffuse, not designed to celebrate their singular use as an overtly political sites of debate, but easily repurposed. Each is carefully woven into the everyday, designed to support existing practices of care and sustenance by providing collective housing or spaces of communal dining or childrearing. Within this work of necessity, they offer moments of peace, providing space for sustained activities of making and gathering enfolded within textured interiors that absorb the harsh edges of noise. Here insistent distractions might be gently transferred into the background, the soft voice of hope might be heard and held, and the powerful quiet might rise to the surface.

These are spaces for gathering in and setting out again.
They may be quiet but:
These are places which carve out a home.
These are places which strive to be better.
These are places to fight for.

Acknowledgements

This work was first shared at the online symposium 'Earth and its Others: the Geographies of Science Fiction', hosted by the University of Fribourg in 2020. My thanks to Christine Bichsel and Lorenzo Andolfatto for all of their wonderful work organising this in such a challenging time, and for their ongoing support. This work owes much to all of those who presented and shared at this event. My thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their generous and constructive comments and to the editors for their support. My continued thanks to the communities that I am privileged to work amongst who inform and inspire in ways beyond measure; the Beyond Gender Research Collective, the London Science Fiction Research Community and Utopian Acts. Finally, my ongoing thanks to David Roberts, it is a joy to gather in and set out with you.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. U.K.Le Guin, *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*, SF Masterworks (London: Gollancz, 2002), p. 84.
2. U.K.Le Guin, 'A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to be', in U.K.Le Guin (ed.), *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), pp. 80–100.
3. Le Guin, 'A Non-Euclidean View of California', p. 11.
4. Le Guin, 'A Non-Euclidean View of California', p. 10.
5. The worlds depicted within these texts are not 'traditional' literary utopias. The worlds they depict are not intended as idealised versions of society existing within the temporally fixed moment of a utopian end-time, and they feature none of the crystalline perfection or uncompromising rigidity of what Le Guin denigrates as the Euclidean ideal of utopia. Rather, the communities they depict are self-aware, critical and contingent, resolutely holding open space for perpetual revolution rather than foreclosing the future. Following Frederic Jameson's definitions these are not blueprint utopias, but depictions of a utopianism in and of process, a manifestation of the utopian impulse. The future of mutual care depicted in *Woman on the Edge of Time* is revealed to be only one possible future within the novel, making it a vision of utopia which is self-reflexive, partial and unfulfilled, dependent on individual choice and collective resistance. As described by Tom Moylan, it is a critical utopia which "asserts the power of desire. . . as an anticipation and a practice." Similarly, the communities of care depicted in *The Wanderground* and the *Broken Earth* exist within wider a wider social context which necessitates revolutionary resistance. Rather than focus on the specific genre definitions of these three texts whose dominant social structures might also mean they can be usefully discussed as critical dystopian fiction, this essay explores the way all three novels depict spaces of community gathering as utopian enclaves, as sites of refusal and as a manifestation of the utopian ideals their inhabitants work to realise. These are the utopias of process which Le Guin urges us to seek out, present in fleeting and fragmentary form.

   F.Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005), p. 2; T.Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014), p. 147. For further reflection on the utopian impulse in critical

dystopian fiction, see: T.Moylan and R.Baccolini, *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2003), and L.T.Sargent, 'The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited', *Utopian Studies*, 5(1), 1994, pp. 1–37.

6. b.hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 389.
7. K.Askins, 'Being Together: Everyday Geographies and the Quiet Politics of Belonging', *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 14(2), 2015, pp. 470–78, p. 476.

   The geography of quiet politics is further described by Askins as "an unassuming praxis of engaging with others, in which new social relations are built in/through everyday places, relationally connected across a range of geographies". Crucially, for Laura Pottinger, the spaces and acts of 'quiet activism' which she defines as "a form of engagement that emphasises embodied, practical, tactile and creative ways of acting, resisting, reworking and subverting" present a purposeful rather than passive expression of quietness.

   K.Askins, 'A Quiet Politics of Being Together: Miriam and Rose', *Area*, 46(4), 2014, pp. 353–54, p. 354.

   L.Pottinger, 'Planting the Seeds of a Quiet Activism', *Area*, 49(2), 2017, pp. 215–22, p. 217.
8. The term 'sf' will be used in place of 'science fiction' to reflect the expanded and interwoven sites of "science fiction, science fact, science fantasy, speculative feminism, speculative fabulation, string figures. . ." following Donna Haraway. This reflects how these novels play with and dissolve ideas of genre boundaries, slipping between and across classifications of utopian fiction, fantasy and science fiction.

   D.J.Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble : Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
9. W.Imarisha, 'Introduction', in a.m.brown and W.Imarisha (eds), *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories From Social Justice Movements* (Oakland: AK Press, 2015), pp. 3–5, p. 4.
10. As Jameson notes this reflects a wider shift in the function of utopian literature, from the prescriptive delineation of a better society to the holding open of the spaces of possibility. These novels form part of the utopian education of desire that other worlds are possible. In his reflection on Jameson's work, Moylan outlines how the work of the literary utopia cannot be reduced to its content, to the specific depiction within the text of an ideal blueprint or system, instead utopian literature "finds its importance not in the particulars of those resolutions but in the very act of imagining them, the form of utopia itself." While the spaces these texts contain exert their own quiet power of possibility, there is also utopian possibility held within the act of reading itself, and in imaginatively inhabiting the world made otherwise.

    Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, p. 39.

    Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*; drawing on E.Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. N.Plaice, S.Plaice and P.Knight, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), I.

    F.Jameson, 'Progress Versus Utopia; Or, Can we Imagine the Future? (Progrès Contre Utopie, Ou: Pouvons-Nous Imaginer l'avenir)', *Science Fiction Studies*, 9(2), 1982, pp. 147–58.
11. I discuss the implications of reading sf and the particular value which this act of engagement might hold for those within the spatial disciplines further in A.Butt, '"Endless Forms, Vistas and Hues": Why Architects Should Read Science Fiction', *Arq: Architectural Research Quarterly*, 22(2), 2018, pp. 151–60.

    As well as offering the space for imaginative freedom, critical reflection and critique which might be particularly found in or through genre literature, the act of reading fiction elicits empathetic engagement. Through what Suzanne Keen terms the 'enacted empathy' of reading practices we are able to walk the surfaces of strange new worlds, to imaginatively relocate ourselves into the experiences of another.

    S.Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
12. P.Bayard, *How to Talk About Books you Haven't Read* (London: Granta Books, 2012).
13. As John Rieder describes, readers of sf are engaged in "using the genre to actively shape their understanding of the world." These particularly science fictional reading practices include the complex construction of entire worlds from the fragments of description present in the text, spaces where the shared premise of the real cannot be assumed and each new line might require its imaginative unpicking and remaking.

    J.Rieder, *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2017), p. 22.

For further reflections on science fictional reading protocols see: K.L.Spencer, '"The Red Sun is High, the Blue Low": Towards a Stylistic Description of Science Fiction', *Science Fiction Studies*, 10(1), 1983, pp. 35–49; and S.R.Delany, *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011).

14. N.K.Jemisin, *The Obelisk Gate* (London: Orbit, 2016), p. 212.
15. N.K.Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (London: Orbit, 2015), p. 409.
16. N.Jacobs, 'The Frozen Landscape', in J.Donawerth and C.A.Kolmerten (eds), *Utopian and Science Fiction by Women: Worlds of Difference* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994).
17. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, p. 338.
18. A.Iles, 'Repairing the Broken Earth: N.K. Jemisin on Race and Environment in Transitions', *Elementa: Science of the Anthropocene*, 7(1), 2019, p. 26.
19. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, p. 399.
20. Jemisin, *The Obelisk Gate*, p. 18.
21. Jemisin, *The Obelisk Gate*, p. 217.
22. G.Canavan, 'New Paradigms, After 2001', in R.Luckhurst (ed.), *Science Fiction: A Literary History* (London: British Library Publishing, 2017), pp. 208–34.
23. K.P.Whyte, 'Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises', *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 1(1–2), 2018, pp. 224–42, p. 236.
24. K.Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).
25. S.M.Gearhart, *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women* (Watertown MA: Persephone Press, 1979), p. 140.
26. Gearhart, *The Wanderground*, p. 138.
27. E.C.Otto, 'Ecofeminist Theories of Liberation in the Science Fiction of Sally Miller Gearhart, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Joan Slonczewski', in D.A.Vakoch (ed.), *Feminist Ecocriticism: Environment, Women, and Literature* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), pp. 13–37.
28. Gearhart, *The Wanderground*, p. 138.
29. A.Bammer, *Partial Visions: Feminism and Utopianism in the 1970s* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004).
30. Gearhart, *The Wanderground*, p. 140.
31. M.S.Barr, *Lost in Space: Probing Feminist Science Fiction and Beyond* (Chappel Hill: University of North Carolina Press Books, 1993).
32. Gearhart, *The Wanderground*, p. 85.
33. Gearhart, *The Wanderground*, p. 129.
34. D.B.Shaw, 'Amazons and Aliens: Feminist Separatism and the Future of Knowledge', in D.B.Shaw (ed.), *Women, Science and Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), pp. 128–57.

    While this binary division of male and female ways of being and the similar divisions of technology and nature was not widely seen as problematic at the time of publication, this gender essentialism leads to language within the novel and actions by the female characters which disregards, dismisses or degrades other groups, particularly gay men, and fails to recognize the lives and experiences of trans, non-binary and gender queer people.
35. G.Valentine, 'Making Space: Separatism and Difference', in J.P.Jones III, H.J.Nast and S.M.Roberts (eds), *Thresholds in Feminist Geography* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997), pp. 65–76.
36. M.Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (London: The Women's Press, 1986), p. 74.
37. Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, p. 69.
38. L.Garforth, 'Environmental Futures, Now and Then: Crisis, Systems Modeling, and Speculative Fiction', *Osiris*, 34(1), 2019, pp. 238–57.
39. Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, p. 75.
40. R.Baccolini and T.Moylan, 'Introduction. Dystopia and Histories', in R.Baccolini and T.Moylan (eds), *Dark Horizons* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 1–12.
41. Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, p. 75.
42. Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, p. 75.

43. Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, p. 75.
44. Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, p. 328.
45. R.Levitas and L.Sargisson, 'Utopia in Dark Times', in R.Baccolini and T.Moylan (eds), *Dark Horizons* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 13–28.
46. K.A.Franck, 'Women and Environment', in R.B.Bechtel and A.Churchman (eds), *Handbook of Environmental Psychology* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2002), pp. 347–62; and L.Bondi and J.Davidson, 'Troubling the Place of Gender', in K.Anderson, M.Domosh, S.Pile and N.Thrift (eds), *Handbook of Cultural Geography* (London: SAGE, 2003), pp. 325–344.
47. S.Graham, 'Vertical Noir: Histories of the Future in Urban Science Fiction', *City*, 20(3), 2016, pp. 382–99.
48. J.Kneale and R.Kitchin, 'Lost in Space', in R.Kitchin and J.Kneale (eds), *Lost in Space: Geographies of Science Fiction* (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 1–16. It is joyfully acknowledged that the work gathered in this volume, and produced by those who participated in 'Earth and its Others: the Geographies of Science Fiction' hosted at the University of Fribourg in 2020 extends and challenges the dominance of 'canon' sf within the spatial disciplines.
49. This ability of sf to prompt critical reflection is central to Darko Suvin's definition of sf as the genre of 'cognitive estrangement'. For Suvin the mirror held up to reality by science fiction is a crucible, it does not simply reflect the world as it is but shows us a world transformed. It is a site where understandings of reality can be reforged.

    D.Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).
50. While examples of such work are too extensive to catalogue here, I want to acknowledge my own indebtedness to the practices, writing and teaching gathered in: A.Fitz, E.Krasny and A.Wien (eds), *Critical Care: Architecture and Urbanism for a Broken Planet* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019); S.Hall, T.Loewenson and H.Tayob, 'Race, Space & Architecture', 2020, (1 June 2022); and E.Attlee, P.Harper and M.Smith (eds), *Gross Ideas: Tales of Tomorrow's Architecture* (London: Architecture Foundation, 2019).
51. a.m.brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico: AK Press, 2017).
52. This approach owes much to the ideas of 'gifting attention' present in the work of adrienne maree brown.

    'Gifting Attention – Adrienne Maree Brown', 2018, <https://adriennemareebrown.net/tag/gifting-attention/> (1 June 2022).
53. Jameson might describe this singular focus on the built within such rich texts as the product of sedimented reading habits and the interpretive traditions formed, in my case, by architectural education and practice. Just as I have practiced the laying down of materials, so this practice has become sedimented within myself.

    F.Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1981), p. x.
54. In construction drawing 'setting out' refers to the process of locating key reference points and levels necessary to coordinate the project.

Author biography

Amy Butt is an architect and lecturer in architecture at the University of Reading with a specialism in architectural representation and communication. In her teaching, she explores the role of narrative and empathetic engagement in design using science fiction literature to provide a critical point of reflection on cities we currently inhabit as well as future worlds currently under construction. Her research explores the way the fictional worlds we construct influence and reflect the world we inhabit, writing about utopian thought and the imaginary in architecture through science fiction literature and film. Notable publications include: '"Endless forms, vistas and hues": Why Architects Should Read Science Fiction' in ARQ and 'The Present as Past: Science Fiction and the Museum' in Open Library of the Humanities. She is a member of the science fiction research collective Beyond Gender, and a co-founder of the architectural design collective Involve.