

## **“It was quiet”: The Radical Architectures of Understatement in Feminist SF**

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**Earth and its Others: the Geographies of Science Fiction, University of Fribourg**

**29th August 2020**

Poisonless: a bare city, bright, the colours light and hard, the air pure. It was quiet.  
*The Dispossessed*, Ursula Le Guin (1974)

This is how Ursula Le Guin describes Abbenay; the capital (or at the least 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. This novel is part of a wider desire within Le Guin’s work to explore the utopianism of process discussed in her essay ‘A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be’ (1989). In place of startling clarity and order she offers negations and obscurity. A utopia that is weak, passive and participatory. It is an alternative, but one which requires work on our part before it can be contemplated, a future which might become visible if only we can “adjust to a dimmer light”.

Following Le Guin’s urging this talk will dwell in three spaces of feminist sf; the comm of Castrima in N.K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-2017), the remember rooms in Sally Miller Gearhart’s *The Wanderground* (1979), and the dining hall of Mattapoisett in Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). The futures that these novels contain are possible examples of what Washida Imarisha terms ‘visionary fiction’, that is science fiction which “has a relevance towards building new, freer worlds” (2015: 4) part of the decolonizing and unshackling of the imagination from which other forms of liberation might be born. This paper will look closely at one space within each of these novels in an attempt to 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.

The comm of Castrima in NK Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy is a space of quiet exhaustion. This is not the crackling heady silence of words unspoken, but 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 has lasted all day, tapers off and sills. Only noticeable because of the tension which preceded it. The work you were doing to hold the noise at bay now released into exhaustion.

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.

This is a hidden space. An abandoned village above conceals a tunnel to the community of Castrima below. Where everyone else has built walls to delineate the boundaries of their caring, to mark out who is self and who is other, this group uses the ruins of the world as camouflage. As Naomi Jacobs (1994) notes, there is a utopianism to be found in digging into the earth, the act of burrowing rather than building. This community contains those driven into hiding by overwhelming fear of discovery, a literal and figurative underground. Their existence so indefensible 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 sense 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.

This is a found space. It is an unnatural crystal formation which was brought into being by the skills of a former civilisation, now rediscovered by their distant ancestors. Its clarity and scale are testament to the technological control of those who went before, while its hard edges echo the rigidity of the former social order. As Alastair Iles discusses (2019), the trilogy is a critique of the preceding civilisation's hubristic techno-utopianism. And so, this relic stands a monument and memorial, its vacant chambers now occupied 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.

This is a challenging space. The crystal structures cannot be easily carved, cut or reshaped, and the knowledge of how to grow them has been lost. So the inhabitants 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...

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. It is not walled in or separated off from daily life, but placed at its center. A manifestation of their social and political structure that strives to remove the barriers which have kept them out of the spaces of power.

There are no artful towers or cornices, just walls built out of wood and cheap brown local bricks, set upon foundations of hewn stone. No asphalted roads, just grassy slopes bisected by dirt paths; only some of those paths have been overlaid with wooden boards or cobblestones. It is a peaceful place...

The world of the surface over Castrima is that of a far future. An earth which has undergone seismic transformation and is now subject to unpredictable 'seasons' which bring with them plagues, earthquakes, acid rain. This is a world beyond the end of the world, as Gerry Canavan (2017) outlines, these are novels which dwell in the repercussions of climate crisis. 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 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.

You know you're right. The belief that orogenes will never be anything but the world's meat dances amid the cells of you, like magic. It isn't fair. You just want your life to matter.

Kathryn Yusoff draws on Jemisin's work, in *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2018), when she states that "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". 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.

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...

The quiet here might be a product of exhaustion, but it also an indication that, just for a moment, it is finally safe to rest. It is a place where those who have been taught to hate themselves might find comfort and recognition.

This is a place which carves out a home.

### **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.

The remember rooms in Sally Miller Gerhart's *The Wanderground* are 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.

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 loose materials create contact with the ground, a small reflection of this community's attentiveness to the environments they inhabit. As Eric Otto (2012) describes, it is a novel which explores a cultural ecofeminism, grounded in ideals of liberation. In the remember rooms, the connection to the ground also generates a connection to others as the surface shifts, providing forms of support which are greater than comfort.

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.

This is a space to listen. It 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 Angelika Bammer (2004), the experiences of the Hill Women are remembered and the community's history is formed by its own telling. The focus this space aims to instil attests to the value they place on being heard, believed and understood.

The rememberings were about to begin. 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.

This is a space to take care. Within the enclosure of these walls it is possible for the guides to attend to the wellbeing of the dozen children present without the risk of overlooking someone in 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. Marleen Barr (1993) details how this novel and other 'feminist fabulations' address obscured realities of sexuality and sexual violence from within the cloak of fiction. For the women and children in the remember rooms, this is place to collectively hold trauma, to acknowledge it 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.

This is a space of significance. The memories which are shared here are the remnants of the cities which the women have left behind, they are the only remaining traces of these life-

worlds for those who have no intention of returning. The room in which they are shared is distant from the city, reached only after a journey out beyond the settlements the women have founded. To visit requires the repeated act of walking away, 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.

This room exists in the Wanderground, a space which has been settled by the Hill Women who fled The City. In this future version of the United States, gender based violence and environmental damage reached a turning point and the earth itself revolted. Mechanical technologies no longer operate outside the city limits and men cannot stray them. Within the cities, women are segregated and subject to systemic brutality, and the Wanderground is a refuge for those who fought to leave. It is a separatist utopia, with, as Debra Shaw (2000) details, all of the problematics that such essentialising of gender entails. But, as Gill Valentine suggests (1997), it also hints at ways identity can be mobilised to proclaim common needs and goals.

All the women leaned each on others, yet nowhere was there a burden – closely fitting, closely entwined... a low level of humming came from everywhere; it seemed literally to support the mass of women.

*The Wanderground* offers mutual support and environmental entanglement, but within the city patterns of hatred and isolation persist. The quiet here is that of a gentle hum, the combining of voices into something strong and steady. But it is also a place continually confronted by the trauma of its founding. This is a place which strives to be better.

### **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 in 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...

The dining hall in Mattapoisett in Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* 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.

This is a space to soften sharp edges. Constructed from timber and weather worn bricks which were scavenged and found, the domed dining hall is overlaid with creeping vines and painted decoration. The materials used are the visible evidence of the environmental concern which underpins all of the actions of this community. It is a novel which, according to Lisa

Garforth (2019), re-socialises climate science providing us with space to argue about what matters ethically and ontologically as we confront notions of the Anthropocene. It is a loosely anarcho-socialist society, and products are understood in terms of social and environmental costs – in materials extracted and in the time of those who must do the work of making.

Really this could be a dining room in a madhouse, the way people sat naked with their emotions pouring out, but there was a strong energy level here...the scraps of melody and laughter, the calls, the clatter of dishes and cutlery, the scraping of chairs on the floor...

This is a space with an openness of purpose. A room in which to eat together, with long wooden benches, where children play games around the table legs, and discussions are held while others play musical instruments. It allows for the blurring of uses, neither a place of work or place of leisure, but accommodating of both. It reflects and contains a society which, as detailed by Baccolini and Moylan (2003), imagines itself to exist outside of capitalist authority and patriarchal discourse which can marginalize and oppress both the environment and otherness.

“The fooder is a home for us all. A warm spot.”

This is a space of gentle welcome. Designed to hold the entire community at one time, it is the largest building amid a number of small dwellings. It is the most significant structure in this community, where the old symbols of spatial power; the church, university, museum, and houses of parliament are notably absent. In their place is a dining hall, which offers basic sustenance and the chance to be together.

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....”

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. This is not a curated exhibition, but the work of anyone willing to share. And the act of making space for such work demonstrates the value they place on art as a productive and worthwhile endeavour. It is work equivalent to any other, a necessary and celebrated 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.”

This is a space of constant change. Amid the chaos of multiple functions and myriad artistic styles, it remains a space which aims to support rather than overwhelm. And so, it is designed to allow for individual modification with shifting panels which can create openness or enclosure. It reflects the community’s awareness of individual difference and the critical importance of emotional wellbeing.

She looked slowly around. She saw ... a river, little no account buildings.... A few lumpy free-form structures overrun with green vines. No skyscrapers, no spaceports, no traffic jam in the sky. "You sure we went in the right direction? Into the future?"

This room exists in Mattapoisett, in the year 2137. For Connie, a Hispanic woman from 1970's Harlem, it is alluring and dismaying in equal measure. She finds momentary escape in this future from a life where she is subject to domestic, racial and sexual violence, and incarceration in an asylum. Depending on whose testimony you believe within the novel, she travels through time to be here, or she is experiencing delusional visions.

"...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."

The inhabitants have forged a world without the prejudice which has defined and imprisoned Connie in realities of persecution and brutality. But, as identified by Levitas and Sargisson (2003), 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.

She will never be broken as I was. She will be strange, but she will be glad and strong and she will not be afraid. She will have enough. She will have pride.

They take up space, in ways that, as Franck (2002), Bondi and Davidson (2003) discuss, challenge the fictions of gender. The quiet self-possession of Mattapoisett is a way of being in the world that Connie cannot undertake while remaining herself. It is a place she cannot inhabit, but it is one she can want for her daughter.

This is a place to fight for.

### **Conclusion: It was quiet**

The spaces of these novels are certainly not radiant castles, they do not offer us order and clarity. But, to return to Le Guin, they hint at the idea of the utopian as something passive and participatory, mired in obscurity. Each is presented not as an ideal, but as an alternative. They are contextual, placed in direct contrast to a way of living which extemporises the inequities and cruelties of our own; where the surface above Castrima models the fears of difference which allow slavery and xenophobia to go unchallenged, 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 sexual persecution to propagate, the worlds of the Hill Women recognise responsibility and agency, where Connie's Harlem batters her with the combined and intersectional oppressions of poverty, racism, sexism and perceived mental illness, Mattapoisett recognises the needs and contributions of each individual.

Following Tom Moylan's (1986) definition, they are critical utopias. They confront the world as it is and offer something which might be better, far from perfect and with its own weaknesses and negations, but an alternative, nonetheless. 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, they provide a necessary critical distance from what we think the future is supposed to look like. As novels which begin from

the premise of their characters and societies, whose architectural expression is a reflection of those ideals and compromises, they suggest spaces which might manifest and support the passive and participatory.

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 as such, 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. There are no cities here, or certainly not as we understand them.

These worlds sit in startling contrast to the imaginaries of the future where the city seems almost synonymous with rapid vertical urbanisation (Graham, 2016). While there is a growing call for the study of sf by scholars in the spatial disciplines such as Abbott (2007) Collie (2011) and Hewitt and Graham (2015), as Kitchin and Kneale (2002) note in *Lost in Space: Geographies of Science Fiction*, we all too infrequently venture beyond the approved canon to consider works explore alternate built futures and their socio-economic structures and the everyday spaces of feminist sf are all too often lost in the shadows cast by the dystopian high-rise. I believe that to focus on these vertical urban fictions which depict the futures we either expect or fear, only serves to ensure their inevitability by crowding out alternatives. This does an injustice to the breath-taking breadth and variety of science fiction visions, and leaves little room for the futures we might hope for.

I would argue that by imaginatively inhabiting the utopian enclaves within these texts it is possible to explore geographies of alterity. Following bell hooks (2014), for their inhabitants the spaces of these novels offer a ‘homeplace,’ that necessary sanctuary from oppression which accommodates the gathering of community and resolve, establishing a point of departure from which to enact change.

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. Once we have lingered long enough to adjust to the dimmer light, they offer us visions of an as-yet-unrealized homeplace from which we can imagine the future otherwise.

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:

My continued thanks to the communities that I am privileged to work amongst who inform and inspire my work to permanent revolution; the Beyond Gender Research Collective, the London Science Fiction Research Community, and Utopian Acts.

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