

A future collectively salvaged from the rubble

We expect science fiction to provide us with more than a seat at the table. We expect it to overturn the table, to transform it into a barricade, to set the table on fire. We expect sf to challenge us, to shake loose possibility, to construct new worlds, and dismantle systems of oppression and exclusion

Wandering through the rubble

This work is an act of salvage and care. We draw on fragments of the un-lived futures that are present in science fiction (sf) to consider how we might collectively inhabit or repurpose built space. Where do we go from here? Perhaps our direction cannot be singular. In response we offer an assemblage text with multiple routes through and ways of reading – an act of collective repurposing. We choose messy multiplicity over the illusory unity of the sole authoritative voice: the single story

‘The passage is through, not over, not by, not around, but through’

Cherrie Moraga, *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 1981

‘On the tenth floor she stepped out from the stairwell onto the vast floor of a machine shop. The large room was lit by sunshine from the windows all around. The rusting hulks of die-cutting machines striped the cracked linoleum floor with shadows. Chango wandered in this gallery of disused mechanisms, running tentative fingers across the dusty, corroded flanks of forgotten tools, their intricate purposes a mystery to her. The rave-in had been in the north building, they had never even ventured here, had never laid eyes on these arcane devices, had no knowledge of them nor desire to find out. To the ravers, an abandoned building was simply a place to hang out for a while. To Chango, each was a world unto itself, a landscape to be savoured’

Anne Harris, *Accidental Creatures*, 2000

‘It was built in the last century, when prosperity must have excused ugliness. The halls had once been blank and identical, the stairwells featureless tubes of concrete block and iron stair rail. Now living ivy worked its way toward the sky at the top of the stairs, where someone had turned a trapdoor into an open skylight; wisteria cascaded down to meet it from the roof. Things peered from the leaves: grotesque carved wooden faces, old photographs of people, ... faded postcards’

Emma Bull, *Bone Dance: A Fantasy for Technophiles*, 1991

‘She follows the median strip of the old avenue out into the open, not bothering to put the parka up. It’s a wrecked part of the city, everything knocked down flat for a few blocks, but the street is okay ... Some of the sisters talk so beautifully. But that’s not her way, words; she just knows what’s the way that feels right. The good way, and herself rambling through the wonderful world’

James Tiptree Jr, *Your Faces, O My Sisters! Your Faces Filled of Light!*, 1976

It is by transforming the city that we can best claim our rights to it, overlaying its mundanity with the strange and wonderful spectres of another world

other worlds can be glimpsed: wild plants and weeds

‘I don’t think utopia needs hope at all. Hope yearns for a future. Instead, we dream in place, in situ, *in medias res*, in layers, in dimensional frequencies’

Jayna Brown, *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds*, 2021

In James Tiptree Jr’s *Your Faces, O My Sisters!*, the protagonist’s only recourse is to reject the presumed supremacy of the ‘real world’ and to escape into another, more utopian space, not by following the settler-colonial trajectory of finding a ‘new world’, but rather by remaking the streets under her feet. This is what Davina Cooper calls ‘utopian prefiguration’ in her essay ‘Towards an Adventurous Institutional Politics: The Prefigurative “As If” and the Reposing of What’s Real’ (2020) – in which the revolutionary subject insistently behaves as if the utopian future is already in existence

Architecture is ‘based on the ideology of progress with its promise of building a better future. This was largely accomplished by disregarding the existing and adopting the colonial attitude of the blank slate or the *tabula rasa*. The future was built on the annihilation of the existing. This erasure inflicted its wounds on the planet’

Angelika Fitz and Elke Krasny, *Critical Care: Architecture and Urbanism for a Broken Planet*, 2019

In *Brown Girl in the Ring*, what was once the subway system has now been appropriated by a group of street children. Using a tape recording and a projector, the children create an ‘illusion of a battalion of feral children’, which appear as ‘a sea of screaming children’s bodies’. Their digitally multiplied voices drive away the threat of violence.

The unruly and multitudinous aspects of the city disrupt the wealthy, sanitised domestic environment

‘There is a connection between bodies and space, which is built, repeated and contested over time ... Some bodies are deemed as having the right to belong, while others are marked out as trespassers ... Not being the somatic norm, they are space invaders’

Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place*, 2004

Creatures whose strangeness shows us the strangeness in ourselves

‘She remembered her grandmother’s words: The centre pole is the bridge between the worlds ... reaching up into the air and down toward the ground. She thought of the building she was in. The CN Tower. And she understood what it was: 1,815 feet of the tallest centre pole in the world ... For like the spirit tree that the centre pole symbolised, the CN Tower dug roots deep into the ground where the dead lived and pushed high into the heavens where the oldest ancestors lived. The tower was their ladder into this world. She could call the spirits to help her. She wouldn’t have to call very loudly’

Nalo Hopkinson, *Brown Girl in the Ring*, 1998

Infiltration: to turn spaces against themselves

In *Glass Houses* (1992), by Laura Mixon, the protagonist Ruby projects her consciousness into the android of Golem and inserts him into the network of robots serving a mansion. Ruby/Golem is almost discovered by two of the house’s occupants; in response, Ruby/Golem tries to blend in among the mansion’s art pieces. Ruby locks Golem ‘into an outlandish pose, full height, arms extended in various contortions, camera eyes askew’. The two occupants then discuss Golem as an ‘eye-catching’ piece, with one of the two questioning whether they have seen it before in the Guggenheim or the Met. They conclude that ‘this sculpture is quintessential Simon’, referring to the artist John Simon, before moving on to study the rest of the collection. While they attempt to fix Ruby/Golem’s identity in place as ‘quintessentially’ belonging to the institutionalised spaces of the art world, Ruby/Golem continues on a mission of infiltration. Hiding in plain sight, these science-fictional beings rewrite the city’s visual language from within

‘We like to come to a cleared site, “to start again from the foundations”... This way we can exorcise the spectre of demolition (previous and potential) that haunts all construction’

Jeremy Till, *Architecture Depends*, 2009

‘It is the desire for and joy in that salvage and coalition-building work, not the hope of its future acknowledgement, that needs to be repeatedly and persistently imagined’

Megen de Bruin-Molé, ‘Salvaging Utopia: Lessons for (and from) the Left in Rivers Solomon’s *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017), *The Deep* (2019), and *Sorrowland* (2021)’, 2021

Lin’s vision is a counter-navigation of urban architecture. The world her eyes reveal is one of multiplicity and contradiction

‘Stars and rain can be seen through glass ceilings. The mobile house turns with the sun. Its sliding walls enable vegetation to invade life. Mounted on tracks, it can go down to the sea in the morning and return to the forest in the evening. Architecture is the simplest means of articulating time and space, of modulating reality and engendering dreams’

A chaotic *spilling* of past and present

The white capitalist queerphobic patriarchy is heavily invested in making sure its cruel fictions are not thought otherwise, ensuring that sf writers don’t reveal to their readers how strange everything is, in this, and in other possible worlds

‘What does this current plane of reality, also known as a mutually agreed-upon fiction, mean to us anyway? And who mutually agreed upon it?’

Jayna Brown, *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds*, 2021

‘Lin’s bulging mirrored eyes saw the city in a compound visual cacophony. A million tiny sections of the whole, each minuscule hexagon segment ablaze with sharp colour ... Each visual fragment, each part, each shape, each shade of colour, differed from its surroundings in infinitesimal ways that told her about the state of the whole structure’

China Miéville, *Perdido Street Station*, 2000

‘[For] all of our ability to analyse and critique, the left has become rooted in what is. We often forget to envision what could be. We forget to mine the past for solutions that show us how we can exist in other forms in the future’

Walidah Imarisha, ‘Rewriting the Future: Using Science Fiction to Re-Envision Justice’, 2015

‘Ficto-criticism was deliberately non-completist: it was diffident, allusive, touching upon ideas and approaches and opening them up, and then leaving much unsaid. It could be windy and full of holes, a ruin, barely standing up, and yet – and yet ... it revelled in its own constructedness’

Hélène Frichot and Naomi Stead, ‘Waking Ideas from Their Sleep: An Introduction to in and of Architecture’ in *Writing Architectures: Ficto-Critical Approaches*, 2020

Utopian possibilities are being enacted in the here and now

A utopian demand for another world, one which can be felt through the soles of our feet

‘There is *no way* I can be happy in this society, in this skin. I am committed to Uneasy Street. I like it; it is my idea that this street leads to the future, and that I am being true to a way of life which is not here yet, but is more real than what is here’

James Tiptree Jr, 1976

Citational salvage: a method to re-encounter texts and flourish in a new direction

‘The impossible attracts me because everything possible has been done and the world didn’t change’

Sun Ra, *How High the Moon*, 1960

United in joy, galvanised by anger and protected by friendship, we draw closer to each other through, by and with science fiction. We fiction ourselves into being as an ever-shifting collective, a multitude, a crew

‘Science fiction is simply a way to practise the future together. I suspect that is what many of you are up to, practising futures together, practising justice together, living into new stories’

adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, 2017

Beyond Gender is a research collective that investigates the radical potential of science fiction to subvert the gender binary. Our practice involves: collective reading, the playing of games, collaborative writing and mutual care. For more information on our practice and publications, see our website: beyondgender.space