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Sunset Simulations

I'm sitting in an aisle seat, 38H, on Qatar Airways flight QR909 travelling from Sydney to Bergen. Three hours into the twenty six hour journey, the plane will first stop in Doha, then Oslo and finally Bergen. I usually like long flights. I like the simulations of sunrise and sunset, played out with yellow-orange-pink coloured cabin lights that point up onto the smooth curved white plastic ceiling of the plane's interior. It is 'nighttime' inside now but through the gap of the seats in front of me I see a glaringly bright rectangle of sunlight stretch through a partly open window. The light skews across the clasped hands of someone watching Avengers: Endgame. I enjoy the strange intimacy of watching a crowd of strangers sleeping, seeing how each person makes their own seat sized space to live the next hours in.

My neighbour, for example, sitting one seat away from me next to the window, is completely covered with a grey micro-fibre airline blanket. They are a soft wrapped-up person-shaped lump, seat belt buckled around their waist securing them inside the blanket. The impression of arms holding knees, pulled up towards their chest, is outlined by the synthetic grey fabric. On the floor in front of them is a pair of discarded black Nike sneakers, a used alcohol wipe and a Mount Franklin water bottle crumpled up from the change in air pressure.

I'd been in Sydney visiting family and friends before I moved to Bergen, together with my girlfriend who was already living there. I'd been delayed by about five months, after the borders closed in March at the beginning of the pandemic, first in Norway and a week later in Australia. My current suspension, being in the air and in-between-places, is marked by my desire to be in two places at once, with lover and loved-ones. This feeling is a missing that sits with me.

In *Lesbians in Space. Gender, Sex and the Structure of Missing* (1995) Elspeth Probyn thinks through structures of absence and longing about the significance of the configuration of bodies in space. Initially also situated on a plane 'in the movement of going' Probyn writes from an ungrounded and stretched out space:

Space is a pressing matter and it matters which bodies, where and how, press up against it. Most important of all are who these bodies are with: in what historical and actual spatial configuration they find and define themselves. (1995, p. 81)

Now my body, or my face, is behind a face-shield that is a gentle but constant pressure around my forehead, a thin sheet of plastic attached to a headband of foam and elastic. The plastic shield mists then clears with the rhythm of breathing. There is at least one empty seat in between each passenger. Under the face-shield I have a black cotton face mask hanging from one ear as I try to eat, spooning mashed potato under my visor, my hands sweaty in white plastic gloves one size too small. A flight attendant walks down the aisle wearing a hazmat suit carrying a silver tray balancing small plastic cups of apple juice, orange juice and water.

Bodies in Space

Bodies have the ability to take up space or offer it. Space has the capacity to accommodate but also to alienate. Just as bodies press up against space, and each other, they are also submerged within it. Submerging and pressing are both transitive verbs describing active relations. I consider space not as a fixed given, but something that is continuously shaped and reshaped by the movement of bodies. Similarly I consider bodies as not predetermined, but responding to the spaces they encounter. The texture of space, its materiality, shows traces of bodies that dwell within them and it is the physicality of space, as well as invisible lines of history that guide the movement of these bodies.

Reflecting on the relationship between bodies and space, specifically gender, sexuality and space, I would like to introduce feminist science fiction as a tool for architectural critique. Feminist science fiction is a literary genre through which the cultural constructions of race, class, sex, sexuality, and gender can be decoded. Speculation and world building are common projects of architecture and science fiction, often taking the shape of a utopia or dystopia. Speculation involves imagining scenarios which extend beyond what is currently real or possible. In their process of world building, science fiction authors assume the role of interior designer, architect and urban planner. I am interested in the potential of examining how architecture is built within these worlds that reimagine bodies or redefine social structures. What are the materials that constitute these spaces and how do the bodies that populate these worlds leave traces?

These thoughts are informed by the questions: who is designing for whom; who has the power to build; how is space constructed, physically and socially; how is it more than a neutral background for living but embedded with history, influenced by invisible power structures and affected by use and the people that inhabit it? Thinking through these questions in relation to the recent global pandemic and the spatial consequences of this crisis I speculate if the sudden reformulation of space can open possibilities of new methods of space-making – by looking at feminist science fiction that moves away from a utopia or dystopia to something-in-between. These include narratives that understand identities as shifting, contradictory or incomplete.

Desert Fantasy

The Four Profound Weaves (2020) is a poetic desert fantasy novella by R.B. Lemburg set in their fictional world Birdverse. In it there are four kinds of magical weaves, woven from wind (signifying change), sand (wanderlust), song (hope) and bone (death). The magical weaves form the four part structure of the book. The story follows Uiziya and a nameless man. Uiziya is a weaver searching for her aunt Benesret, a master weaver who 40 years ago promised to teach her the four profound weaves. The unnamed man in his older age has finally transitioned with the help of a carpet made of wind woven by Benesret. Both characters are transgender elders and the story includes other gender-queer, non-binary characters and queer relationships. The interconnectedness of change, wanderlust, hope and death as cycles related to changing identities and rhythms of life is explored through their journey.

Black and White Laminate

The hum of the glossy white chest freezer, that I don't notice during the day, moves low through our bedroom at night. The 45 m² apartment is on the second floor of a three-story building in Nygårdshaugen, just south of Bergen's city centre. It sits nestled within a row of tenements built from timber with stone facades, a result of urban expansion that begun in Bergen in 1877. The 98 year old building is full of quirky quick fix solutions to the inevitable problems that emerge from the ageing of its bones. There are two doors in every room so we can walk endlessly in a circle anti-clockwise through the entryway, kitchen, bedroom and living room. A cream marbled laminate floor lies across the entryway, kitchen and bedroom. The shower has the same patterned floor but in a blue-pearl colour. It has been converted from a windowless closet in the small entryway, just opposite the front door, so the blue towel bath mat doubles as a welcome mat. The laminate floor in the living room has an alternating pattern of large black and white squares and if you look closely it has a texture like skin.

The living room windows face the street and during the day I've been watching builders renovate the facade of the white timber building across the road. The scaffolding they work from is wrapped tightly in a semi-transparent blue netting. Planks of partly rotten timber peeled away, gaps filled with insulation. Within the room, on the black and white laminate, sweat from our bodies blends with the tears of a phone call, mingles with the awkward pause in a zoom meeting, tuna oil, The Legend of Zelda, safety, long strands of brown hair, some light and fine some dark and thick, anxiety, a succulent, missing, touch, skin, bound.

Lines Blur

There have been many distinctly dystopian and disorientating moments throughout the past pandemic defined years, the result of abruptly transforming global realities. Science fiction as a genre is characterised by the 'cognitive estrangement' produced by new or novel elements of the text. As the reader compares the fictive world against their familiar lived reality a gap opens that produces a sense of alienation (Calvin, 2016). I believe the opening possibilities offered by this 'gap' and the sense of strangeness present in science fiction can be seen as inherently queer.

I use the term queer, enjoying the slipperiness of the word, to mean both those who do not correspond to established heterosexual norms of sexuality or gender and, from the formal definition, strange, odd, oblique. Queer is a slippery word insofar as it embraces an inconsistent multiplicity of meanings and takes pleasure in resisting attempts to make sexuality signify in monolithic ways (Pearson, Hollinger and Gordon, 2008).

In thinking about the application of queer theory to science fiction, what is apparent is not only sf's ability to think outside mimetic reproductions of contemporary reality, but also its capacity to fulfil at least part of Michel Foucault's call to 'free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently'. (Pearson, Hollinger and Gordon, 2008, p. 3)

The recent and abrupt transformation of movement through, access to or isolation of space in response to the global pandemic, though not a

homogenised experience, has produced its own kind of cognitive dissonance, a queering of space. The boundaries of the spaces we live in have shifted or dissolved. Home has become workplace, leisure space, school and more as lines blur. In the architectural process of designing a house/building, rooms/areas are divided and defined by program. The imagined use of each area informs the overall spatial arrangement, reflecting certain norms, values and conventions of design and society.

In *When Program is the Enemy of Function Gender-Nonconforming Experiences of Architectural Space* (2017) Simona Castricum writes of architecture, our cities and buildings, their programs, connections and interfaces, as reinforcing essentialist and cisnormative notions of gender. Rather than being an architecture of safety, belonging or identity, for some these are structures of hostility, othering and privilege. Castricum identifies the architectural brief, or program, as where this othering begins. This is the stage in the building process where client and stakeholders are identified and connected to detailed purposes and in disregarding a diversity of users, spaces of risk and exclusion are created. Castricum elaborates how gender-nonconforming perspectives and experiences hold the potential to break away from binary thinking in architecture, finding more space in the centre. 'To design for the unknowns and achieve greater functionality beyond what architecture otherwise seeks to control is surely a desirable objective' (2017, p. 377).

Building code, government rules that specify standards for construction, exist now as minimum requirements to ensure safety and accessibility. My experience is that these codes exist as an administrative checklist, separate from the

conceptual development of the project. A meaningful shift of thinking can occur if architects start with the question who are we designing *with*, rather than who are we designing *for* (Safe Space Collective, 2021). *With* gives space for co-creation, an ongoing process of negotiation that celebrates the singularities of individual experience and multiplicities of identity. Reflecting on who has the power to build is also key in this discussion, as outlined in the zine *Safe Space: a queer practice of architecture* (2021) by Safe Space Collective:

Architecture is only as diverse, representational and welcoming as its designers, for space is a cultural product of the architect's ideological discourse which, in turn, is inseparable from one's social, economic and political identity. Under today's recurring systematic oppression, queerness calls into question the hegemony of the majority, resists tenets, and never ceases to adapt and transform. (2021, p. 4)

The importance and urgency of queering space and practices of space-making rises again and again to the surface.

The Rainbow-Tiered Court

The spaces we encounter in *The Four Profound Weaves* are connected by a vast desert which Uziya and the nameless man travel through, winds shifting layers of sand. Three settings that are important in the story are the snake-Surun' encampment, the Khana quarter and the Rainbow-Tiered Court. These are imagined architecture(s) with their own distinct material and spatial qualities. The snake-Surun' encampment is a settlement of tents in the desert, varying

in size and type depending on their use. It is home to Uiziya and a community of Surun weavers. It is an accepted tradition that children are able to choose their own gender, using their own carpet woven from wool. Some choose not to change and stay an 'in-betweeners'.

The Khana quarter, where the nameless man comes from, lies within the city of Iyar. It is a place of separation, isolated from the surrounding city and internally by an inner white wall which divides the men and women as they lead separate lives. Khana men are scholars and the women traders. Groups of nomadic women traders travel and trade while grandmothers raise the children.

The Rainbow-Tiered Court is the palace of the Ruler of Iyar who is also known as the Collector. Here he keeps his collection of precious objects hidden from the rest of the world. It is described as a fortress, or prison, that goes deep into the ground. Each level of the building has its own corresponding colour and it's in the deepest levels where he keeps his treasure. The Collector is obsessed with preservation and sees change as a threatening concept that ultimately leads to death. The Rainbow-Tiered court is ultimately broken down by Uiziya and the nameless man, characters that encapsulate change, as they learn how to weave from death.

These spaces are reflections of the people that inhabit them and the people reflections of space. Binary distinctions and gender divisions are emphasised structurally through the solid stone walls of the Khana quarter. The self-identified oppressor of change hides himself and his treasures deep within a subterranean palace of distinctly defined horizontal layers. In the desert

encampments of the weavers however queer identities and transformation is at home. This is also true for the nomadic lifestyle of the Khana traders. These are light-weight, transitional or indeterminate spaces.

The Act of Dwelling

Running my hands along the walls of my apartment from room to room I wonder why they are where they are. One of the many things I have learnt from my own queerness, is that there is power, pleasure and joy in peeling back the layers of patterns that are accepted as normal or natural. In tracing the historical development of residential architecture, to the types of homes being built in Bergen today, the concept of domesticity plays a leading role. The notion of domesticity emerged during the 19th century as new distinctions between work and home solidified, emphasising growing spatial separation between male and female spheres, public and private life, constructions justified by gender-based assumptions. These assumptions have been reflected in the professional division of architecture and interior design, the former male-dominated the latter female. Before then the house was not a private shelter for a small family but a larger structure that combined workshops and residential accommodation of larger social networks (Heynen 2005). Today it remains clear that despite the diversity of kinship relations that exist and persist housing composition still preferences the private nuclear family model (Bonnevier, 2005).

What I find exciting to think about is how it's not just the act of building that can create new realities, but also the act of dwelling. 'To inhabit a house means

going through a mutual process of moulding in which house and inhabitant become adapted to one another' (Heynen, 2005, p. 21). Despite the original intention of my apartment, who it was built for or its material structure, I have the privilege to shape a queer home around me.

Glossy Beige MDF

Cold air tingles my feet as I move my legs out from underneath the down-filled duvet, over the edge of the mattress downwards to the cool cream laminate floor. I shuffle my bare feet into a pair of North Face slippers that have a blurry image of the northern lights printed on them. Walking out of our dark bedroom, turning left through the kitchen, I unlock the door that connects the rear of the apartment to a narrow timber staircase. The staircase is just wider than the width of my shoulders and I have to bend my head as I go down one flight of stairs. Exposed to the fresh evening air I move with a sleepy briskness. The stairs lead me to a covered timber bridge reaching over our shared back courtyard to a two-storey white timber building. The building is mainly used for storage, with a laundry on the lower level and two toilets on the upper. We share the laundry and the toilets with the five other apartments in our building.

I reach two untreated pine timber doors with polished brass handles and I chose the left, the same every time. Inside is something between a toilet cupboard and a cubicle, a 20 mm thick MDF sheet painted glossy beige separates the two bathrooms. Sitting on the chilled ceramic toilet seat I pick at a loose flake of beige paint, revealing layer after layer of different coloured paints underneath. Honey orange, dark moss green, petrol blue. A hole has been cut in the MDF

wall around a single exposed light-bulb hanging from the ceiling, so light shines in-between both cubicles. Similarly an electric wall-mounted heater crosses through a calf-height opening. Enjoying the warmth as I pee, I hear the right door open and see the navy pyjama clad legs of my neighbour through the gap in the wall.

Something-in-between

I feel an irreconcilable strangeness, akin to a science fiction narrative, thinking about how much our homes, their forms and uses, have changed in the last 24 months. These changes have also emphasised existing inequalities inherent to such architecture, be it an absence of safety, stability or access. Through this feeling I find myself returning to the appeal of in-between spaces, thresholds and envelopes, of movement, departing and arriving, and dynamic errors with spatial implications such as leaning, slipping, disorientating, deviating, bending, shifting, dissolving and blurring. These are characteristics tied to queerness which complicate binary notions such as inside and outside, self and other, the familiar and the strange. They allow us to think beyond the optimisation, regulation or delineation of space emphasised in current architectural processes, towards a new methodology of space-making.

I struggle as I often do, when I reach the end of a text, to formulate a satisfying conclusion. Here my reflections feel like the beginning of sentences that run on with ellipses, my conclusion more of an introduction or maybe an invitation. An invitation to gaze through gaps and holes, searching for cracks and leaks, celebrating when you sense something queer.

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Printporn

Fonts: `NotCourierSans` by Open Source Publishing and `ABeeZee` by Anja

Meiners, sourced via Libre Fonts by Womxn

Method: Digital; CMYK

Paper: A4 (29.7 × 21.0 cm)

Editions: 25

Version: First

Print master: Annette

Printed by: Kopibutikken, Bergen

Published by: Karmaklubb* and IGWTLI publishing. Partly funded by The Freedom of Expression Foundation (Stiftelsen Fritt Ord), Arts Council Norway (Kulturrådet)

On the occasion of: Karmaklubb* x Kiosken Studio residency 2022

Date: 30th March 2022