

‘Equally like a beginning and an end’: edge-lands and threshold conditions

Article

Published Version

Open Access

Butt, A. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1762-2768> (2024)
‘Equally like a beginning and an end’: edge-lands and
threshold conditions. field:, 9 (1). 125. ISSN 1755-0068 doi:
10.62471/field.125 Available at
<https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/114056/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher’s version if you intend to cite from the
work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Identification Number/DOI: 10.62471/field.125
<<https://doi.org/10.62471/field.125>>

Publisher: The University of Sheffield School of Architecture

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law,
including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other
copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in
the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

field:

a free journal for architecture

PRINT ISSN: 2753-3638

ONLINE ISSN: 1755-0068

www.field-journal.org

vol.8(1)

'EQUALLY LIKE A BEGINNING AND AN END': EDGE-LANDS AND THRESHOLD CONDITIONS

Amy Brookes

ABSTRACT

This paper was developed while sitting on the doorstep of my flat, inhabiting the line-thickness of a boundary, and lingering within the space between. It is an attempt to dwell on the threshold which is traced onwards into the fictional spaces of three sf novels: Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, Ada Palmer's *Too Like The Lightning*, and Andrea Hairston's *Mindscape*. These speculative works are considered alongside and through works of art, architecture and spatial theory which address the spatial and social construction of thresholds, to reflect on the practice and representation of technologies of the boundary, the "borders, laws, doors, ... and scalpels" described by Sophie Lewis.

While in *Exit West* the doorway collapses distance into the thickness of a shadow, in these fictions this threshold is also drawn out, blurred and mutable, until the space between becomes an inhabited depth. From the trench surrounding a home in *Too Like The Lightning*, to the strips of land between settlement and barrier in *Mindscape*, these spatial edge-lands act as what Jane Rendell refers to as transitional spaces between forms of social organization.

These are the gaps and the spaces of overlap; they create social and emotional distance which can reinforce patterns of othering and segregation, but they also act as spaces apart from the worlds they border, ripe with the utopian potential of any such cracks in the world machine.

This article was developed during those suspended moments of 2020 and 2021, while sat on the top step of the stairs which led into my flat. The surfaces of this threshold I so often stepped over, my thoughts already elsewhere, imprinted themselves on the soft skin of my hands and thighs as I curled up in the open doorway. This is a space that is not quite the street but is not home either. It is not one or another, but a gap that is neither and an overlap which is both. The versions of myself I perform, the rules which govern behaviour on either side of this boundary, do not apply here. It is a space *in* between.

In her work on transitional spaces, Jane Rendell discusses the Narkomfin building as a transitional space, where 'transitional' objects and spaces are those 'located in the overlap.'¹ The Narkomfin building was initially conceived as an experimental form of housing designed around a series of social condensers – shared spaces that would provide opportunities for solidarity and community located alongside apartments which ranged from self-contained flats to communal dwellings for larger collectivised groups. It was intended to foster and support social change, to encourage new ways of living together, and to act as a transitional space into a more socialist future. Rendell argues that the act of writing can create similar sites for change by setting texts alongside one another 'to create a place of potential overlap in the mind of the reader,' and create a transitional space into other ways of understanding.²

In this article I dwell in the possibility of transitional spaces, between the real and the fictional, between practice and research, between the world as we encounter it and the futures we strive to build. I am guided by three works of sf whose narratives linger on spatial thresholds; *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid (2017), *Too Like The Lightning* by Ada Palmer (2016), and *Mindscape* by Andrea Hairston (2006).³ I will focus

on the spaces in these novels which exist within the boundary to examine the ways in which they allow their inhabitants to construct or consider change.

Each of these novels explores the geo-political enactment of borders and the implications for those who live within and between them.⁴ They all explore a future Earth and use the tropes, scale and estrangement of sf to prompt critical reflection on both the spatial and social construct of the border. *Exit West* draws on the trope of the portal; an opening which instantly connects here with there, and uses it to punch holes in the fabric of our contemporary world. It is a global what-if story which remains steadfastly intimate, tracing the lives and encounters that are made possible by this dissolution of distance. While the doorways in *Exit West* circumvent the spatial mechanisms of bordering, Ada Palmer's *Too Like The Lightning* and the subsequent books in the *Terra Ignota* quartet look to a far future where national borders have been dismantled, in a radically restructured society where belonging is defined not by blood or geography but by practices of choice. Here small self-created households draw borders around themselves, and Palmer reworks the trope of the alien visitor to explore existential and moral questions regarding the structure of society. As Palmer uses the domestic scale of the border to explore the consolidation of power and the boundaries of belonging, *Mindscape* by Andrea Hairston is set on a future Earth where barriers of deadly radiation have descended without apparent cause to wind like ribbons around the globe. These new border zones defy western-scientific comprehension, and Hairston uses the physical presence of this other-worldly technology to explore the boundaries that are drawn around ways of knowing and states of being.

In this way each of these books considers the border as a spatial and social device, operating at the global scale but enacted at the level of intense individual experience. For Imre Szeman, sf's capacity to simultaneously address the breathtakingly vast and the deeply personal makes it a genre best placed to address climate emergency and 'shake us out of our faith in surplus.'⁵ I would argue that this same capacity allows these fictions to address the myriad scales of spatial and temporal borders and provoke reflection within a reader. Darko Suvin defines science-fiction as the literature of 'cognitive estrangement,' texts which transport the reader to worlds of radical strangeness to offer a transformative glance back at the familiar. As Suvin describes, in these fictions 'the mirror is a crucible'; through it we bear witness to worlds remade.⁶

This imaginative reconstitution of reality is celebrated by sf scholars and activists such as Walidah Imarisha who argues that these fictions can provide a site to 'dream as ourselves,' where we might liberate the imagination and gather the resolve to sculpt reality.⁷ I believe that sf is a similarly critical site for the spatial disciplines and all those intimately involved in the imagining new built worlds into being. In these selected novels the sf devices of the portal, the alien being, and the otherworldly technology, are refashioned to make manifest social, existential and epistemological acts of bordering. They expose the constructed-ness of systems of enclosure and exclusion, and present the possibility that they could be imagined and made otherwise.

In this way the act of reading sf is both a reflective and creative process. As Kathleen Spencer delineates, each text presents its reader with fragmentary glimpses into another world, from which we must imaginatively construct a whole 'stretching beyond the terms we have been given.'⁸ As I read these fictions I collage in my lived experiences, memories

and other imaginings to fill the gaps. It is a deeply personal act which allows me to view the fragments of my own life in the context of fresh strangeness.

These processes of estrangement and critical reflection also echo the way in which Rendell describes interdisciplinary practice, which operates 'at the edge and in between disciplines.'⁹ As worlds entirely elsewhere these fictions provide space to resist disciplinary boundaries. Accordingly, I find myself considering these fictions alongside and through works of art and spatial theory which address the spatial and social construction of thresholds and borders, drawing on references and experiences from my life as an architect and lecturer in representation. This paper manifests a movement between and across disciplines, practices, and imagined worlds. Here I find a joyful transgression of borders, a refusal to settle, an inhabitation of the space in-between.

¹ Jane Rendell, 'The Setting and the Social Condenser: Transitional Objects in Architecture and Psychoanalysis' in *Reading Architecture and Culture*, ed. by Adam Sharr (Routledge, 2012), pp. 136–50 (p. 136) <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203721193-20>>.

² Rendell, 'The Setting and the Social Condenser', p. 136.

³ This article follows Donna Haraway's framing of sf as 'science fiction, science fact, science fantasy, speculative feminism, speculative fabulation, string figures' Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 2.

⁴ For further discussion of the geo-political border and nation state in sf see: Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, 'Dis-Imagined Communities: Science Fiction and the Future of Nations', *Edging into the Future: Science Fiction and Contemporary Cultural Transformation*, 2002, 217–37. For further discussion of the border wall in utopian and dystopian world building, see: Meagan Kathleen Smith, 'Science Fiction at the Border' (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2022); Elsa Dominique Bouet, 'Hitting the Wall : Dystopian Metaphors of Ideology in Science Fiction' (The Universty of Edinburgh, 2013).

⁵ Imre Szeman, 'Literature and Energy Futures', *PMLA*, 126.2 (2011), 323–25 (p. 325).

⁶ While Suvin's definition was developed in order to establish a boundary around science fiction in relation to other genre fictions, I find this particular quality in all the sf texts discussed in this paper. Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (Yale University Press, 1979), p. 5.

⁷ Walidah Imarisha, 'Introduction', in *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, ed. by adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2015), pp. 3–5 (p. 5).

⁸ Kathleen L. Spencer, "'The Red Sun Is High, the Blue Low": Towards a Stylistic Description of Science Fiction', *Science Fiction Studies*, 10.1 (1983), 35–49 (p. 45).

⁹ Jane Rendell, 'Architectural Research and Disciplinarity', *Arq: Architectural Research Quarterly*, 8.2 (2004), 141–47 (p. 145).

EXIT WEST

it did not reveal what was on the other side, and also did not reflect what was on this side, and so felt equally like a beginning and an end.¹⁰

The boundary space in *Exit West* is contained within the thickness of a doorframe. This doorway in particular leads from the Greek island of Mykonos to a house in West London, dissolving the intervening time and space. It is one of many doorways that have changed, no longer leading into the next room but folding space to create a connection between here and there without the passage between. Their destinations are unknown; welcome and relative safety cannot be guaranteed. By collapsing distance, the doorways have removed the risk of the journey but not the peril of arrival or the loss of departure.

In Alicja Kwade’s installation *WeltenLinie* (WorldLine) large black frames outline the view of a series of objects including a polished stone, a tree trunk, and a rock.¹¹ Yet as you move and the objects hit the edge of the frame they appear to be transformed; the polished stone is reflected covered in green glaze, the tree truck is stripped of its bark, and the rock shimmers with gilding. The doorways of *Exit West* prompt me to recall my own experience of this piece, to look past the careful use of double-sided mirrors and meticulous alignments, to read these frames as doorways to elsewhere. As they move across the bounding line of the frame each object is subtly altered and my own perception of its fixity is stripped away. These objects are revealed to have always existed in a state of potential change; to echo Spencer, they stretch beyond the terms we had been given. I had understood the doorway as a boundary of distinction between two identifiable places or conditions, but through *Exit West* and *WeltenLinie* I come to apprehend the threshold as a transformative space, even if only the thickness of a frame or a shadow.

It seemed the more empty a space in the city the more it attracted [...] local newspapers referring to the area as the worst of the black holes in the fabric of the nation.¹²

The shadow cast by the half open door leaf in *Exit West* is transformed into a sliver of darkness that folds space. They are cracks through which the world can seep in. But the transformative potential of these doorways is dependent on their location and use. Those which lead into uninhabited or unused rooms seem most inclined to change, and so the security of the land-banked homes of London, left vacant to accumulate wealth, are shattered by a thousand hairline fractures.

For Sophie Lewis the doorway, like the national border, can be understood as a boundary technology. Through the consideration of water management, Lewis develops an attentiveness to ‘borders, laws, doors, pipes, bowls, boats, baths, flood-barriers, and scalpels’ as threshold mechanisms which ‘hold, release and manage,’ and are deployed with specific political, social, and environmental intent.¹³ These boundary technologies operate across scales shaping the mutual construction of global and domestic life. Where these mechanisms perpetuate segregation and exclusion Lewis calls us to create ‘desired or needful openings’ which are ‘conductive to flourishing’ allowing movement across and in-between.¹⁴ Read together, Lewis’ list and the doorways of *Exit West* demand that I acknowledge everyday boundaries, to confront the damage done by mundane acts of exclusion. Their domestic scale draws attention to the threshold mechanisms which perpetuate iniquitous access to shelter, the legal mechanisms of land ownership, property speculation, and the creation of isolated enclaves of privilege within urban space. Here, the fictional makes palpable the everyday violence of the front door.

Soon there was a vanload more of them, in full riot gear [...] barricades and checkpoints were manned by armed government forces.¹⁵

While the doorways in *Exit West* collapse distance, the idea of the national border remains and the spaces of arrival are monitored and secured with the animosity of all border policing. In this way the border of the nation state is simply displaced, and while this speaks to the resilience of exclusionary practices, this relocation is still transformative. The current physical distance between everyday life in London and the brutality enacted in detention centres or at immigration checkpoints means that these experiences can be held at an intellectual and emotional remove. But this border blossoms in terraced streets crossed with police cordons and darkened by power blackouts. It strips the comfort of distance and refutes any attempts to relegate this violence to the periphery.

This relocation of border transforms a home into a liminal space, what Léopold Lambert describes as being within the thickness of the boundary line, ‘a space that has no geometrical, and therefore no legal, existence.’¹⁶ Those who occupy this place are no-where, stripped of the legal rights which accompany presence. But this condition is not ubiquitous. Rather, as Lambert and Lewis note, it is the determined result of applied systems whose foundations range from callous ambivalence to explicit racism, and through them I am forced to confront my role as an ‘implicated subject.’¹⁷ As Amanda Lagji discusses, while the doors in *Exit West* facilitate mobility the temporal dimensions of migration persist where people are held in transit, exacerbating existing iniquitous power dynamics.¹⁸ Like the immigration raids which shatter the illusory safety of suburban streets the appearance of these doorways heightens the apparent immediacy of acts of bordering, relocating the border from the edge of the nation and the edge of consciousness, to the centre of London and the heart-land of the home.

here they were penned in together, and being penned in made them into a grouping, a group.¹⁹

This particular redrawn border territory in *Exit West*, between the shadow of the doorway and the edge of the police cordon, is swiftly inhabited by those who step through. They are a group borne of situation – of this specific location and of their position within it. This collective identity is forced upon them by police presence which flattens and dismisses any distinctions of identity or kinship. It is an act of enclosure which is a source of terror for those held inside. But it also provides the common ground of a shared situation, a place from which to offer comfort and solidarity.

As described by Lewis and Lambert, the dehumanising mechanisms of the border are based on definitions of identity generated by those who control its edges. This is echoed by Stavros Stavrides who considers the city as a series of identity enclaves, where access to each demarcated domain is predicated on an individual’s characteristics.²⁰ Stavrides suggests that in-between spaces might provide ‘spaces of encounter between identities,’ from which acts of solidarity become possible.²¹ While the creation of collective identity in *Exit West* is forcibly applied, Josephine Carter describes how these border crossings and acts of assembly also establish the ‘possibility for a form of community that facilitates ethical responsibility for others’, one which imagines the ‘infinite, immeasurable and unpredictable possibilities for relating to others.’²² Through *Exit West* I am able to understand this enclosure as a vicious act of exclusion while also practicing the radical hope that it can be remade by those within as a space of encounter.

she did not need to fear that her views could not be comprehended, for her English was like theirs, one among many.²³

10 Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West* (London: Penguin, 2017) p. 103.

11 Alicja Kwade, *WeltenLinie*, 2020, powder coated steel, bronze patinated, concrete, oak, pine wood, petrified wood, corten steel, sandstone, stone, granite, marble, wood. Alicja Kwade and National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, <<https://alicjakwade.com/works/weltenlinie>>.

12 Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 126.

13 Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism against Family* (Verso Books, 2019), p. 166.

14 Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now*, p. 167.

15 Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 145.

16 Léopold Lambert, ‘The Politics of Narrowness: When Walls Tighten on Bodies’, *The Avery Review*, 11, 2015 <<https://averyreview.com/issues/11/the-politics-of-narrowness-when-walls-tighten-on-bodies>> [accessed 8 October 2022].

17 Stefano Bellin, ‘Disorienting Empathy: Reimagining the Global Border Regime through Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*’, *Literature Compass*, 19.12 (2022), e12694.

18 Amanda Lagji, ‘Waiting in Motion: Mapping Postcolonial Fiction, New Mobilities, and Migration through Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*’, *Mobilities*, 14.2 (2019), 218–32 (p. 219).

19 Hamid, *Exit West*, p. 128.

20 Stavros Stavrides, *Towards the City of Thresholds* (Common Notions, 2019).

21 Stavros Stavrides, *Towards the City of Thresholds* (Trento: Professionaldreamers, 2010), p. 39.

22 Josephine Carter, ‘How Far Are We Prepared to Go? Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* and the Refugee Crisis’, *Textual Practice*, 35.4 (2021), 619–38 (p. 636).

23 Hamid, p. 143.

In *Exit West* the physical border of the police cordon is replicated in blocked Wi-Fi and cut power lines which curtail digital freedom.²⁴ The brutality of this, and all forms of incarceration, cannot be understated. To those who surround them, the occupants are an undifferentiated group suspended in transition. But within the house this flattening of self and space is resisted, and the boundary line unfolds and expands. The doorways each contain untold possibilities of connection with all else-where and with those who might step through them.

These doorways break open the lines which delineate the edges of place, continually disrupting the mechanisms of the boundary drawing as detailed by Lewis, Lambert and Stavrides. This fiction exposes how political and national borders are already vulnerable, contingent on systems of control that must be continually enacted, and that I am complicit in reinforcing and reperforming. As well as recognising my role in these global systems of spatial control, I am also made aware of smaller ways in which I perpetuate practices of boundary delineation through the drawing conventions of architectural representation, privileging the depiction of enclosure rather than demonstrating connection. In an effort to break open these enclosures of practice I turn to Do Ho Suh's *My Home/s - Hubs*, a large-scale installation made of translucent fabric where the entrance halls of each of his homes are replicated at full scale in brightly coloured cloth, joyful and meticulous.²⁵ It is a literal stitching together of these in-between spaces which tie together the public street and the private home. Each hallway led to a home that the artist occupied, and so the experience of walking through them retraces a deeply personal spatial history. As an installation it collapses lived time and space, revelling in the transformative threshold state of in-between spaces. It is a testament to an understanding of space which is always in relation, where, like the doorways of *Exit West*, both memory and possibility of connection are potently present.

TOO LIKE THE LIGHTNING

The bottom was choked with wildflowers and seed-heavy grasses, tousled by the foraging of countless birds...²⁶

This boundary space in *Too Like the Lightning* is an unremarkable gully; overgrown and filled with wildflowers, a recess cut into the land which surrounds a small community. It acts as a dividing line separating this bash'house, which is both collective home and workplace, from those of other affinity groups. This boundary is a demarcation of a conscious choice of belonging – an enclosure which establishes the 'us' of constructed kinship.

Too Like the Lightning depicts a future where multiple structures of social identity have been deconstructed or reframed as entirely private including gender, religion, and nationality. In their place are communities of choice, creating what Lee Konstantinou describes as a 'postgeographic form of global governance.'²⁷ But these new social groups have coalesced into entrenched structures of power, informing acceptable behaviour, and delineating the scope of possibility for their members. When reflecting on this social construction of identity I am drawn to Ilya Kabakov's *Labyrinth (My Mother's Album)*.²⁸ This work is a large-scale installation comprising a series of corridors which resemble the interior of a Soviet-era housing block. The turns in these corridors elicit anticipation while they also constrain the viewer in a thwarted state of transition, reflecting life within a society founded on an anticipated future both already realised and perpetually deferred. Recalled alongside *Too Like the Lightning*, this work allows me to understand the mutual construction of domestic space and social intent. Here domestic threshold spaces act as the manifestation of identity; they are the defining premises for everyday life, and the outlines of future possibility.

separated this row of bash'houses from the next, like a deep, dry moat...²⁹

This gully may be filled with wildflowers and softened by grass into gentle undulations, but it still resembles a moat. It is a trench around a home, a spatial echo of histories of defensive enclosure. Like the wider society of the novel, it speaks both of gentle interconnection and the violent impulses of spatial belonging.

These references to historical forms are deliberately deployed by Palmer who discusses the restructuring of the household in this novel as simply another transformation of the domestic, which has never had a fixed historical form.³⁰ Following the slippages of corridor and gully evoked by *Labyrinth*, I turn to the work of Robin Evans, who details the historical development of the domestic corridor as a product and manifestation of social division. In the UK corridors were devised to serve isolated rooms, what Evans describes as 'individual compartments in which to preserve the self from others,' to defend occupants from distraction by removing the possibility of incidental encounter.³¹ A spatial barrier between the domains of men and those of women and children, between servant and served, they are a manifestation of class and gender segregation. While the gully around the bash'house is an exaggeration of such separation, reading *Too Like the Lightning* alongside the work of Evans allows me to trace between history and imagined future, bringing the lived implications of this original intention to isolate into the present. I am driven to examine my own replication of these border lines that were drawn to segregate and enclose, the patterns of movement I retrace, allowing them to shape and structure behaviour.

The high draw-bridge like walkway which led to the main door of the shimmering glass bash'house [...] line the entrance hall with the traditional relics of triumphs...³²

A bridge crosses this moat. It is a garden path elevated above the sunken wildflower garden and the only tendrils of connection traversing the threshold. It leads to a home whose occupants orient their lives around individual excellence, connected through a hallway which evidences their own worth. To move across and through these spaces is to be made vulnerable, to be confronted by the achievements of others, to be judged within this space of proclaimed value.

This passageway of bridge and hall constructs spatial hierarchy by mediating access to the rooms beyond as delineated by Evans. But it also directs and controls the perception of space and the place of an individual within it. Prior to domestic use, the corridor was originally deployed in military barracks, prisons, and asylums. As described by Mark Jarzombek, these institutions aspire to subsume the individual, with 'every inch focusing on the task of bringing man, building, and nation into a single optic.'³³ Here the corridor is a space of enforcement and surveillance, leading to ranked doors which permit no deviation from the logic of the whole. This historical reading might seem incongruous with the ideas of choice which permeate *Too Like the Lightning*, but the dominating constructs of the bridge and hall reflect how these new social groups have coalesced into institutions, and gestures towards the presence of 'incompletely repressed problems' like gender, class and religion which continue to exert structuring social influence.³⁴ Through *Labyrinth*, and Evans and Jarzombek's histories of the corridor, these domestic boundary spaces speak to me as manifestations of control which have become so every-day as to be invisible. They ask me to redress the legacies of segregation within domestic space, and rail against institutional architectures which dictate my place within the world.

24 For discussion of the role of digital technologies as 'portals' within *Exit West*, see: Michael Perfect, "'Black Holes in the Fabric of the Nation": Refugees in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*", *Journal for Cultural Research*, 23.2 (2019), 187–201.

25 Do Ho Suh, *My Home/s – Hubs*, 2016, polyester fabric on stainless steel pipes. Do Ho Suh, Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong, and Victoria Miro, London, <<https://www.victoria-miro.com/exhibitions/501/>>.

26 Ada Palmer, *Too Like the Lightning*, (London: Head of Zeus, 2017) p. 3.

27 Lee Konstantinou, 'Post-American Speculations', *American Literary History*, 35.1 (2023), 290–304 (p. 297).

28 Ilya Kabakov, *Labyrinth (My Mother's Album)*, 1990, wooden construction, 9 doors, wooden ceiling props, 24 light bulbs, detritus, audio and 76 works on paper, photographs, ink and printed papers. Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, and Tate, London, <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/kabakov-labyrinth-my-mothers-album-t07923>>.

29 Palmer, *Too Like the Lightning*, p. 3.

30 Ada Palmer, 'From Ada's AMA: Terra Ignota, Bash'es & Hives' <<https://www.exurb.com/from-adas-ama-terra-ignota-bashes-hives/>> [accessed 15 September 2023].

31 Robin Evans, 'Figures, Doors and Passages', in *Translations from Drawing to Building* (MIT Press, 1997), pp. 55–91 (p. 74).

32 Palmer, *Too Like the Lightning*, p. 29.

34 Rebecca Ariel Porte and Benjamin Aldes Wurgaft, 'Rockets and Voltaire: A Dialogue on Ada Palmer's "Terra Ignota"', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2022 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/rockets-and-voltaire-a-dialogue-on-ada-palmers-terra-ignota/>> [accessed 15 September 2023].

33 Mark Jarzombek, 'Corridor Spaces', *Critical Inquiry*, 36.4 (2010), 728–70 (p. 751); see also: Stephan Trüby, *Elements of Architecture: Corridor* (Marsilio, 2014).

a cheerful cave, walled with foam of festive colors [...] Inside the cave is all clutter, the choicest treasures gathered from the trash of which Bridger has first pick.³⁵

A child, Bridger, lives in the gully. They are unobserved in the undergrowth, hidden here by the adults who care for them. Nestled up against the bash’ wall they are concealed and held close. This trench which marks the boundary of the bash’ is neither part of the household nor part of the wider world. Between public and private, they are safe in the space between.

This life on the threshold exists outside the rules of the bash’ or the world beyond, and these structures of power are challenged by the inhabitant of the in-between. This playfully echoes the complex examination of borderlands by Gloria Anzaldúa.³⁶ In her nuanced tracing of the Mexico/US border and the complexities of history, tradition, belonging and identity woven through and into those places, Anzaldúa describes the borderlands as the place where worlds converge to create a third country which extends within the self. In place of simple binaries, the borderlands attest to the complexities of lived experience, refuting segregationist delineation by reshaping space and self. Read in this light, Bridger’s presence serves as a somewhat utopian retelling of the borderlands. While, as Evans and Jarzombek discuss, the legacies of the corridors shape behaviour, the borderland creates the space of its own making. As Bridger selects items to treasure, they reconstitute the materials of the world.

the transformation, as real as the page before you, impossible and undeniable.³⁷

But Bridger is not here out of choice. As their name might suggest they have a fantastical ability to bridge between the imagined and real. They can imbue reality into the objects of imagination, turning

a drawing into the object it depicts, blurring the realities of interior story and external world. That this radical power is held by a child makes both vulnerable to exploitation, and so they are hidden by their caregivers in this gully, this bridging space. Between and thus outside of controlled space, they exist outside of the limits of possibility.

While Bridger’s ability is science fictional in its potency, it reflects the ways in which our worlds are continually made and remade. In recognising this, I must also acknowledge the structures of control which I reinscribe in design projects and confront the borders of my own making. As I think through the implications of uncritical replication of enclosure, I recall Hayv Kahraman’s *Bab el Sheikh*.³⁸ In this work, multiple semi-translucent figures are overlaid onto the plan of a courtyard house. They drift across the walls of rooms but are pressed up against the edges of the courtyard, held in place by the cultural rules of gender, constrained by the corridor. The figures bend and twist themselves to fit, but they also exuberantly multiply in these hidden spaces, and their sprawling bodies claim and remake the site of their confinement. As Evans and Jarzombek document, the histories of the corridor linger in each redeployment of these spatial devices, but as Anzaldúa attests the lived reality of the borderlands is a much more complex construction of space and self. Reading *Too Like* across and between these artworks and spatial theory, I question where I have allowed spatial divisions to delineate the boundaries of what I imagine to be possible, and how much I must learn from ‘those who cross over, pass over or go through the confines of the normal.’³⁹ Bridger’s wilful reshaping of reality from within the borderland reminds me that the world is continually under construction, and that which has been made can be remade otherwise.

MINDSCAPE

Breaking apart land and sea, night and day,
yesterday and every other tomorrow...⁴⁰

The boundary spaces of *Mindscape* are Barriers, seams of energy which materialised to encircle the globe in threads of the unknown. Almost impossible to traverse, they have come to replace the nation states they cut across, marking out boundaries of life-worlds for those contained within. They have spawned the creation of new hybrid cultural identities, new patterns of scientific understanding, language and music, but also new forms of social segregation forged from the legacies of systemic oppression.

By impeding movement these Barriers reshape the lives and cultures of those contained within, now grouped together in unanticipated combinations. This forced intimacy draws me to consider the Barrier alongside the boundary space in Marina Abramović and Ulay’s *Imponderabilia*.⁴¹ This performance artwork is sited in the doorway to a gallery, inhabited by two naked people. Passing through it requires turning to face them, squeezing between them, and brushing close. It dismantles the illusory detachment of the viewer to recognise the relationships established by works of art to other bodies and life worlds. As Hairston describes in relation to dancing and acting, ‘creating meaning from experiences in the world always involves a performance, a moment of embodied exchange.’⁴² Thinking through *Imponderabilia* alongside *Mindscape* is an opportunity to reflect on the mutual construction of physical distance and bodily self, which are replicated at scale in *Mindscape* as cultures are radically reshaped by the Barriers, required to remake themselves relations of proximity and intimacy.

The fluid, milky veil hanging across the horizon looked unusually dull in the pre-dawn light [...] A black crystal corridor in the Barrier yawned before him.⁴³

The Barrier in *Mindscape* is a zone, a swathe of landscape which has been rendered uninhabitable. But it is occasionally split by channels where the swirling mists temporarily part to allow safe passage. Where they can be predicted the seasonal corridors are swiftly populated by caravan crossings. Like all migrations, these are movements through the unknown. The looming Barrier either side makes manifest the risk of physical harm and exudes existential peril.

As described by John Rieder and Christina Bacchilega, the Barriers are ‘the imposition of a new frontier [...] dividing what was from what is and can be,’ forcing these new zones to ‘redefine themselves in relation both to one another and to their lost pasts and possible futures.’⁴⁴ These are the tenuous threads of connection to the lost past of cultural and kinship groups now split apart, and the sites of interchange which shape possible futures. For Homi Bhabha it is in the interstitial spaces that the intersubjective and collective can emerge, as ‘terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood and communal representations that generate new signs of cultural difference and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation.’⁴⁵ These are sites between polarities, between fixed identification, where difference can be entertained and the possibility of cultural hybridity opened up. In *Mindscape*, these are the spaces where both the historic and developing constructions of cultural identity co-exist, and both are placed in a state of hybridity and flux. A space of overlap to think beyond categories of difference.

35 Palmer, *Too Like the Lightning*, p. 208.

36 *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Fourth Edition, 4th ed. Edition (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012).

37 Palmer, *Too Like the Lightning*, p. 6.

38 Hayv Kahraman, *Bab El Sheikh*, 2013, oil on modular panel, <<https://hayvkahraman.com/project/let-the-guest-be-the-master/>>.

39 Palmer, *Too Like the Lightning*, p. 3.

40 Andrea Hairston, *Mindscape* (Seattle: Aqueduct Press, 2006) p. 10.

41 Marina Abramović and Ulay, *Imponderabilia*, 1977, 52’16”, video of performance at Galleria Comunale d’Arte Moderna di Bologna. LIMA, <<https://www.li-ma.nl/lima/catalogue/art/ulay-marina-abramovic/imponderabilia/7094>>.

42 Andrea Hairston, ‘Disappearing Natives: The Colonized Body Is Monstrous’, *Extrapolation.*, 54.3 (2013), 257–63 (p. 257).

43 Hairston, *Mindscape*, p. 290.

44 John Rieder and Cristina Bacchilega, ‘History and Its Others in Afrofuturism’, *Iperstoria*, 8, 2016, p. 18.

45 *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 2012), p. 2.

the Barrier look like it swallow black and blue tornadoes [...] somethin' sides me be under my skin, in my head.⁴⁶

It's as if I glimpse worlds, universes, dimensions beyond our own, different rules, different languages, different mindscapes.⁴⁸

think of me at the center of the Barrier mindscape, translating truth, interpreting on being for another, bridging realities.⁵²

are hidden, revealed and transformed all at once. Here there are myriad places in between nested within one another and extending ever further, to be found within the self, to be encountered and made with others.

THRESHOLD CONDITIONS

Three years have passed since I started writing this piece, and I no longer live in the flat with the porch steps, but it is summer again. So, I sit with my back pressed against the sun-warmed wood of the door and my feet curled over the tiles of the front path, inhabiting the thickness of the boundary. In her writing on the 'Matter of Matter', Jennifer Bloomer describes sitting within the poché of an ancient castle as being swallowed by the wall. For Bloomer architectural representations are 'longing marks' and the simple delineations which reduce the potent materiality of the wall to two straight parallel lines are either a subjugation or denial of the 'gravid object.'⁵⁴ She asks me to 'go between the lines, to the heart of the matter, in the belly of the wall,' to recognise the boundary as space, thick and fecund.⁵⁵ As I read these words I feel a shifting pulse within my own belly. I am currently pregnant, a new life being written within the lines of myself, creating a space in-between where I had previously known only the illusion of inviolate self. I recall a conversation with a friend and colleague who spoke about being pregnant as the bodily reproof of singular self-hood, this time when I and we are indistinguishable in the messy materiality of flesh.⁵⁶ It is an intimate dissolution of individuality rendered momentarily palpable in the wet heat of blood, but it also speaks to the foundational truth of inter-relation. Even as this warm summer breeze skims my porous skin and lifts the sweat of my grown self, I am all blurred edges and intertwined networks, boundaries which serve to delineate only the swollen possibilities of the space between the lines. I linger here a little longer, remade within the threshold.

The Vermittler ability to resonate with the Barrier in patterns of mutual influence is due in part to the radiation which has wrought genetic changes in them. While the Barrier can act as a point of connection, a bridge to other worlds and states of being, it requires the creation of radically new hybrid selves. Those who have been remade belong to both sides of the divide and neither, able to access this place between which in turn connects them to all places. This is a choice to engage with the possibilities contained between and beyond known worlds, but it requires them to relinquish the people they once were, to commit to being remade by that which they encounter.

In *Mindscape* the encounters with borderlands are made viscerally potent. The science-fictional device of the Barrier retells the implications of geographical acts of bordering which cut across landscapes in disregard of more than human networks and connections, and echoes the ongoing violence of colonial legacies which split apart kinship groups and cultures, or displace and divide on the basis of religion or race. But through the Vertmiller the border as edge is unpicked and recast as a threshold. This is presented as an act of will which recognises that in order to remake the world we also remake ourselves. Read alongside and through these works of art and theory, I come to see this as an invitation to celebrate the threshold as an in-between state operating across scales of influence, through bodily encounter, social hybridity, spatial design, and the existential unknown. It is an invitation I feel echoed in Dorothea Tanning's *Birthday* in which doorways lead onwards to further thresholds of strangeness.⁵³ In this painting, the first door is held open by the artist's self-portrait, revealing further partially opened doorways beyond. It is a gesture which models the choice to enter into spaces which

The material of the Barrier is a substance which flows and shifts, extending out tendrils which slide across the skin of those who stray too close. Touching the Barrier means risking burns, scarring, and radiation sickness. Those who stray into its field appear to burn out of this plane of existence, occasionally glimpsed again as shadows within its depths, lingering in the shifting energy patterns. As well as dividing the mundane places of geography the Barrier is a threshold between the realms of body and spirit, both enclosure and opening, wall and doorway.

The Barrier cannot be measured using techno-scientific methods, but can be interacted with by the Vermittler. These are individuals who have been remade by the Barrier, altered through proximity to its radiation. Each of them draws upon their own heritages of understanding to channel communication; some reach out through dance and song while others enact knowledge gained through sand mandalas and medicine bags. The edges of the Barrier represent the limits of Western knowledge systems, a threshold to understanding beyond that which is claimed as known.

The Barrier's tangible presence acts upon the bodily self, the social group, the cultural construct, while the effect of its radiation establishes it as an existential and epistemological edge condition. In all these readings, it is a presence which bridges the known and the unknown. Grace Dillon describes how this serves to recognise 'more than Eurowestern ways of thinking' through the depiction of 'conjunction as science.'⁴⁹ This is what Hairston refers to throughout her work as a 'Spectral Aesthetic from a polyrhythmic perspective,' interested more in relational balance than diametrical binaries.⁵⁰ The Barrier in *Mindscape* demands a move beyond fixed frames of knowledge, into the complex and relational. In his analysis of the corridors as depicted in genre fiction Roger Luckhurst notes that these spaces are frequently used to establish a state of suspense and to engender the subtle uneasiness of the interstitial.⁵¹ The Barrier, as both boundary and corridor is fundamentally unsettling, a space of suspense which holds its inhabitants between places, outside of the reassurances of the quantifiable. It threatens and promises encounters with the unknown.

46 Hairston, *Mindscape*, p. 354.

47 Aldo Van Eyck, 'Team 10 Primer 1953-62', ed. by Allison Smithson, *Ekistics*, 15.91 (1963), 349-60 (p. 360).

48 Hairston, *Mindscape*, p. 556.

49 Grace L. Dillon, 'Haint Stories Rooted in Conjure Science: Indigenous Scientific Literacies in Andrea Hairston's Redwood and Wildfire', *Black and Brown Planets*, 2014, 101-16 (p. 104).

50 Andrea Hairston, 'I Wanna Be Great!: How to Rescue the Spirit in the Wasteland of Fame', in *Upstaging Big Daddy: Directing Theater as If Gender and Race Matter*, ed. by Ellen Donkin and Susan Clement (University of Michigan Press, 1993), pp. 235-52 (p. 237).

51 *Corridors: Passages of Modernity* (Reaktion Books, 2019).

52 Hairston, *Mindscape*, p. 553.

53 Dorothea Tanning, *Birthday*, 1942, oil on canvas. Philadelphia Museum of Art, <<https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/93232>>.

54 Jennifer Bloomer, 'The Matter of Matter: A Longing for Gravity', in *Sex of Architecture*, ed. by Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway, and Kanes Weisman Leslie (Harry N. Abrams, 1996), p. 161, p. 163.

55 Bloomer, 'The Matter of Matter', p. 163.

56 Thank you to Katy Beinart for this exchange.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To the communities I am privileged to overlap with: London Science Fiction Research Community, and the Beyond Gender Research Collective. To David for introducing me to the work of Hayv Kahraman, to Glyn for recommending *Too Like the Lightning*, to Katie for introducing me to the work of Sophie Lewis, to Sasha for introducing me to the work of Homi Bhabha, to Sinéad for recommending *Exit West*, and to Sing for introducing me to the work of Dorothea Tanning. Aspects of this research were initially presented at ‘Beyond Borders: Empires, Bodies, Science Fiction’, London Science Fiction Research Community Annual Conference, 2020.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Amy Brookes

Dr Amy Brookes (formerly Amy Butt) is an architect and lecturer in architecture at the University of Reading with a specialization in architectural representation and communication. Her research explores the way the fictional worlds we construct influence and reflect the world we inhabit, writing about the imaginary in architecture through science fiction literature and film. Recent publications include ‘Made up Ground: Architecture, Science Fiction, and the Surface of Imagined Worlds’ in *Architecture and Culture*, and ‘The Present as Past: Science Fiction and the Museum’ in the *Open Library of Humanities* which won the Science Fiction Research Association Innovative Research Award 2022.

