

**“Equally like a beginning and an end”: Edge-lands and threshold conditions**  
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The proposal for this paper was developed, as so much of my recent work has been, while sitting on the top step of the stairs which lead into my flat. 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 behavior on either side of this boundary, do not apply here, it is a space *inbetween*.

In her work on transitional spaces, Jane Rendell (2012) discusses the Narkomfin building as a transitional space, where ‘transitional’ objects and spaces are those “located in the overlap between inside and outside.” It is an experiential form of housing designed around a series of social condensers, shared spaces that would provide opportunities for solidarity and community, alongside apartments which ranged from self-contained flats to communal dwellings for larger collectivized groups. The building was intended to foster and support social change, to encourage new ways of living together, to act as a transitional space into a more socialist future. Rendell argues that the act of writing can create similar sites for change, setting texts alongside one another, “to create a place of potential overlap in the mind of the reader,” a transitional space into other ways of understanding.

So, this paper is an attempt to dwell within three transitional spaces of sf; *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid (2017), *Too like the Lightning* by Ada Palmer (2017), and *Mindscape* by Andrea Hairston (2006). It will focus on the spaces in these novels which exist within the boundary or threshold condition, to examine the ways in which they allow their inhabitants to construct or consider change.

Following Rendell, I will set these fictions alongside works of art and spatial theory which reflect on the nature of such in-between spaces and states, in the hope that these will create spaces of overlap for us all, to “break down the distinctions between inner and outer realities.” I will resist the urge to draw comparison or conclusion, and instead, attempt to leave open the space in-between.

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.

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.

For Sophie Lewis (2019) the border like the door, is a technology, devised to “hold, release and manage” that which it contains. Where the boundary has a thickness, which accommodates an in-between place, the technologies of the border and the door act as threshold mechanisms, controlling access to both the other side, and to the in-between. These are technologies designed and deployed with political, social and environmental intent, in support of a powerful fantasy of separation. In their place, Lewis calls for the creation of “desired or needful openings” which are “conducive to flourishing”, allowing movement across and in-between.

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.

The shadow cast by the thickness of the frame or the half open door leaf, is transformed into a sliver of darkness that folds space. Like all boundaries the doorways define the places they demarcate by locating them along a shared edge, albeit replacing the time of passage with an identifiable moment of transition. The doorways 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. They are cracks through which the world can seep in.

In Alicja Kwade's *WeltenLinie* (WorldLine) (2017), the boundaries appear to transform the objects contained within. In doing so they distort expectations and undermine the assumption that knowledge systems, the clear lines drawn between one thing and another, can ever delineate the possibilities of the world. Here the threshold can be re-interpreted, not as a boundary of distinction but as lines of connection drawn between strangeness's.

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

While the doorway has collapsed distance, the idea of the border remains, and the spaces of arrival are monitored and secured with the animosity and cruelty of all border policing. In this way the border is simply displaced, surrounding the doorways which act as holes in the fabric of the nation state. But while the brutality enacted in detention centres, offshore, or at immigration checkpoints, is held at a remove - this border blossoms in terraced streets, crossed with police cordons and darkened by power blackouts. It is a displacement of border which strips the comfort of distance, and refutes attempts to relegate this violence to the periphery.

The space between border walls, is described by Léopold Lambert (2015) as being within the thickness of the boundary line. "They are trapped within the thickness of the line, a space that has no geometrical, and therefore no legal, existence." As such, bodies which occupy this place are nowhere, stripped of the legal rights which accompany spatial presence. The spatial technology which tightens around and subsumes the individual within them, is not ubiquitous, rather as Lambert notes existence in-between is the result of applied systems, the enactment of policies whose foundations range from callous ambivalence to explicit racism.

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

This particular redrawn border territory in West London, between the shadow of the doorway and the edge of the police cordon, is occupied by Nadia and Saeed, who are swiftly joined by other individuals and families. They are a group borne of situation - of this specific location and of their position within it. It is a collective identity forced upon them, established by the police presence which flattens and dismisses difference. This act of enclosure 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.

Do Ho Suh's *Passage/s* (2016) is a stitching together of entranceways and hallways, the connecting spaces which tie together the public street and the private home. They are linked by the common thread of personal history, so that the experience of walking through them echoes the lived history of the artist, a tracing of the journey they took to recognise each of these passageways as the threshold to home. It is a testament to an understanding of life as a transition rather than a destination, enacted in the in-between spaces.

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

The border of the police cordon is replicated in blocked wifi and cut power lines which curtail digital freedom. The violence inherent in this, and all forms of incarceration, cannot be understated. To those who surround them, Nadia and Saeed are suspended in transition from one place or another, in a denial of the lived experience of the journey or places in-between. But, within the house, this flattening of the boundary to a line, is refuted, unfolded and expanded. Not only by the lives of the inhabitants, but also by the doorways through which they passed which contain the possibilities of connection with all elsewheres, all the places they have travelled from, all the other shadows of doorways and those who might step through them. A connection founded not by association with one place or another, but by occupation of the space between.

Stavros Stavrides (2019) discusses the city as a site of identity enclaves, where accessibility - as a vital attribute of spatial justice, is predicated on an individual's ability to meet the characteristics demanded by each demarcated domain. In this conception of urban space, the spaces in between are the places of encounter, of relational, multifarious or open identity. Stavrides suggests that "creating in-between spaces, might mean creating spaces of encounter between identities instead of spaces characteristic of specific identities." This is the ground from which acts of solidarity become possible.

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

The 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 the houses of other similarly constructed kinship groups. Each of these homes contains adults and children who have carefully chosen one another as family, and so this boundary is a demarcation of a conscious choice of belonging, an enclosure which establishes the 'us' of constructed kinship.

For Robin Evans (1997) the incorporation of the corridor within domestic architecture is both a product and manifestation of social division, "A careful containment and individual compartments in which to preserve the self from others." Gaining ubiquity in the UK in the 19<sup>th</sup> century corridors were designed to distance the occupants of each room from distractions, providing a space dedicated to circulation which removed the possibility of incidental encounter. As such, they were a spatial buffer and barrier between the rooms considered to be the domain of men and those of women and children, between servant and served. A manifestation of class and gender segregation and privilege, written into the spatial fabric of the home.

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

Like a castle moat now softened by centuries of rain and grass into gentle undulations, this gully around the home speaks of histories of violence, and the inherent divisiveness which lingers within any such act of enclosure. That a trench has been constructed around a home, albeit one filled with wild-flowers, is a deliberate evocation of the spatial technologies of war. It suggests that while overt bloodshed might have been relegated to an age long past, the potential remains. This space reflects its wider society, existing in a state of reconciliation, committed to a future of gentle interconnection while also acknowledging the deep-seated desire for spatial belonging.

The corridor spaces between rooms shown on plan in Hayv Kahraman's *Bab el Sheikh* (2013), constrain the figures within, demanding their contortion and compression, requiring them to bend and twist themselves to fit. The figure contained is an avatar of the artist, the version of herself which is created by those who define her through gender and nationality. They are a multitude of bodies, and their presence here speaks as the multitude contained within the individual, and as the collective experience of bodies which, like this one, are similarly constrained. They have grown into and fitted

themselves to this space, merging and identifying with the home and the hidden spaces between rooms, claiming the site of their confinement as their domain.

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...

A bridge crosses this domestic canyon, a drawbridge-like structure which instils precarious unease. It leads to the heavily surveilled main door, behind which is the entrance hallway. This bash is one of many which belong to the Humanist hive, a socio-political group for those who value individual achievement, the striving for artistic, creative or physical excellence. The hallways of each of their bash' houses are lined with the relics of their members' success. It is both testament to their value system and proclamation of their own worth within it. Like the bridge which preceded it, this hallway attempts to diminish the visitor and subsume them within the values of the Hive.

This corridor in Ilya Kabakov's *Labyrinth (My Mother's Album)* (1990) is an expression of the boredom of extended anticipation and the torture of expectation. It is lined with the memoirs of a life lived as a woman in the Soviet Union, the deeply individual and also common experiences of a struggle for survival within a society founded on an anticipated future which is both already realized and perpetually deferred. It is a spatial reflection of the weary hope of a life in transition.

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.

A child, Bridger, lives in the trench that surrounds the house, in a den concealed by the undergrowth and the shadow of the bridge overhead. Bridger has been hidden here by the adults who care for them in an attempt to keep them safe. This trench which marks the boundary of the bash, is neither part of the household it contains, nor part of the wider world. Here, nestled up against the outside wall of a home, they are close enough to care for while also being able to live unobserved and unaccounted. Confined to this place between, they have the freedom of belonging nowhere.

For the architect Aldo Van Eyck (quoted in Smithson, 1963) the threshold is a space to be extended and celebrated, to "persuade it to loop onto a realm – an articulated in-between realm." He argues that a doorway offers only the manifestation of barriers already present within society; the product of architects who are too poor in spirit to imagine a world otherwise. It defines the importance of the in-between realm as a place where the significance of departure and arrival can be recognized, where the critical importance of the encounters and experiences of both places can be held and valued. The in-between establishes a common ground, a space which can accommodate the disruption and dismantling of binary polarities.

"You're a fantasy... I'm making it be real"

Bridger has been hidden here out of fear. As their name might suggests, they are able to bridge between the imagined and real, able to imbue life into a doll or a turn a crayon drawing into that which it depicts, to blur the realms of the interior story and external world. The trench they occupy belongs to neither to a home nor the world beyond it, it is physically and symbolically a place where the rules which govern the realities on either side no longer apply. It is a space outside of the limits of possibility, where new worlds can be imagined into being.

In her nuanced tracing of the US – Mexico border, and the complexities of history, tradition, belonging and identity woven through and into those places, Gloria Anzaldúa (2012), describes the borderlands as the place where worlds converge to create a third country, one which extends and exists within the self. "The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants... those who cross over, pass over or go through the confines of the normal." For those who are in-between, it is a borderland which demands and claims the space of its own making.

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

The boundary space in *Mindscape* is referred to as a Barrier, seams of energy which materialized on or from the earth, encircling the globe in threads of the unknown. Almost impossible to traverse they have delineated the edges of new places, marking out the boundaries of the life-worlds of those contained within. In doing so they have spawned the creation of hybrid cultural identities, establishing new patterns of scientific understanding, language and music, but also fostering new forms of social segregation forged from the legacies of systemic oppression.

The corridor has its origins in the architectures of military barracks, prisons and asylums. As described by Mark Jarzombek (2010; see also: Trüby, 2014) these are spaces constructed with the intention of isolating and constraining their inhabitants within institutional power structures “every inch focusing on the task of bringing man, building, and nation into a single optic.” The ranked doors subsume the individual dwelling within the logic which governs the whole, while the single connecting space of the corridor establishes the conditions necessary for the observation and enforcement of approved patterns of behavior.

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

The barrier is a zone, a thickness whose substance flows and shifts, extending tendrils out which slide across the skin of those who stray too close. Touching the barrier means risking burns, scarring, and radiation sickness, while those who stray into its energy field appear to burn out of this plane of existence. Those who choose the barrier as a way to leave this life are occasionally glimpsed as shadows within its depths, lingering in the shifting energy patterns. As well as dividing the mundane places of geography, the barrier is a boundary between this life and an unknown existence, between the realms of the body and the spirit.

This boundary space in Marina Abramović's, *Imponderabilia* (1977) is inhabited by two people. The doorway they occupy is the entrance to a gallery. Passing through it requires that you turn and face one or the other, squeeze yourself between them and engage in the intimacy of touch. It is a boundary which dismantles the distanced position of visitor or viewer and recognizes the relationships which are established by works of art to other bodies and life worlds. It brings the distanced bodies of the artist into the space of the boundary, as living doors into the museum.

The fluid, milky veil hanging across the horizon looked unusually dull in the predawn light... A black crystal corridor in the Barrier yawned before him.

The barrier is occasionally split by corridors, channels where the swirling mists are temporarily parted to allow safe passage. Where they can be predicted, the seasonal corridors are routes for trade and migration, swiftly populated by caravans crossing this hostile landscape. Like all journeys, they are a movement through the unforeseen, bounded by the barrier which makes manifest both the looming risk of physical harm as well as the existential peril of the unknown.

For Homi Bhabha (2012), it is in the interstitial spaces, that the intersubjective and collective can emerge, “these spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood and communal representations that generate new signs of cultural difference and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation.” These are sites between polarities, able to both acknowledge and exist apart from them. In between these places of fixed identification, difference can be entertained without an assumed or imposed hierarchy, and the possibility of cultural hybridity opened up. These are spaces to think beyond categories of difference and to elaborate strategies of complex selfhood. A space of overlap which accommodates the creation of subjects who are in excess of the sum of their parts.

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

The barrier is unable to be measured using western techno-scientific recording methods, but it can be interacted with using ways of understanding developed by the Vermittler. They are individuals who have been remade by the barrier radiation, each drawing upon their own heritages of understanding to channel communication with the barrier through dance and song, enacting the knowledge gained through sand mandalas and medicine bags. For them, and those who attend to their ways of understanding the edges of the barrier represent the threshold of western knowledge systems, the space between and beyond that which is claimed as known.

In his analysis of the corridor as an architectural and infrastructural space, Roger Luckhurst (2018, and 2019) considers its deployment in fiction to establish a state of suspense, used to provoke the anticipation of a terror which threatens to emerge from around the corner, while also engendering a subtle uneasiness of the interstitial. Luckhurst asks, "what kind of emotion is the space of the corridor meant to evoke? Is it always a space of suspense that builds towards the sublimity of terror...?" The corridor is unsettling and unnerving, a space of suspense which holds its inhabitant between places, outside of the reassurances of the quantifiable or easily understood. It threatens and promises encounters with the unknown.

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

The Vermittler ability to resonate with the barrier in patterns of mutual influence, is due in part to the genetic changes it has wrought in them. The barrier can act as a point of connection, a bridge to other worlds and states of being, but it requires the creation of new hybrid selves. As such, they no longer belong to either side of the barrier divide, but to both sides and neither, able to access this place between which in turn connects them to all places. Their experiences attest to the need to be changed by that which we encounter, in order to engage with the possibilities contained in the gaps between known worlds.

The doorways in Dorothea Tanning's *Birthday* (1942) lead onwards to further thresholds of strangeness. The door, held open by a representation of the artist's self, is an invitation to actively participate in entering the spaces which are hidden, revealed and transformed all at once, where everything is in motion and there is no singular destination or truth. 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.

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