



Holding space for strangeness: in favor of critical utopianism in urban geography

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Abstract. What could urban geographers continue to learn and unlearn from critical utopianism and emancipatory futurities? This contribution seeks to recover transformative academic practices and work towards didactics of speculative estrangement. Specifically, I propose to draw on science and speculative fiction literature to support the revision of established geographical imaginations and epistemologies in a higher-education context.

1 Introduction

As sort-of citizens of the modern world, we have been trained to see certain things as important (...). In particular, the problem of “the future” was that only a small set of things could possibly count as “the future”, and everything else was being blocked out, even though it was going on all around us. So unlearning that set of blinders is the most important thing (Tsing and Shin, 2021:10).

What is the function of future thinking in times of a planetary multi-crisis playing out so overtly in various social, economic, and environmental dimensions that it appears to become increasingly hard to ignore even in the most privileged niches of Western European life? These are critical times in which to face questions of planetary futures – and thinking about futures in a planetary way implores us to no longer treat (human) survival as a matter of course, as Julia Verne and colleagues, referencing Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, put it in their 2023 keynote to Deutscher Kongress für Geographie (Verne et al., 2024). When I presented an earlier version of this paper at that conference, the plural form of “futures” mattered to me, and I will return to possible implications of this expression in a moment. The urban is both affected by and part of these multi-crisis conditions, and there is perhaps little need to mobilize any images to remind the reader of the most recent catastrophic events wreaking havoc to any number of lifeworlds around the globe. The strengthening of

regressive and authoritarian politics, people drowning in the Mediterranean due to brutal border regimes based on racialized othering, the disciplining of and deadly violence against female, trans*, and BIPOC bodies, and the devastation of natural habitats and extinction of entire species of plants and animals – there is no lack of dystopian news. This is not a call for fatalism, however, nor am I seeking to downplay the urgency to work towards change in the current precarities of the planetary situation. To the contrary, I want to follow the many voices who have long since shed light on the condition of crisis being anything but exceptional (e.g., Berlant, 2011). As acute as it may have (and continues to) become, worlds cast into a devastating and devastated multi-crisis condition are an ordinary experience to many people, in various temporalities and spatialities. The ongoing violence of colonial continuities, femicide, forced displacements, and environmental destruction is putting an end to lifeworlds and lifetimes on a planetary scale (e.g., Zaragocin, 2018). At the same time, vulnerabilities to crises and the power to shape futures are distributed unevenly, for the very same historical reasons.

So why even consider futures, in this seemingly bleak landscape of worlds in ruins? It appears to be rather too easy to slip into a mental realm where “future” and “crisis” become mere synonyms. My students in Dresden and Heidelberg, for instance, routinely reported feelings of fear and desperation when asked to reflect on their associations with the notion of “future” during our past years of post-pandemic teaching from 2020 onwards. As urban geographers, how

could we attend to this seemingly increasingly hopeless situation and understand crisis subjectivities not only as something that has the power to alienate and isolate us as individuals, but also as a base for recovering a critique of structural inequalities and collective agency (Calvente and Smicker, 2017)?

In this forum contribution, I want to argue in favor of recovering transformative academic practices and also in favor of urban futures in the plural, joining a chorus of voices that ask us, with Lauren Berlant, to imagine otherwise and in spite of it all. There is a need for such futures in the plural, as an act of open-ended imagination. However unlikely it may seem at certain moments in time, futures of the urban under crisis conditions could be and often are much more ambiguous and complicated, always holding potential openings for an otherwise. “Un/doing future” (Chakkalakal and Ren, 2022) is a call to urban geographers to re-organize: to rethink and shift practices in order to try and navigate these spatial and temporal futures in plurality more consciously and actively. Scholars of Black, indigenous, and queer futurities (e.g., Halberstam, 2005; McKittrick, 2021; Noxolo, 2022; Sedgwick, 1990) and new materialism (e.g., Haraway, 2015) have paved the way in this respect. We can think of queer futurities, for instance, as firmly rooted in present materialities of body and space, where futures are approached as “a site of queer potential in the present: an ever-present capacity for difference-making located in our embodied relations and practices” (Kinkaid, 2024). However, the notion of such latent utopias, or prefigurations, is located in a manner that appears to create some epistemological friction with the aniconic momentum of critical theory (Sørensen, 2023). Risking to state the obvious, this is not akin to abandoning critique altogether in favor of some form of pure idealism. Reading José Esteban Muñoz, I have come to share a growing yearning for critical utopianism, which would support attending to both relationality and futurity in our analysis and praxis of the urban. Bloch’s (1973) concrete utopias and the notion of radical hope are key influences here: “hope is spawned by a critical investment in utopia, which is nothing like naïve but, instead, profoundly resistant to the stultifying temporal logic of a broken-down present” (Muñoz, 2019:12). A logic of a broken-down present, as I would argue with Jaeggi (2023), is no coincidence: it results directly from an inertia, an unwillingness if not outright refusal to enter transformative processes of learning, the cultivation of nostalgia towards an (allegedly) simple past. Other possible futures – past and present – are being blocked out by such regressive tendencies. What could urban geographers continue to learn and unlearn from critical utopianism and emancipatory futurities?

2 Groundwork for critical utopianism: some practices to transform (urban) geography

Perhaps unsurprisingly, utopian glimpses are extremely rare in the current academic realm. This is not limited to urban geography, of course. The now prevalent neoliberalization of higher education systems reflects strongly in an outsized valuation and recognition of acquired third-party funding and publication metrics over content and quality of teaching (and research), the precarity of academic labor conditions¹, and systematically understaffed and overcrowded classrooms and courses, as well as a grating culture of pressure, extreme individualism, and competitiveness amongst scholars. Other structural issues include the medieval roots of a proto-feudalism in the German academic system that entrenches hierarchies and forced dependencies between tenured and untenured staff, not to mention students. Nevertheless, there is a huge body of literature from which to take inspiration for doing academia otherwise, creating niches for other, more collective and emancipatory forms of knowledge-making. In what follows, I will sketch some very rough outlines for transformative practices in academic research and teaching in the broader context of human geography. Through these (and other) practices, we might get closer to reaching for those – by definition unattainable – utopian horizons in a speculative-materialist manner.

2.1 Slow down

Much has been written in favor of slow scholarship over the past decade or so, and these calls have certainly not lost any of their urgency (e.g., Mountz et al., 2015; Schwiter and Vorbrugg, 2021). Slow scholarship is a call to reflect on the conditions under which we do research, teach and learn, read and think and write, collaborate and compete – a call to reflect, in short, on the relations of academic production. Its slowness is a matter not only of rhythm and pace but of solidarity, mutual care, and (re)organizing. Much of its impact is owed to feminist theories and practices of radical care for the self and others, of making space for collective thinking and writing, which have been taken up in the field of geography. Slow mentoring and learning are integral to this effort (e.g., Caretta and Faria, 2019).

2.2 Build on critical (urban) theories

Those seeking to create spaces for reflection, to conduct critical analyses of geographies, to question and perhaps irritate geographical imaginations and epistemologies while

¹A rather specific form of precarity, of course, that mostly concerns time (in terms of working hours, short-term contracts, etc.), stability, work–life balance, and boundaries rather than one of hourly wages. For a brief overview on the situation and academic labor organizing in the German context, see <https://mittelbau.net/information-in-english-2/> (last access: 24 August 2024).

also striving to make the contradictions that arise productive can build on wide-ranging literature in urban theory, critical geography, and postcolonial and feminist studies. These include but are not limited to extremely productive proposals to navigate the situated knowledges of geographical epistememes through tactics of feminist reflexivity (Rose, 1997), and pluralize urban theory-making (e.g., Robinson, 2006; Roy and Ong, 2011) whilst remaining on the lookout for temptations to either essentialize, provincialize, or universalize the urban (Schwarz and Streule, 2016). For the German-spoken context, *Handbuch Kritische Stadtgeographie* (Belina et al., 2024), recently published in a completely revised and conceptually and empirically enriched edition, is testament to the ongoing need for and relevance of critical urban theories. While practicing slow scholarship and building on critical urban theory may seem like rather obvious suggestions, I will now delve a bit deeper into speculative estrangement as a way of disturbing, shifting, and multiplying established perspectives on the urban.

2.3 Hold space for speculative estrangement

Teaching and learning urban geographies is one of the areas that I find particularly pressing and rewarding to engage in as a scholar. Making and holding space for collective reflection on positionalities and for an unlearning of established perspectives is, I believe, key to teaching critical thinking (hooks, 2010). By speculative estrangement, I refer to one of the affordances of science and speculative fiction literature: to transport protagonists and readers to imaginary worlds where unquestioned assumptions are challenged (Suvin, 1972). Such a project of otherwise worldbuilding through reading and writing speculative texts (Farhadi, 2022) ties in beautifully with Mary Louise Pratt's outline for the pedagogical arts of the contact zone: "exercises in storytelling and in identifying with the ideas, interests, histories, and attitudes of others; experiments in transculturation and collaborative work and in the arts of critique, parody, and comparison (...), ways to move into and out of rhetorics of authenticity; ground rules for communication across lines of difference and hierarchy" (Pratt, 1991:40). Feminist and decolonial pedagogies are a major inspiration in that they understand and practice education, and speculative education in particular, as a collective responsibility (e.g., Schreiber and Carstensen-Egwuom, 2021; Houssay-Holzschuch, 2024).

3 Towards a didactics of speculative estrangement

What could such didactics of speculative estrangement entail? Two examples from my own praxis include the following: on the one hand, in my human geography graduate and undergraduate courses, I have drawn on a range of science and speculative fiction (SF) literature to support the revision of established geographical imaginations and epistemologies. SF literature has much to offer towards specu-

lative estrangement as a didactic technique because a lot of these texts engage deeply in imagining otherwise, in utopian dreaming and critical worldbuilding. The powerful writing of Black speculative fiction author Octavia E. Butler, for instance, namely her 2000 essay "A Few Rules for Predicting the Future" (Butler, 2000), has given my students space for reflection on their own relation to possible futures. Butler addresses historical difference and trajectories of becoming (rule 1: "Learn from the past"); relationality, multi-sitedness, and multitemporality (rule 2: "Respect the law of consequences"); positionality and questions of unequal access (rule 3: "Be aware of your perspective"); and, finally, contingency, radical openness, and the ever unfinished processes of transformation (rule 4: "Count on the surprises"). So, in a twist on expectations often heaped on SF authors that they perform some sort of prophetic act, Butler's proposals do not share much with the anticipatory practices of predictive modeling and other forms of "calculating futures" (Anderson, 2010). As SF author Ursula K. Le Guin once remarked in her characteristically direct-yet-charming manner, "I am grateful to an interviewer who respects the limits of my learning and my intellect, and who doesn't require me to act the Oracle of Delphi" (Le Guin and Naimon, 2018:6) by asking about the future of humanity. Instead outlining the probabilities of one specific type of future, Butler's four "rules" open up a realm of speculation, imagination, and reflection not only on futurities but also on the present that is highly stimulating and productive both in the classroom and in the context of research. Other key concepts that feature in my SF-based teaching include creative writing oriented by Le Guin's (2020) thoughts on storytelling and critical worldbuilding and the notion of hyperempathy woven through much of Butler's work², namely her postapocalyptic *Parables* series (Butler, 1993, 1998). Introducing hyperempathy as a pharmaco-fictional vehicle in creative writing prompts in the classroom during my "Writing Urban Futures" seminar, for instance, enabled students to pay closer attention to the spatialities and affective registers of fear and pain, depression, hope, and joy (Schwarz, 2023).

On the other hand, nurturing a concern for "the disjuncture between the actual and the possible" (Brenner, 2012:17) also calls on critical scholars and lecturers of human geography to engage in a critique of contemporary regressive tendencies in their various neo-fascist and authoritarian forms. Curricula can draw on existing scholarship that seeks to unsettle ontological and epistemological parochialisms (Schwarz, 2022) – such as geographical research on far-right territorializations (e.g., Varco, 2023, and other research conducted by the Terra-R network, <https://terra-r.net/>, last access: 24 August 2024), alt-right phantasies of "reverse colonization" in science fic-

²Lauren Olamina, the *Parables*' main protagonist, and some members of her traveling community are hyperempathic – an inherent condition involuntarily subjecting them bodily and mentally to the unfiltered emotions of others in their proximity.

tion literature (Higgins, 2021), and well-worn NIMBYisms in the face of a planetary climate crisis and global migratory movements, to name just a few. A relational perspective that dissects notions of home, origin, and identity would be able to point to the illusion of enclaves, the illusion of an insular, isolationist dwelling behind walls as a solution to anything. If exile is, as Di Cesare (2021) argues, not an exceptional condition but a planetary way of existence today, there remains no imaginary backyard into which to retreat. In this context, human geographers would do well to attend to and try to dissect the ways in which the otherwise singular “future” is not a mere ideal – but rather an absolute utopian promise by definition. A singular, foreclosed future could, in a normative sense, actually turn out to be so much worse than other future presents. To do so, I follow Jaeggi (2023:16) in understanding and embracing progress as a political imperative, a kind of self-nurturing and self-enriching process of experiencing and learning. Unlearning – as mirrored in the opening quote from an interview with Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing – is an integral part of this dialectical notion. Essentially, it aims to overcome perspectives that limit learning from the past and present experiences of oneself and others – to identify and set aside certain blinders that obstruct the emergence of other angles, other conceptions of the world (Tsing and Shin, 2021:10). By questioning power relations, providing students with methods and space for reflection, as well as transdisciplinary collaborations, transformative teaching in the field of human geography can contribute to this project. In this logic, the classroom becomes a space of potential progressive transformation, a place where academia can try to hold space for strangeness, surprises, and better ways forward and sideways. Progress, in this sense, would be not so much about publishing a text in a high-ranking journal bearing “progress” in its name. Instead, we could ask what such a text might contribute to the transformation of a thread-bare status quo. Progress is, in other words, perhaps less about the age and gravitas of an institution, academic reputation, or journal metrics – and more about current forms, contents, and qualities of the entwined processes of thinking, writing, teaching, learning, and unlearning about and alongside the geographies of urban futures we engage in. In a nutshell, holding space for strangeness in academic settings requires more than a radical openness to change – we are asked to engage in the collective project of a reparatory social science (Bhambra, 2022), center non-hegemonic futurities (Curley and Smith, 2024), and to actively make room for contingency, surprises, other possibilities, openings, and paths of futurity. Crucially, such a decentering approach also asks us to “hold strangeness in relation” (Cornum, 2023), to keep utopia as “the other” in mind as a necessary yet essentially uninhabitable ideal – instead of striving to explore, capture, and conceptualize everything.

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