

Straying with the Trouble: Science fiction, utopia and the anti-carceral imagination

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sor**Phil Crockett Thomas**

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Abstract

Prisons continue to dominate our collective social imagination of the best way to respond to social harm, despite the overwhelming evidence that they do not make society safer or enact justice. To support the urgent work of thinking beyond prisons, this article focuses on the anti-carceral imagination of activists and scholars involved in the movement for prison abolition. I discuss findings from *Prison Break: Imagining Alternatives to Prison in the UK (2021–2022)*, an interdisciplinary research project which used creative writing workshops to support activists and scholars involved in prison abolition and transformative justice in the UK, to write short works of science fiction imagining more just futures. These were published in an open-access book: *Abolition Science Fiction*. The first part of this article discusses the project's innovative methodological approach of collaborative fictioning, and its theoretical framework, both of which draw on poststructuralist feminist approaches, abolitionist scholarship, literary and utopian studies. I then discuss some of the project's findings via an analysis of a sample of the stories which explore utopian temporalities, drawing both on our collective analysis within the workshops, and my own close reading. Through this, I offer insights into how the stories can improve our understanding of abolitionists' anti-carceral imagination and help enact more just futures, arguing that fiction is an important space where activists reckon with the complexity of their concerns and hopes about the *distant* future, and hold them close as a *distant* presence in their daily lives.

Keywords

collaboration, fictioning, prison abolition, science fiction, sociological fiction, utopia

Introduction

'Utopia' combines the Greek 'place' (*topos*) and prefix 'not' (*ou*), but when spoken the word sounds the same as eu(*topia*) meaning 'good place' (More, 1516/2012). As Miguel Abensour notes, utopia is 'a playful name . . . that permanently oscillates . . . between

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the place where everything is good, the place of bliss (Eutopia), and the place of nowhere (Ou-topia)' (Abensour, 2008, p. 406). In a 1982 lecture, Ursula Le Guin riffed on the theme of utopia as no-place, commenting:

Utopia is uninhabitable. As soon as we reach it, it ceases to be utopia. As evidence of this sad but ineluctable fact, may I point out that we in this room, here and now, are inhabiting utopia. (Le Guin, 1989, p. 81)

Le Guin gave this lecture in California, once seen by colonists as a promised land. But paradise was paved, and she critiques the Californian utopian imagination of the early 1980s as shackled to growth, expansion and accumulation (Le Guin, 1989, p. 85). She quotes the dissident novelist Milan Kundera, commenting that the building of utopias tends to necessitate 'a little gulag on the side of Eden' for all who don't fit within the utopian vision. Decades later, the geographer and abolitionist activist-scholar Gilmore's (2007) *Golden Gulag* focused on California's intensive prison building programme that began around the time of Le Guin's lecture, swelling the state prisoner population by nearly 500% in the space of 20 years (Gilmore, 2007, p. 7). As a form of 'organised abandonment', imprisonment and its after-effects result in 'vulnerability to premature death' for its population which disproportionately comprises of ethnic minorities and poor or socially marginalised people (Gilmore, 2007).

Prisons practise a form of social exclusion which not only displaces people spatially, but also temporally. Worldwide and particularly in the US prison sentences are getting longer, and people are serving more of their sentence inside prison. In more recent work, Gilmore (2017) has written about imprisonment as 'extractive', not only of prisoners' free labour – an important element of prior abolitionist critiques – but also of their 'life-time'. She argues that prisons are places of 'enforced inactivity', which nevertheless allow for the circulation of capital as the system cycles people through it (Gilmore, 2017, p. 227). As Gilmore (2017) makes clear, this extraction of life-time not only affects the individual but 'changes lives elsewhere – partners, children, communities, movements, the possibility of freedom' (p. 229). Kundera continues, 'in the course of time this gulag grows ever bigger and more perfect, while the adjoining paradise gets ever smaller and poorer' (Le Guin, 1989, p. 87).

Prisons continue to dominate our collective social imagination of the best way to respond to social harm, despite the overwhelming evidence that they do not make society safer or enact justice. Arguments for prison abolition have a long history within the anarchist tradition, particularly regarding the fate of political prisoners. However, the contemporary movement developed in the 1970s in support of prisoner-led organising and high-profile actions against the carceral conditions which affected all prisoners. The global movement for prison abolition encompasses a diversity of issues, positions and approaches, but broadly, it seeks to abolish or significantly reduce the use of prisons and other punitive social practices and replace them with responses to social harm that centre on responsibility and healing, rather than on punishment and exclusion. Like many political projects seeking radical social change, the movement for prison abolition operates with a sense of temporality that oscillates between the present, the near future and the distant future. This complex notion of time affects abolitionist practices and imaginaries.

For example, there is the strategy known as the ‘attrition model’ which visualises the goal of abolition as the end of a ‘chain of shorter campaigns around specific issues’ (for example, on decarceration or decriminalisation). This is a strategy designed to mitigate potential feelings of overwhelm and paralysis when faced with the distant prospect of prison abolition coming to pass (Knopp et al., 1976).

In this article I focus on abolitionists’ anti-carceral imaginaries, arguing that fiction is one of the key spaces where activists reckon with both concerns and hopes about the *distant* future, and hold them close as a *distant* presence in their daily lives. To ground this argument empirically, this article discusses findings from Prison Break: Imagining Alternatives to Prison in the UK (2021–2022), an interdisciplinary research project which used creative writing workshops to support activists and scholars involved in prison abolition and transformative justice in the UK, to write short works of science fiction imagining more just futures. These were published in an open-access book: *Abolition Science Fiction* (Crockett Thomas, 2022a).¹ The first part of this article discusses the methodological approach and theoretical framework of Prison Break. I then discuss some of the project’s findings via an analysis of some of the stories in the book, drawing both on our collective analysis within the workshops, and my own close reading. Via explicitly engaging with the question of what a world without prisons could be like, the stories implicitly engage with other questions, such as how might the temporality of prison abolition be represented in a fictional plot, structured by a beginning, middle and end? What kinds of utopian forms do abolitionists’ utilise? How is narrative causality figured and who are the agents of change? As I will argue, these stories demonstrate that the anti-carceral imagination is not primarily concerned with triumphalist fantasies of a world without carcerality, but with reckoning with the complexities of a future knotted with the scar tissue of past and present harms. As such, I argue that the stories evidence a form of *and* utopia, embodying both the recognition of the ‘terrible injustice and misery of our world [and] escapist and consolatory fantasies’ (Le Guin, 1989, p. 98). In foregrounding this productive uncertainty, this article contributes to abolitionist thinking and projects, the sociology of punishment and social justice, utopian studies, and scholarship involving creative and collaborative methods.

Fictioning as method

The Prison Break project grew from an observation I kept coming across in the work of abolitionist scholars and activists: that the importance and energy needed to document and critique the harms of prison and other forms of punishment can limit our capacity for developing alternative visions and practices of justice that could be truly transformative. It is hard to do that crucial speculative work when there’s so much firefighting to do, and when ‘burn out’ is endemic. As Davis (2010, p. 10) notes, ‘the prison is considered so “natural” that it is extremely hard to imagine life without it’. In other words, the prison has ‘territorialised’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004; Latimer & Skeggs, 2011, p. 395) our imagination of responses to social harm and justice. The naturalness of prisons is also reinforced by popular culture and as such, this project also responds to Brown’s (2014) call for creative ‘counter-visual’ representations of justice.

The project made space for this kind of imaginative work through a process of onto-methodological ‘research-creation’ – as described by Paul Couillard, ‘a form of practice whose analytical framework does not . . . study what already exists, but acts by bringing something new into the world’ (Truman, 2021, p. 15). A key objective of the project was thus to explore – through the process of ‘research-creation’ that took place in the innovative workshops that produced our book *Abolition Science Fiction* – how nurturing the expression of activists’ anti-carceral imagination might both deepen our understanding of the ‘carceral imaginary’ (Benjamin, 2016), and help us think beyond containment and exclusion as the primary social response to harm.

The title of this article, ‘Straying with the Trouble’, references a line from a poem written by Koshka Duff as part of the project, which riffs on Haraway’s (2016) ‘Staying with the Trouble’. If staying with the trouble ‘requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings’ (Haraway, 2016, p. 1), then *straying* with the trouble suggests a practice of attuning to the present while using imaginative techniques to stray and play, and find new ways of troubling, or being the trouble.

As this project sought to learn from the expertise of people involved with activism and scholarship on prison abolition and restorative justice in the UK, a purposive sampling method was used. Using personal networks I approached individuals and activist groups to participate in the project via email or in person, inviting them to recommend others who they thought would be interested in taking part. I then designed and facilitated three two-part creative writing workshops (holding two online and one in person), working with 28 activists and scholars based in England, Wales and Scotland. Each pair of workshops lasted for four hours in total and comprised a mix of reading, discussion and creative writing exercises designed to develop different skills and explore project themes. I later worked with some of the participants individually to polish their stories. We then met online as a whole group for a ‘sharing symposium’ to discuss and celebrate the 14 stories, manifesto and poem that were finished and included in *Abolition Science Fiction*.

In this project I have focused on fiction as a verb: *fictioning* – so, the way that the writing of fiction, particularly in collaboration with others, can open a space to imagine the world anew, and in doing so, transform our practices in the present. Creative writing workshops invite writer-participants to explore and express their knowledge and experience in new ways. As such, fictioning has ethical affordances for working with people who have stigmatised knowledge – for example in supporting the telling of different stories from those privileged or demanded by the state, or creating composite characters to act as proxies for experiences, thus resisting the requirement to share traumatic personal stories (Crockett Thomas, 2022b). This does not mean that this approach is free from harm. As arts-based methods have gained more widespread use within the social sciences, often with the argument that they are more accessible for participants, some scholars have argued that they depend on access to cultural capital and may be alienating for working-class participants (see e.g. Smith, 2024). In this project, the participants were activists and scholars who often possessed high levels of cultural capital. They were also self-selecting, and as such, many had an interest in creative writing, with most

having done some as part of their compulsory education. Further, the exercises we used were beginner level, and I selected science fiction partly because it is a popular genre, whose tropes and stock characters are ubiquitous within popular culture and therefore familiar to my participants.

Collaborative fictioning has meant reading, writing and thinking with others with different perspectives and experiences. As in all research, there was a power imbalance between the project's participants and myself as the researcher. There were also differences and inequalities within the group, for example in terms of social or professional status, experience as a writer or activist, experience of criminalisation or violence, or how networked or connected participants were to each other. A more equitable balance of power was aided by happy accidents: none of the participants or indeed myself occupied the dominant position in all these aspects, and also by strategies like budgeting to pay everyone for their time. Feminist critiques of social science methods being underpinned by exploitative or extractive logics (e.g. McKittrick, 2021; Rexer, 2022) are well founded, and in this project fiction functioned as a way for the participants to control if and how to reveal information, and only share the writing that they wanted to with the project.

Alongside participants' stories, *Abolition Science Fiction* also contains discussion chapters on different themes which draw on the project participants' collective analysis of the stories in the workshops, relating them to current debates and learning in the movement for abolition. As such, the epistemological status of this discussion is treated as collaborative analysis, albeit mediated through my concerns as the book's editor. Power inequalities inherent to research relationships have not been done away with, but participants have been credited with their contribution and continue to be consulted on the legacy and outputs of the project. The book was designed to support readers hoping to undertake their own creative exploration of justice issues, so includes discussion prompts, creative writing exercises and suggestions on how to organise a workshop like those used in the project. It has an open-access licence, and was shared with the aim that it could act in the world beyond the lifespan of a one-year research project.

My methodological approach builds on critical feminist engagements with the 'ontological politics' (Mol, 1999) of research. In this tradition, research is recognised as inherently speculative and productive, and our knowledge as partial and situated (Haraway, 1988). As Truman (2021, p. 7) notes, 'The differential link between a *situated* curiosity and speculative possibilities or potentialities fuels much feminist materialist thought.' This situatedness is not static; rather we 'become-with' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 256) our research and our participants and it reshapes us as we shape it (Crockett Thomas, 2020, p. 75). In order to conceptualise collaborative fictioning I have drawn on the work of the art scholars David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan who, inspired by Gilles Deleuze and particularly his notion of 'fabulation', describe one of the functions of fictioning to be 'mythopoesis', a kind of 'address to the future' that might help generate 'a people to come' or help build new worlds (Burrows & O'Sullivan, 2019, pp. 16–17). I am also indebted to feminist scholars who have embraced the affordances of speculative fiction for experimenting on the thresholds of knowledge production, for example by troubling 'fact' through 'speculative fabulation' (Haraway, 2016), or to materialise and politicise archival absences via 'critical fabulation' (Hartman, 2008).

As such, Prison Break also sought to investigate the role that fictioning could play in the dialectical moves between imagination and praxis, articulated by Bloch (1995), and more recently Levitas (2013, p. 149) who argues ‘we need to understand utopia as a method rather than a goal . . . always suspended between the present and the future, always under revision . . . for the moment accessible only through an act of imagination’. Imaginative works such as stories can mediate an exchange between author(s) and audiences. As such, the project builds on previous scholarship which explored the ontology and agency of artworks to affect and engage audiences in reimagining complex justice issues (Crockett Thomas et al., 2020).

Social science fiction

The Prison Break project is underpinned by a conceptualisation of the imagination as situated, social and speculative. This conceptualisation is widely shared within the social sciences, by social justice activists and scholars, and among the scholars and writers of science fiction. For example, within the social sciences we have C. Wright Mills’s egalitarian notion of the ‘sociological imagination’ involved in making the connections between private and public troubles legible. As Latimer and Skeggs (2011, p. 397) note, ‘imaginaries are rooted in socio-political and cultural contexts, as at the same time they are performative and do their political work’. Robin D. G. Kelley’s history of the ‘black radical imagination’ demonstrates how ‘revolutionary dreams erupt out of political engagement; collective social movements are incubators of new knowledge’ (Kelley, 2003, p. 8). Social movement researchers Haiven and Khasnabish (2014) write that ‘the radical imagination’ is a collective process rather than ‘private property’, but this does not deny that it is also situated, and has a personal, affective dimension shaped by experience. The social imagination is also at work in science fiction, as while it entails the imaginative construction of new worlds or those different from our own, the narrative invites us to consider its relation to the world we know. This might be incidentally, for example, as in Asimov’s novel *The End of Eternity* (1955), where the futuristic society of time-travelling ‘eternals’ possess the same values and biases as the author’s milieu; or purposefully as in Russ’s *The Female Man* (1975), where the author uses parallel universes to satirise the misogyny she experienced in 1970s America. As such, many writers of science fiction have argued that the genre can tell us more about the present than the future. For example, Samuel Delany writes that science fiction’s relation to the present,

. . . is one of dialogic, contestatory, agonistic creativity. In science fiction the future is only a writerly convention that allows the SF writer to indulge in a significant distortion of the present that sets up a rich and complex dialogue with the reader’s here and now. (Delany, 1984, p. 165)

Here Delany is working with Suvin’s (1979) influential conception of science fiction as a literary genre defined by ‘cognitive estrangement’ (p. 4). Suvin was drawing on the work of earlier Marxist literary scholars such as Viktor Shklovsky who made such claims about the potential of art to make the familiar strange. For Suvin (2010), the key device within science fiction that facilitates this estrangement is the ‘novum’, a term he borrows from Bloch (1995), designating it a new thing/innovation/phenomenon (hence

cognitive) that has implications for the fictional world represented, in a way that ‘deviates [estranges] from the author’s and implied reader’s norms of reality’ (Suvin, 2010, p. 68). For example, in Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam Trilogy* (2003–2013) advancements in genetic engineering (the novum) have brought about ecological catastrophe and human near-extinction.

Science fiction’s potential for ‘estrangement’ has not been lost on scholars outside of the arts, and social scientists have explicitly drawn on science fiction as a resource since at least the 1950s, and since the 1990s as ‘a methodology for grasping the social’ (Gerlach & Hamilton, 2003, p. 168). The traffic has not been one-way, and the literary and media scholar Donald F. Theall developed the term ‘social-science-fiction’ (Gerlach & Hamilton, 2003, p. 164; Theall, 1975) to describe the work of authors such as Le Guin, Delany and Butler who draw on social sciences scholarship in their fiction. This has created a situation where the science fiction authors who get written about the most within the social sciences are the ones who engage directly with social theory (Gerlach & Hamilton, 2003, p. 165), or those who are engaged in a process of cognitive estrangement (Luckhurst, 2005). As such there are clear risks that creative works that conform to this pattern are instrumentalised and those that do not are sidelined, narrowing both perceptions of the genre and its contribution to knowledge within the social sciences.

My project is indebted to and inspired by contemporary activist approaches that have cultivated a space for reading, especially speculative fiction, and for creative writing practices. These approaches embrace fiction as a resource for reflecting on the past and hope for the future, and as a tool to think through issues in ways that are different from non-fiction. The most well-known publication resulting from this work is the speculative fiction anthology *Octavia’s Brood* (brown & Imarisha, 2015), named in honour of the Black feminist writer Octavia E. Butler, and collectively workshopped by social justice activists and community organisers in the USA. The book’s editors describe their activism and political organising as a form of science fiction, because of the way it entails moving beyond the boundaries of what seems possible (brown & Imarisha, 2015, p. 3).

Imarisha (2015) termed the work in the anthology ‘visionary fiction’ noting that ‘this term reminds us to be utterly unrealistic in our organizing, because it is only through imagining the so-called impossible that we can begin to concretely build it’. As brown describes, collaborative fictioning acted as a safe ‘exploring ground’ to tackle difficult issues without serious worldly consequences (brown & Imarisha, 2015, p. 279). It is not a choice between imagination and practice, but a dialectic process. As Imarisha emphasises,

. . . visionary fiction . . . is not a form of self-help. . . . It’s not just an exercise in imagination. The goal of this is to change the world, and that is not an optional step. (Imarisha, 2023)

The influence of *Octavia’s Brood* can be seen in the uptake or intensified practice of creative writing within activist groups, in activist and artistic projects such as Writers 4 Utopia² and *Reworlding Ramallah* (Copley, 2019), and the inclusion of creative writing on abolitionist themes in subsequent non-fiction publications by activist-scholars (e.g. Bradley & De Noronha, 2022; Kaba, 2021; Purnell, 2021). It has also influenced academic projects similar to this one, for example Haiven’s Worker as Futurist project that

supported Amazon workers to write speculative fiction about *The World After Amazon* (Benivolski et al., 2024). Recent scholarship within the social sciences has explored this phenomenon. For example, Haran (2017, p. 1) has used the term ‘imaginactivism’ to describe ‘how activist communities are formed, inspired and/or reinvigorated by fictional cultural production’. Drawing on Cooper’s (2013, p. 2) conceptualisation of ‘everyday utopias’ as communities, networks and spaces ‘creating the change they wish to encounter, building and forging new ways of experiencing political life’, Ackhurst (2019, p. 123) describes how grassroots feminist activist groups in the UK use ‘intersectional prefiguration and visionary fiction-ing’ in ‘the process of discovering new ways to navigate towards utopias while fostering everyday disruptions within (and also outside of) everyday utopias’. Miranda Iossifidis (2020, p. 159) has explored how participants in an online speculative fiction reading group ‘seek out and engage with utopian and critically dystopian fictions that nourish the capacity for individual and collective resistance and struggle’ in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In an important critical intervention Ackhurst (2024) reflects on the over-emphasis on the ‘imagination’ as a site that can produce solutions to the problem of injustice. Against this she encourages ‘attending to both the carceral and liberatory tendencies within the imagination and seek[ing] to learn from them’ (Ackhurst, 2024, p. 95).

Abolitionist futures

In recent years the concept of abolition has been mobilised to consider other practices and institutions. This receptiveness to radical proposals speaks to our contemporary moment, a time of uncertainty and anxiety about the present and future of the planet. Social instability creates an opportunity for rethinking and reworking other social arrangements, not only those that are obviously problematic like borders (Bradley & De Noronha, 2022), but also idealised or cherished institutions like the family. This mirrors a characteristic of the contemporary anti-carceral imagination which is to think about justice outside of the ‘silo’ of criminal justice.

Abolitionists stress that their aim is not to remove physical *prisons* from society without also attending to other carceral institutions and social practices (Ben-Moshe, 2013, p. 86; Morris, 1995). A crucial aspect of this is how we imagine and enact anti-carceral ways of living and organising ourselves in the present, against the dominant carceral logic. Benjamin (2016, p. 151) entreats us to consider more broadly, ‘how carceral imaginaries seek to contain individual bodies *and* collective visions of the future [yet to] remain attentive to the many forms of subversion and resistance that also take shape’. For example, following the line of flight that Halberstam (2011) termed ‘the queer art of failure’, queer and trans abolitionists transform the transphobic discourse that deems them impossible subjects, asking ‘what would it mean to embrace, rather than shy away from, the impossibility of our ways of living as well as our political visions?’ (Bassichis et al., 2011, pp. 36–37). Practically, this means experimenting with new ways of being in social and political communities, in the spirit of brown and Imarisha’s (2015) invocation of a utopian activism oriented towards the hopeful rather than the realistic.

However, there is often ambivalence expressed about the concept of utopia within the movement for prison abolition. For example, Angela Davis and her co-authors write:

Abolition is by necessity speculative, and we ardently embrace its utopian dimension. Yet if a movement is framed as a progression towards utopia, its conceptual and organizing moves can also reinforce a central myth about abolition: that it is impractical, unattainable, a dream. . . . Utopian approaches can be cast as limited, and it is a refrain too often levelled against abolitionists, along with our ‘evangelical zeal,’ our naivete, our failure to be pragmatic, and our extremism. (Davis et al., 2022, p. 15)

While agreeing that in one sense, the utopian is energising and to be ‘embraced’, the authors are concerned that the project of abolition will be contaminated by the popular prejudice against utopia, which will dissuade people from the cause. Activist-scholars also ruminate on the harm utopia can do within movements for social justice, serving as a distraction from action attuned to the necessarily messy present. For example, Ackhurst (2019, 2024) identifies the emotional distress that can be experienced by activists believing that they can end violence and harm and realise a utopia free from these things. As Ackhurst demonstrates, utopia can sometimes act as an attachment that can wound, as in Berlant’s (2011) conceptualisation of ‘cruel optimism’.

Despite the negative public image of utopia as a delusion, the conceptualisation of utopia as blueprint has long been out of fashion. As H. G. Wells wrote back in 1905:

In a modern Utopia there will, indeed, be no perfection; in Utopia there must also be friction, conflicts and waste, but the waste will be enormously less than in our world. (Wells, 2005, pp. 176–177, cited in Cooper, 2013, p. 7)

Contemporary utopian scholars such as Levitas (2013) and Cooper (2013) tend to characterise utopia as processual rather than the creation and implementation of a fixed plan. Abensour argues that ‘the persistence of utopia’ is ‘due not so much to the repeated pursuit of a determinate content as to the ever-reborn movement toward something indeterminate’ (Abensour, 2008, p. 407). Similarly, within contemporary fiction, most utopias are imperfect or conflicted ‘critical utopias’ (Moylan, 2014). Tom Moylan has argued that 20th century utopianism was delegitimised by its implication in authoritarian regimes, genocide and nuclear projects, only to re-emerge in the late 1960s with the development of the ‘subversive utopianism’ (Moylan, 2014, p. 10) of writers like Le Guin, buoyed by the time’s social movements for racial, sexual and gender liberation. Such writers and their readers rejected ‘utopia as a blueprint while preserving it as a dream’ (Moylan, 2014, p. 10). As such, the ‘critical utopia’ offers a form of utopia that is recuperable for activism.

The concept of the ‘critical utopia’ also influenced *Prison Break*’s methodological approach. At the end of each part of the workshops I ran a longer writing exercise, which I adapted from Michael Deerwater, a science fiction scholar and writer. This involved participants individually imagining a ‘novum’ (a science fictional novelty or innovation), in this case, a difference that meant prisons or punishment no longer existed, or something that would significantly change the way we respond to social harm. Participants came up with nova such as: prisoners become able to walk through walls; bodies can be physically contained but consciousness can be downloaded into a free body; or prisons are replaced by a form of ritual mediation in a healing forest. They then wrote scenes set in this future from the perspective of an alien visitor, which is a long-running narrative device within the genre.

The second time I ran the exercise there was an additional challenge: think of an unintended effect of your novum. Now participants were invited to write a scene where their protagonist (who is aware of the unintended effect) must decide what, if anything, to do about it. This addition was partly a way to bring dynamics into the plot, but also, in inviting the consideration of unintended effects or problems, encouraged the development of ‘critical utopias’. Further, it was an attempt to pre-emptively do away with the paralysis of the task of ‘solving’ the problem, by incorporating problems and imperfections into the plot that allow us to think *with* the stories rather than focusing on their ‘failure’ as a utopia. In this way, the second prompt introduced ‘faultlines’ (as in the utopian fiction of Kim Stanley Robinson [Thaler, 2023]). Through fictional explorations of the ramifications of various projects to mitigate environmental catastrophe ‘Robinson’s fiction depicts failure as a necessary component of learning how to inhabit a climate-changed world’, motivating his readers to take action in the present rather than withdraw from fear of failure (Thaler, 2023, p. 442).

The full details of the workshop method, writing exercises and prompts used, as well as the stories and an edited version of our workshop discussions can be found in *Abolition Science Fiction*, which is free to read and download at abolitionscifi.org. To demonstrate the utility of this approach for thinking beyond abolition as an impasse, I will now analyse a selection of the stories generated by the project as they relate to conceptualisations of utopia, concluding by arguing what they can tell us about the anti-carceral imaginary. Readers might like to explore the stories in our free e-book before reading the following analysis.

Analysis: Utopia in a sample of participants’ stories

My analysis focuses on a close reading of a sample of the stories drawing on literary theory, utopian studies and the scholarship on prison abolition. It is deeply informed by the collaborative discursive interpretations generated by participants in the sharing symposium where we came together to read and discuss the finished stories.³ In the analysis that follows I refer to participants in keeping with how they chose to be named in the book.

Dystopia

In *PR2* by Sarah Armstrong, the central character is the Prison Records System (version 2) currently used by the Scottish Prison Service. As such, the story is not set in the *future*, but uses the science fiction trope of the agentic machine or bad computer to articulate the present harms of this kind of quantification, surveillance and bureaucratic violence that underpins the actuarial justice that Feeley and Simon (1992) characterised as the ‘new penology’. The story represents an important aspect of the ‘slow violence’ (Nixon, 2011) of imprisonment and other forms of detention, which is the prolonged waiting that incarcerated people and their loved ones are subjected to. For example, in Scotland as in many other jurisdictions, some prisoners are subject to indeterminate sentences which might destroy hope. This is an example of what Gilmore (2017) referred to as the extraction of prisoner’s ‘life-time’. The past is also present in the intertextual references made to Shelley’s gothic horror *Frankenstein* (1818), and Alphonse Bertillon’s late 19th century

policing and forensic developments, which conjure up images of past dreams of the technological mastery of ‘monstrous others’.

The voices of different characters are differentiated by their preoccupations and the different language that they use, for example, a prisoner looking to find someone that is ‘holding’ (slang for dealing drugs) in order to help them bear the ‘pains of imprisonment’ (Sykes, 1958); over-worked, detached or cruel staff who speak in institutional jargon and of the chore of filling in paperwork; and PR2 itself, a machine that translates the complexity and mess of human experience into discrete categories (‘height, bereavement, methadone prescription, offender behaviour course completion’), used to generate the records, reports and calculations of ‘risk’ that determine each prisoner’s fate. As if mirroring prison practices of segregation these voices don’t come together through direct dialogue but their linguistic struggle manifests in the event of a death in custody.

The deployment of these different voices demonstrates Armstrong’s situated knowledge as an activist-scholar who possesses a detailed understanding of how the legal system operates in Scotland. When *Abolition Science Fiction* was used by another colleague in a prison-based reading group in Scotland, PR2 was the story that the members of the reading group feared would get the book confiscated. The story was perceived as dangerous not because it advocates rioting or burning down the prison, but because of the insider knowledge about one of its key operating systems. PR2 foregrounds the presence of dystopia within the anti-carceral imagination, not as a distant threat or fantasy, but as an existing reality, albeit one that society largely chooses to ignore.

The Monument by ‘Dave’ is set in a future after the ‘Day of Abolition’ and is unusual amongst the stories in that it starts with a description of how the abolition of policing came about. The plot describes the morning routine of a Municipal Heritage Warden (and former police officer). The narrative point of view is a detached third person perspective and this, in combination with the use of policy discourse, for example, ‘abolition was the success of evidence-based policy over tradition and inertia’, demonstrates the piece’s satirical humour. The titular monument is not in commemoration of those who struggled for abolition, but in honour of the final police officers who served. It is a symbolic part of the package negotiated by the Police Federation to protect officers from future attempts to hold them accountable for their actions. As project participant Cara Jardine commented, people complain that abolitionists don’t provide a roadmap to abolition, but the dystopian scenario presented by Dave seemed like ‘a really believable way of how you might get there by having it all couched in evidence-based policy and cost saving!’ Echoing abolitionist calls to look beyond the prison to carcerality in other institutions and practices mentioned earlier, Dave explained: ‘I was concerned not so much with what comes *after* policing as what runs alongside it.’ Participant Koshka Duff suggested that the story invites abolitionists to reflect – in ways that might be uncomfortable – both on the limitations of strategies that opt for gradual reform, and of the carceral and exclusionary practices in our relations with others.

Yang utopia

But what of utopia in the project’s stories? To discuss this, I turn again to Le Guin’s 1982 lecture. As I have discussed, she was part of a generation of writers who broke with the

'blueprint' conception of utopia to reclaim it in a more critical form. Drawing on Taoist philosophy, Le Guin (1989, p. 90) argued that the dominant historical model of utopia has been the 'big yang motorcycle trip', characterised as qualitatively 'bright, dry, clear, strong, firm, active, aggressive, lineal, progressive, creative, expanding, advancing, and hot'. You can see this kind of utopian impulse in several of the stories, for example in Josie Tothill's *5AM DMC with an Alien* and River Ellen MacAskill's *A Fine Seam*, the catalyst for abolition comes from incarcerated people and a process of prison riot or overthrow, its impact then rippling out across society. This emphasises the importance of the agency of incarcerated people, and the inspiration drawn from their resistance to the movement for abolition.

In contrast, in *Prison Planet 824* by 'Richard C Quorum', the prisoners' freedom relies on the rest of society being unaware of it. The protagonist of the story is a new arrival to the prison planet who discovers that it has been overthrown by its captives. Now the self-governing planet cooperates to 'maintain the fiction to the old world that this prison still operates as they founded it'. Duff commented that this had 'resonances with liberation struggles around sexuality and gender, and with the thought of a community in which you're experiencing freedom, and a community from whom that freedom needs to be hidden'. Not every project participant was a reader of science fiction, but the author of this story employed a pseudonym signalling their love of the genre, and perhaps also their embarrassment at writing a story that indulged in the pleasure and fun of the 'yang' utopian form. In a knowing wink to the difficulty of providing a route-map for abolition, the piece ends with the rebels announcing that they are about to provide an explanation of how they achieved liberation, followed by an ellipsis that denies it to the reader.

Yin utopia

In contrast to the stories that focus on a moment of revolt and liberation, *The Seed* by Lizzie Hughes offers a different abolitionist temporality, that we could perhaps think of as almost-imperceptible slow resistance in response to 'slow violence'. An unnamed, omniscient and playfully performative narrator explains that the story's plant protagonist grows, silently, greenly, 'into the infrastructure of the prison, causing cracks' and the prison's ultimate destruction. Sitting untended on top of the prison filing cabinet containing risk assessments, it is 'the kind of thing you see and instantly forget (in fact, I had to look at it a few times to write that)'. Presenting an image of passive yet constant resistance, the plant uses the infrastructure of the prison against it. This is a different type of revenge fantasy, and reminiscent of Le Guin's (1989, p. 90) proposition for a 'yin utopia' countering the dominant 'yang' utopia, which would be among other things, 'dark, wet, obscure, weak, yielding, passive, participatory, circular, cyclical, peaceful, nurturant, retreating, contracting, and cold'.

However, the timeline of this story is ambiguous. Is the plant growing at an 'unnatural' rate? If so this story could be argued to evidence a 'weird green utopianism' (Garforth & Iossifidis, 2020) where nature is powerful and unsettling rather than pastoral. After the plant finishes its work, the former captives emerge into 'landscapes that are too big too bright too loud with too many things in them'. Liberation from the prison is represented

as a transition that takes time and for some may never be complete. One could also think about the growing seed as an image of the temporality of activist struggle, seen from a collective, non-human or historical viewpoint that could be liberatory. As an activist, your individual life-time 'is not the timeline on which movements occur. . . . When you understand that you're really insignificant in the grand scheme of things, then it's a freedom . . . to actually be able to do the work that's necessary as you see it and to contribute in the ways that you see fit' (Kaba, 2021, pp. 27–28). This story implies an attempt to decentre the individual and think present and future activist temporalities together.

Critical utopia

Moments by Anonymous offers a powerful analysis of the temporality of harm and justice as non-linear, and a critical utopia. The story uses the familiar science fiction narrative structuring device of a time-loop, which 'entails the continued repetition of a specific span of diegetic time separately from the external or nonprotagonist timeline' (Schniedermann, 2023, p. 291). In *Moments* the protagonist uses a virtual reality simulation (rather than lived time) to repeatedly confront and murder the person that sexually assaulted them. Narratives involving time-loops have become popular enough to move outside of the genre, and Schniedermann (2023, p. 292) suggests their appeal is that 'reliving the past holds the wholesome, therapeutic promise of correction and improvement'. However, unlike *Groundhog Day* (1993) where the protagonist is compelled to repeat time but through repetition the past and future are both changed (for the better), for the protagonist of *Moments*, no matter how many times they choose to return to the scene, the past cannot be erased and will always figure in their future.

The scene of the simulation is set up as a conversation between the protagonist and the person who harmed them, but the protagonist has removed their attacker's ability to speak. Inspired by the anonymous author's personal experience, *Moments* is rooted in an implicit dialogue between a desire for revenge and punishment, and abolitionist principles, facilitated by the 'exploring ground' (brown & Imarisha, 2015, p. 279) of fictioning. In response to the story, participant Jess Poyner commented 'you can live in the middle, it's not a binary, and I think this story really encapsulates that and the difficulties we all have around that'.

As Mariame Kaba (2021, p. 137) notes, in all her years of organising she has 'never known an abolitionist who thought that nothing was the preferred alternative to imprisonment. We believe in consequences for harm.' Building on approaches developed by racialised and other marginalised groups unwilling or unable to seek help resolving conflict from state agents, transformative justice practices were developed to address sexual violence within activist movements, often by survivors of this violence, who felt failed or harmed by formal justice systems. Rather than idealising such processes, the story echoes the accounts of transformative justice practitioners of how challenging and time-intensive dialogue-based approaches to justice can be for everyone involved (e.g. Chrysalis Collective, 2011). The protagonist wants to face their attacker but only as a simulation that they can control, not to forgive them, but as part of their own healing process. The piece ends with the line 'this is my utopia: I will be free'. As the wry protagonist makes clear, this is a solitary utopia of compromise. Without real world

accountability there is peace here, perhaps, but not accountability or justice. As such, this utopian scheme contains a 'faultline' or failing which invites the reader to take action in the present.

Day 62 on Earth by Jess Poyner is set on a future planet Earth within a colony of the descendants of survivors from both sides of the 'Eugenics Wars'. The narrative is told from the perspective of an honoured alien visitor and resembles fieldnotes or a report. As Suvin (2010, p. 84) notes, the 'education novel' plot structure is common within science fiction, where a naïve or outsider protagonist comes to understand the novum for themselves (and therefore allows the reader to understand too). In this case, the visitor learns how the colony handles social harm and conflict without the use of punishment or prisons, in contrast to their own society. The novum is that their society is built on the principle 'that life is sacred, life is interdependent, life is growth'. This knowledge, gleaned from catastrophic loss, has led them to develop ongoing rituals where the community gathers to offer 'praise' and suggestions for 'growth' (constructive criticism) to each other.

The society could also be seen to embody elements of Le Guin's (1989, p. 90) characterisation of 'yin utopias', particularly as participatory, cyclical, peaceful and nurturant. For example, in response to the second prompt (aimed at generating critical utopias), *Day 62 on Earth* introduces a character who does things that cause harm in the society, who project participant Chris Rosedale dubbed 'the inconvenient person'. Poyner shared that the story was partially inspired by the complexities of real intentional community building, and the experiences of those who don't fit comfortably within radical groups. Instead of excluding the character, the others engage in a process of dialogue and accountability, and the story reflects the abolitionist argument that 'no one is disposable' (Gossett et al., 2014). This attitude is literalised in the story as there are so few people left that they cannot be wasted in prison. As Rosedale commented,

... that account of a society that has got rid of prisons and is doing justice differently, we expect to be written about in quite affirming and extolatory ways, but in that moment, abolition is experienced as tragedy, carcerality is a luxury that society can't afford.

The colony aims to show the alien visitor the superiority of their approach to justice, and although the story fits with some of the characteristics of the yin utopia as described by Le Guin, it is also yang in its creativity, clarity and action. The solution is not for the yin utopia to replace the yang. Le Guin argues that the yin utopia is one of degrowth, and claims it is as hard to reach utopia by going backwards as it is to keep going forwards. Instead she proposes forging a path 'roundabout or sideways' (Le Guin, 1989, p. 98) that balances the two. In other words, it is not a binary either/or but an *and* utopia that she seeks. I want to conclude by reflecting on the anti-carceral imagination and the *and* utopia.

Conclusion: The anti-carceral imagination

The *and* utopia is a productive contradiction. It encompasses action, rest, imagination, fighting, compromising, leaving and returning. In these contradictions, the *and* utopia is inhabitable, even if it is not always comfortable.

As these stories demonstrate, this sense of *and* is also evident in the way abolitionists work, with a sense of temporality which oscillates between present, near future and distant future. In the present, this might mean working with others to foster spaces of ‘everyday utopia’ (Cooper, 2013) or to practise an ‘everyday abolition’ (Lamble, 2021) attentive to forms of carcerality and exclusion in our daily lives and relationships. This work focused on the present and near future is important and sustaining, done in the knowledge that the change one seeks may not come within one’s life-time. The anti-carceral imagination seems not to be animated primarily by successes, but by ‘the everyday work of reproducing life, of dwelling at what might at first appear to be the cusp of failure’ (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014, p. 20). Amidst this ongoing work, activist’s fiction serves as a resource for holding the distant future near, and through this understanding present struggles better.

As the stories in *Abolition Science Fiction* demonstrate, imagining a world without prisons either in the near or distant future entails a shift away from the prison as problem, to focus on the social arrangements, material conditions and values of such a world. The founding of a new society does not entail destroying everything and starting over. As Gilmore argues,

Abolition is not *absence*, it is *presence*. What the world will become already exists in fragments and pieces, experiments and possibilities. . . . Abolition is building the future from the present, in all of the ways we can. (Gilmore & Lambert, 2018)

This rejection of the perfect future no-place in favour of a practice of experimentation and bricolage in the present echoes Mathiesen’s (1974, p. 1) claim that ‘the alternative lies in the unfinished, in the sketch, in what is not yet fully existing’. For Mathiesen, it is crucial to maintain abolition as an unfinished sketch to avoid ending the possibility for growth. These ideas are mirrored in Le Guin’s (1989, p. 93) lecture where she argues that ‘the nature of the utopia I am trying to describe is such that if it is to come, it must exist already’ in fragments and failed attempts.

One of the ways we can build the future from the present is through following lines of flight that emerge through collaborative fictioning. In the stories that come out of the Prison Break project, Gilmore’s conceptualisation of abolition as presence rather than absence appears in details and fragments, like a Municipal Heritage Warden’s misgivings about his new role, or a protagonist’s resolution to once again return to the scene of their assault, a plant seeking light and space to grow, and the patience of a dwindling colony in working through problems together. The prison still looms large in many of these stories, which re-emphasises the difficulty of moving beyond the prison and the slippery character of utopia. Rather than retreating into a fantasy of perfection or solutionism, the stories created by participants are critical sketches which enrich our understanding of the anti-carceral imagination via illuminating important themes such as the meaning of community and freedom; bearing witness to the violence of incarceration and the impact of harm; exploring the complex temporal dynamics of struggle, hope and action; and exposing points of tension relating to strategy and values.

Within the project, collaborative fictioning created a space for activist-scholars to create *and* utopias that offer critiques and imagine otherwise; for the exploration and

sharing of complex feelings and ideas about justice and punishment (including feelings of failure and carceral impulses); and to produce narratives that generate dialogue, help sustain hope and inspire action. They demonstrate that abolitionists are not inspired primarily by ‘perfect’ fictional utopias but flawed ‘critical utopias’ which reflect the complexity they see in their movement. It is a straying with the trouble that makes it possible to stay with it.

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Notes

1. An e-book and audio-book are available open-access at the project website: abolitionscifi.org. The book explores some similar themes to this article, although for a general audience. It was created as part of an Independent Scholar Fellowship (2021–22) from the Independent Social Research Foundation.
2. <https://writers4utopia.wixsite.com/zine>
3. To read more of our collaborative analysis please see the discussion chapters in *Abolition Science Fiction*.

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