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Working towards utopia: hope and disappointment in a room of one's own

Abstract:

In this paper, three women writers offer a personal and critical consideration of the utopian ideal of a place to write – Woolf's pervasive 'room of one's own' (1977) – as both a physical location and a psychological and cultural 'space'. In doing so, we draw on José Esteban Muñoz's writing on (queer) utopia, particularly his observations about hope and disappointment as critical methodologies through which "a backward glance … enacts a future vision" (p. 4).

We glance backwards to utopian ideals of a place in which to write and consider how and why such ideal places – solitary, uninterrupted, even beautiful – slip through the writer's fingers. Again drawing from Muñoz, we consider the tension between hoping for a utopian writing place and disappointment at failing to construct, access, or regularly inhabit them. According to Muñoz, although hope is always eventually disappointed, "disappointment … is not a reason to forsake [hope] as a critical thought process" (p. 10).

Crucially, then, while we consider the reasons for writerly disappointment with/in writing utopias, we return to hope as a powerful methodology for imagining utopian writing places – enacting future visions – and as a productive and enabling aspect of the writing process.

Biographical note:

Dr Nike Sulway is a lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Southern Queensland, in Toowoomba. She is an award-winning writer of novels, short stories, and poetry. Her writing utopia is a snug room built of stone and wood, with a warm fire and large window that opens out to a view of Australian bushland: she-oaks and ghost-gums who lean in to tap on the walls. The only sounds are those of black cockatoos, splendid fairy wrens, and yellow-breasted robins, of creek water running over stones, wild music, and the quiet scratch of pen on paper.

Dr Maria Arena is a lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba and is a writer of short fiction and novels. Gazing through

her home office window, she imagines her yet-to-be built utopian writing room at the bottom of the garden. With windows on three sides, a floor-to-ceiling bookcase, and a comfy chair, she imagines herself pondering the calm forest until the trees whisper for her to write, and write, and write.

Dr Tara East is a lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Southern Queensland. She writes speculative short fiction and novels as well as non-fiction articles for academic and general audiences. Her creative works are typed in the creaky, likely haunted spare bedroom of her century old Queenslander. Her writing utopia is a warm room stuffed with inspiring curiosities: artwork, candles, gramophone, a lockable door, reference books, two hounds asleep beneath the desk, and an hourglass turned over.

Keywords:
Utopia, place, writing, disappointment, hope

> A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail
> – Oscar Wilde, 2023

Introduction: a backward glance

In October 1928 Virginia Woolf read two papers to the Arts Society at Girton College. The papers were later expanded and published as the book-length essay A Room of One's Own. The essay begins, after a little hither and thither, with a proposition. "I propose," Woolf writes:

> making use of all the liberties and licences of a novelist, to tell you the story of the two days that preceded my coming here – how, bowed down by the weight of the subject which you have laid upon my shoulders, I pondered it, and made it work in and out of my daily life. (Woolf, 1977, p. 8)

And so, taking inspiration from both the structure and the content of Virginia's essay, we intend to tell you a story of how we came to a consideration of the writer's place – the writer's room – as a failed utopia. And as a place of hope. But first (and throughout the paper: like her, we like to digress sometimes, to take the air and think while walking, wondering, wandering), we begin by locating our discussion within the places where it has been composed, and by considering our relationships to the places where we, ourselves, go to write.

> *Here I am, then – one of the writers of this paper – sitting at the edge of a gully on a sunny winter morning, lost in thought. Beside me is a shed which I hope, one day, might become my very own writer's place. For now, it is the playground of snakes and bandicoots. There are gaps between the old boards, and holes rusted through the corrugated iron roof. One of my most familiar nemeses – a stand of privet – has grown up so close to the north wall, sending its roots into the foundations, that the building tilts southwards. Inside, there are two empty IBCs and an old mattress. Down the steep slope of the gully, I have planted she-oaks: tube-stock protected by green plastic tree guards. When grown, they will offer food and comfort to the black cockatoos. I cradle a cup of hot tea in my hands and watch the chickens scratch and bicker in the shade. I lean against the shed wall, lost in imagining. Walls straightened, a wood heater with a stone wall behind. A copper kettle. A view through a recycled wall of windows to a gully free of lantana and privet. A good chair, a warm fire, a sturdy table, an open notebook. No email. No meetings. No committees or marking or reports or grant applications or washing or weeding or mending. Goddess, imagine! No email. A room of my own, and enough time – whole days, whole weeks, whole months of lovely, quiet, empty and unspooling time, to write.*

Since it was published, Woolf's essay has become perhaps the most famous argument suggesting that a writer – and most particularly a woman writer – "must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf, 1977, p. 7). While she does not use the word utopia, Woolf's description of the material and cultural conditions required for women to write fiction is a clear example of what Ernst Bloch calls a concrete utopia. As Bloch writes, a concrete utopia is "an anticipatory kind [of utopia] which by no means coincides with abstract utopia dreaminess, nor is directed by the immaturity of merely abstract utopian socialism" (Bloch, 1986, p. 146). As opposed to abstract utopias, which José Esteban Muñoz describes as "akin to banal optimism", concrete utopias are "relational to historically situated struggles" (2009, p. 3) without being over-determined and inflexible. Importantly, concrete utopias are subject to fluctuations; they change in response to new ideas, new challenges, new insights, and questions. Importantly, too, concrete utopias are collective rather than individual. As Muñoz writes, they are expressions of "the hopes of a collective, an emergent group, or even the solitary oddball who is the one who dreams for many" and are "the realm of educated hope" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 3).

Hope is central to Bloch, and to Muñoz, who builds on Bloch's work to articulate the usefulness of hope – of the work of imagining, describing, and working towards utopia – as a critical methodology. "My approach to hope as a critical methodology," writes Muñoz, "can be best described as a backward glance that enacts a future vision" (2009, p. 4).

And so we begin, here, with a backward glance towards Woolf's hope for a world in which women might have access to the time and space required for writing. Which leads us to a double disappointment. Both that her vision has not become reality, and that her utopian vision did not stretch beyond imagining middle- and upper-class white English women raised to economic and creative equality with middle- and upper-class white English men. Never mind. As Muñoz notes, drawing on Bloch, "hope can be disappointed" (2009, p. 9). Disappointment is as necessary a part of the endless cycle of imagining and enacting a better future as hope.

In considering Woolf's essay, we create a nested set of backward glances: we glance backwards towards Virginia in the early twentieth century, who glances back towards (among others) Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, Margaret Cavendish, Lady Winchilsea, and Shakespeare's fictional sister, Judith. We glance backwards towards Virginia's unrealised and limited utopia in order to understand the precursors to our own future vision. (Knowing that one day, perhaps not too far ahead, others will glance backwards, disappointed by the limits of our own utopian vision.)

Imperfect as Woolf's utopian vision was, we nevertheless recognise her essay as an example of a concrete utopia, since it emerges out of a consideration of the historical struggles of women writers, and considers how those struggles might be addressed. We also recognise it is an example of a single person articulating "the hopes of a collective, an emergent group" (Munoz, 2009, p. 3) – women writers – which is anticipatory but also open to revision and reimagining.

Woolf's utopia: a room of one's own and five hundred pounds a year

At the core of Woolf's essay is the proposition that, in order to write, a person requires money, and a room of one's own. A simple, and simply radical, proposition that – we argue – remains convincing in its simple practicality. But what, precisely, were the room and the money for? And, more importantly, how much money and what kind of room were required to enact Woolf's utopia?

The income required to make it possible for a woman to write is, Woolf suggests, five hundred pounds a year. This is the amount of the legacy Woolf received on the death of her aunt in 1928, and is equivalent to around £40,000 pounds sterling in 2023 (approximately $AU75,000.00). For Woolf, this regular and lifelong income meant that she no longer had to make a living by "cadging odd jobs" (Woolf, 1977, p. 43). More importantly, it meant she was relieved of having "always to be doing work that one did not wish to do" (p. 43) at the expense of time spent writing, and indeed at the considerable expense of "that one gift which it was death to hide" (p. 43) by which we take her to mean not only her ability to write – her experience, intellect and skill – but also her creativity and imagination.

For Woolf, then, a key benefit of a secure income for a writer is that it that removes the necessity for them to do work other than writing. Instead, their mental energy, time, and imagination can be focused on their craft. Woolf's literary basic income (structurally similar to a UBI [Universal Basic Income] or to Ireland's BIA [Basic Income for the Arts], which we discuss in more detail later in this paper) is also what provides a writer with the capacity to gain sustained and uninterrupted access to a room of one's own in which to write.

The rooms Woolf describes as suitable for writing are "quiet rooms" that come with various "amenities … partridges and wine, beadles and turf, books and cigars, libraries and leisure" (Woolf, 1977, p. 28). The leisure is significant here, indicating as it does uninterrupted time, free of the demand to do anything else, or be anywhere else. According to Woolf, a writerly utopia includes spaces that provide and protect the "the urbanity, the geniality, the dignity which are the offspring of luxury and privacy and space" (Woolf, 1977, p. 28). That is, while the practical requirements of Woolf's utopia are a secure income and a room of one's own, what these two practicalities provide for writers are time dedicated to writing, mental and emotional freedom, financial security (including, by implication, basics such as food and housing security, and – the least tangible, secondary result of these basic needs being met – dignity.

Hope and disappointment for contemporary (women) writers

Since Woolf's essay was published, the situation for some women writers has improved in substantial ways. Women have greater access to the institutions and institutional supports Woolf reflects on during her rambles around London and Oxbridge, including university education, and potential access to financial support such as scholarships and grants. And yet,

as studies consistently show[1], writers have not, as a collective, managed to achieve either secure incomes, or rooms of our own.

Of course, Woolf was concerned almost wholly with the barriers to white upper- and middle-class women writers. This limitation to her vision is, we admit, disappointing. Yet, within the disappointment, we find the provocation – the hope – to imagine a more inclusive writerly utopia. Before we do that, however, we want to consider the situation for contemporary writers, including women writers, at least in the Western world, and in particular in terms of their access to a basic income, and rooms of their own.

Show me the money

There's no getting away from the economic and class privilege that informs Woolf's discussion. As Gildersleeve writes – in her house containing many rooms, not one of which is her own – "Woolf seems to lack an awareness of her own privilege and how much harder it is for most women to fund their own artistic freedom" (2020). Most of us these days like to believe that contemporary writers come from a diverse range of economic and class backgrounds: that modern literature is as likely to be written by writers who are poor or disadvantaged, as those born with legacies of five hundred pounds a year, adjusted for inflation.

The truth is, unsurprisingly, that being born into wealth and privilege *does* increase the likelihood of becoming an artist. In 2019, Borowiecki and Dahl conducted a survey of US Census data, looking at the socio-economic backgrounds of artists. They found that people from families with substantial economic privilege were far more likely to become artists, including writers. Their research revealed, for example, that artists are twice as common in families with an annual income of $100,000 (compared to $50,000 per annum), and ten times more common in families with an annual income between $100,000 and $1 million.

Borowiecki and Dahl's study doesn't interrogate *why* writers are more likely to emerge from wealthy families, but Woolf's argument about the benefits of an income for (women) writers provides some answers, however speculative. Additionally, we note that in the contemporary context a writer may spend several years working on a book with no guarantee of publication; few people can afford to take such a financial risk. And, as we know, even when their work is published, writers' incomes are well below Woolf's five hundred pounds a year ($AU75,000). Instead, according to Zwar et al, the average Australian writer earns just $18,200 per annum from writing. A dismal figure that, the same study reveals, results in 40% of Australian writers relying on their partner's income to sustain them, and a further 40% relying on a day job. That is, *most* Australian writers either rely on their partners to act as unofficial patrons of the arts, or sustain their writing practice through other forms of work[2].

As Shirley Anne Macmillan writes:

> we've made sacrifices as a family to enable all of us to live the kind of lives we're aiming at creatively. But we've also been fortunate enough to be able to do that, and lots of people aren't. We do need to ask where all the working class published authors are. What is being done to ensure that working class voices are represented in publishing? (as cited in Hennessy, 2018)

Arts policy and support in Australia is currently undergoing a radical revision that may have significant impacts on writers' incomes. In February 2023, the Australian Labor Government launched its National Cultural Policy, *Revive*. The policy includes an acknowledgement that:

> As well as insecure work and gender inequality, many submissions to the National Cultural Policy consultation process raised remuneration, including a basic income for artists. The Government recognises that artistic and cultural work is a professional activity and that fair pay and conditions for arts and cultural workers are essential. (p. 53)

The policy then lays out its response to these concerns, including undertaking to pay live performers at government events, and perhaps allowing artists on unemployment benefits to have some of their labour "recognised as part of their mutual obligation requirements" (p. 54). The announcement and policy does not, however, address how the insecure work and unsustainably low income of Australian writers will be tackled. Perhaps one answer lies in a model being trialled by the Irish government.

In Ireland, artists are involved in a three-year pilot program that may well provide a model for our revolutionary utopia. As part of the program, 2,000 Irish artists have been provided with a Basic Income of $1400 per month for three years. Ireland's cultural minister, Catherine Martin, describes Ireland's BIA (Basic Income for the Arts) scheme as "truly innovative on a global level … I hope other countries will follow Ireland's lead" (Dafoe, 2023). There's that word again: hope.

Irish artists receiving the BIA report reduced anxiety about covering life essentials, such as paying rent, and finally being able to devote time to practicing and developing their art (Marshall, 2023). This freedom to practice art without the mental and emotional distractions of poverty is something Woolf argued was a consequence of sufficient income, and would result in work that was "without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching" (1977, p. 74). Or, as the contemporary writer Asja Bakić similarly argues:

> Having fewer expenses reduces the strain on the text. When we need to earn less, the work is less compromised because we don't have to make concessions; we don't hold back; we won't censor ourselves so that others can pay for what they want to hear. (2019)

Another noteworthy outcome of the BIA pilot program is increased applications for arts project funding, which Shane Finan (a participant in the scheme) suggested was a result of

having sufficient time to devote to the application process (UBILab, 2023). This suggests that the BIA could result in a real shift away from a culture in which only the relatively privileged have the time and resources to make art.

A quiet room

> *The desk in my writing room is wooden and painted black. It is pressed against a casement window whose view is, honestly, unremarkable – a sage-green colorbond fence, a corrugated roof, a shipping container – but the lighting is fantastic. In a former life, the desk was the 'family table' at the restaurant where I met my partner. My office is not a utopia; it is a second bedroom where the spare bed has been flipped up against the wall. The mattress is an eyesore, but after years of working in communal spaces – kitchen tables, couches (when we've owned them), and outdoor sitting areas – I finally have a room of my own. But writing does not pay for this room, or this house that I love, or the books that fill my shelves; teaching does. Teaching is a demanding job that requires time and energy: two resources essential to writing. A common occurrence: it's 4pm and I've spent the day marking student assignments. I haven't completed the measly 25 minutes promised to my new manuscript. Like most writers, my passion is supported by a day job. Copies of my first published novel rest on the bookshelf closest to where I sit almost every day, writing and teaching, but there are gaps on this shelf (there are gaps on many of the shelves). What books might occupy those spaces if I had the time to write them? If I were the lucky recipient of a stipend like Woolf's, perhaps I could write for more than 25 minutes a day. A terrifying thought: how many books will I not write because I have to financially support myself? How many books are other writers not writing because they are busy trying to survive? It's winter as I write this, and soon the sun will be gone. I can't work in my office at night, not in the presence of all those spectators, all those untold stories.*

Writers are, in many ways, among the earliest home office workers. During the early waves of Covid lockdowns, however, people quickly learned that homes are hives for distraction, which may account for the long tradition of writing sheds: spaces, close to home but clearly separate from it, in which writers can focus on their craft. Phillip Pullman, Roald Dahl, and Dylan Thomas had them (Bausells, 2014). Michael Pollan, Chuck Wendig, and Jack Carr have them (Wendig, 2014; Pollan, 1997; Newport, 2022). At times, Virginia Woolf, too, wrote in a repurposed tool shed she called the "writing lodge" (Lee, 2008). (Woolf is one of the few women writers mentioned on such lists).

There is a long history of male authors removing themselves from their family home in order to write. J.D. Salinger, for instance, built a cabin a quarter mile from his family home, so he had a place to work. Salinger lived alone in his cabin for weeks at a time while his wife supplied him with daily meals and tended to their two young children. Free from domestic and professional responsibilities, Salinger had the space and time in which to write. If a

woman writer followed Salinger's example, writes Olivia Campbell, "chances are she would be maligned as neglectful, monstrous" (2021). In Jenny Offill's novel, *Dept. of Speculation* (2014), the protagonist fantasises about becoming an art monster: someone who puts their art before everything else. Instead, she gets married, has kids, discovers her husband is cheating, and struggles to complete her second book. How many phantom novels, we wonder, haunt the bookshelves of her home?

Woolf describes a room of one's own as a place where a writer can create their work, undistracted by financial or emotional stress, a place where they can create with dignity. And yet, when we glance backwards to historical examples of women writers we rarely discover them in solitude. As Woolf herself observes: "If a woman wrote, she would have to write in the common sitting-room" (1977, p. 93) where they were subject to "all kinds of casual interruptions" (Austen-Leigh, as cited in Woolf 1977, p. 93-94). Jane Austen, for example, wrote in the family's sitting-room (Woolf 1977, p. 93) while the Brontë sisters worked at a table in the family dining room (BBC 2015).

Children – for whom women remain the primary caregivers (Samtleben & Müller, 2022) – add another complication for women seeking solitude. Toni Morrison describes rising at four am to write, before her children woke. Maxine Hong Kingston reported working for twenty minutes while her children were distracted with a bag of marshmallows. Shirley Jackson wrote while her children slept (Campbell 2021). According to Campbell, contemporary women writers, if they have children, find their writing solitude not in writing rooms with lockable doors, but "in parked cars, closets, and bathrooms" (2021)[3].

In her book *Wifedom: Mrs Orwell's Invisible Life* (2003), Anna Funder describes how, as a writer herself, she envies the "conditions of production" that many male writers enjoy. She argues that men have benefitted from the invisible, thankless, and expected unpaid labour of women, who create the time and space for male writers to do their work, writing that:

> We know that a male writer's time to write was traditionally created for him by liberating him from the need to shop, cook, clean up after himself or anyone else, deal with the mundane correspondence, entertain, arrange travel or holidays, care for his own children (excerpt as a 'helper' who is thanked, as if it were not his job, or not his children) and so on. Time is valuable, because it is finite. So, as with all other finite commodities, there is an economy of time (p. 52).

Another backward glance: Le Guin's Omelas

Ursula K Le Guin's short story 'The ones who walk away from Omelas' (1975), is a work of utopian fiction. While also the work of one of our foremothers, and focused in some measure on the notion of a utopia, it is entirely different in tone and focus to Woolf's essay. Le Guin's short story is dedicated to and was written in response to a utopia described in William

James's *The moral philosopher and the moral life,* and in particular to the moral dilemma presented by:

> a world in which … millions [are] kept permanently happy on the one simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torture. (1891, as cited in Kennedy & Goia, 2004, p. 274)

In Le Guin's short story, everyone in Omelas is shown the child whose torture is the condition of their life of privilege and comfort, and then given a choice as to whether to stay or leave. As the story's title suggests, there are those who stay, and those who walk away, heading "towards … a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas" (1975, p. 284).

In other words, while Omelas is one form of utopia, there are those whose disappointment in it, their inability to tolerate the condition of its existence, is such that they abandon it and set out in the hope of finding a different, more perfect utopia.

A future vision: working towards utopia

> Where do those who walk away from Omelas *go*? There's nowhere to go, nowhere moral, nowhere safe, nowhere that does not depend on the suffering of some child. That means you have to stay and fight, and make the revolution as kind as possible.
> (Veronica Schanoes, 2023, p. 182)

In grappling with our disappointment in the limits of Woolf's utopian vision, we see how crucial it is to dream differently when imagining a concrete utopia for the present, and for the future. It becomes clear that our utopian dream of time and space to write must be accessible to a far more diverse range of writers than Woolf's vision included. Further, we notice that the conditions of writing are, and have historically been, available to only a select and privileged few. While it might be possible for an individual contemporary writer to secure an income, and a room in which to write, a fully realised utopia requires that we not achieve our own personal dreams at the expense of our fellow writers. That we cannot walk away, towards our own utopias, leaving others to suffer and struggle, but must stay and work, with and for other writers, towards a more collective and inclusive utopia.

> *At the bottom of my garden is my imagined writer's room, my – to use Pissarev's term – "castle in the air" (1864, cited in Bloch 1986, p.10). When I glance through my (real) office window, I see its outline, like a glass slipper, or perhaps Wonder Woman's invisible jet. It hovers, taking up the second floor above my partner's shed (I cannot imagine this space because it is not my own), where he will also create, noisily (we'll need insulation). Through my invisible walls, I see the outline of floor-to-ceiling bookcases, a comfy couch, a small bench with rustic tea-making paraphernalia, a desk (sturdy and inviting), swivel chair (ditto), laptop, and plants on*

> *every level surface, maybe hanging from the ceiling, too. Beyond my invisible windows is the forest, anchored in the present and filled with activity: birds, lizards, snakes, wallabies, the stream going about its business, light refracted from endless leaves. Nothing too distracting: just enough to remind me that I'm part of the world. Not enough to pull me from the stories spinning from my mind, spilling onto the screen, or the page (should I choose couch, rather than chair). Because that's what happens in my castle: I write. Not lessons, not feedback, not emails, not the things that have paid my bills and my mortgage for the last several years, but stories. And I am productive, prodigious, happy.*
>
> *A notification ping draws me inside my office; my castle in the air vanishes; this is the reality that chains me.*

Muñoz notes that "the here and now is a prison house" (2009, p. 1), and most days we have to agree. Yet, it is the promise of the Blochian "not-yet-become", of the "wish-landscape" (1986, as cited in Muñoz, 2009, p. 140) where a vast regiment of writers have the time and the space to write that draws us to our utopian vision.

But, before we set off towards utopia, a confession: utopias worry us.

Oh sure, they sound nice, but at what cost all this hope, all this radiance, all those castles in the air? Who is the child of Ursula Le Guin's 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas' (1975) trapped in the dark room, naked, filthy, and despairing, while everyone else lives in the light? Who is this child without a voice, who has no choice but to stay. And to suffer. This is not a utopia created to reflect "the hopes of a collective" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 3), but one that serves *some* individuals at the cost of others.

To some extent, every writer who strives to live by their writing but must "write around all [their] other jobs" (Crawford, 2022, p.13) to meet their financial commitments is the child of Le Guin's dreadful utopia. We are trapped in the dark room of late capitalism: we work on the things we don't love in order to make enough money to do what we love, and our valiant efforts—which frequently generate profits for other people – are often not sufficiently acknowledged or (financially) rewarded. We grow tired, and disheartened. We walk away:

> Women in particular, who are made disproportionately responsible for reproductive labour and care work, walk away; they simply don't have time to write in between looking after other people. Working-class writers, or those who are otherwise structurally discriminated against in publishing, walk away. (Crawford, 2022, p.13)

How then, can we grasp hope as a methodology and stop this dramatic, generations-long and ongoing loss of women and other writers, and their voices, from the field of writing?

Le Guin knew a thing or two about utopias. She understood them, as Thomas argues, not as

perfection, but as *processes* (methodologies) that involve "reflection and adjustment, learning and growth … communication and respect, self-awareness and honesty" (2018). And she knew that, under capitalist and patriarchal systems, these processes were impossible to achieve; that's why she destroyed our world, repeatedly, and built it anew.

In her acceptance speech for the National Book Foundation Medal in 2014, Le Guin said: "We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable—but then, so did the divine right of kings" (2014, as cited in Attebery, 2019). Implicit in this statement is a hope that we will work to imagine a post-capitalist utopia. A utopia that is most thoroughly articulated in her novel, *Always Coming Home* (first published in 1985), where her Blochian wish-landscape is expressed in the form of a world free of capitalism and patriarchy. According to Kelly Lynn Thomas:

> *Always Coming Home* is a study in what a complete and utter rejection of capitalism and patriarchy might look like—for society and for the art of storytelling … poverty is non-existent because the society supports all of its members. Artists, artisans, and other creative types are valued as highly as hunters and farmers. (2018)

Oh, the hope of such a place! How inaccessible it seems in the here and now, where artists are reframed as content providers, and co-opted into capitalism via the language of sole traders, entrepreneurialism, gig-based employment, public funding, and abysmally low incomes. Where portfolio careers (diversify to survive!) are the norm, and every artist must constantly deplete their reservoir of time and energy to maintain an online presence, must make themselves available to an over-stimulated audience. And where "the owning class thinks we should be grateful, deliriously grateful, eternally *thank you, sir* and *what would I have done without you,* for every damn thing, including the blessed opportunity to write books for a pittance" (Crawford, 2022, p. 16). How the disappointment stings! And yet, as Muñoz notes, and as we keep returning to in this paper, disappointment is a sometimes necessary precursor to hope.

In *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch writes that "the work of [hope] requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong" (1986, p. 3). For writers, part of this becoming is the creation of a model of work that recognises the importance of artists to the cultural wellbeing of society because, although it should go without saying, "culture is a public good" (Pennington and Eltham, 2021, p. 12).

When the Labor government launched *Revive,* Prime Minister Anthony Albanese was at pains to acknowledge that "arts jobs are real jobs", and that "creatives are essential workers" (as cited in Mills, 2023). Similar ideas were expressed by the participants in Ireland's BIA scheme, who noted that being afforded a basic income felt like a long-overdue recognition that artists are essential workers; that the work they perform is real work, providing both economic and social benefits to their country. Jennifer Mills notes that, in Australia, artists also want "to know our work is meaningful, that we are valued not just by 'the economy' but by society as a whole" (2023).

However, Mills argues, Australian artists cannot passively wait for government policy to deliver revolution or liberation. Instead, she calls for "collective action" in order to achieve "a post-work utopia" and reminds us that it is "our (essential) work to imagine" such a utopia into being (2023). Mills's invitation is a creative and productive response to the disappointing limits of the *Revive* policy, and an inducement towards a "future dimension … [that] contains only what is hoped for" (Bloch 1986, p. 4).

In Muñoz's prison house of the here and now, each of us, the writers of this paper—like Woolf—has access to a room of our own, which is, we acknowledge, far more than many other writers. Still, like the 40% of Australian writers who support their writing with other work, what we write in these rooms is only rarely novels, poems, plays, or essays. Rather, our rooms are remote workplaces where we work to earn the money to pay the bills to buy ourselves time, however limited, in which to really *write*. Of course, this wasn't our intention when we dreamed of becoming writers, but as Bakić notes, "It's a lie to say we write whatever we want, whenever we want. We write what we have to write to survive" (2019). Survival does not sit comfortably alongside creativity, which is where imagination and hope meet, so we gather together, virtually and in reality, to envision a collective utopia. In doing so, we look to Pissarev for inspiration and consolation, remembering, as he reminds us, that:

> The gulf between dream and reality is not harmful if only the dreamer seriously believes in his dream, if he observes life attentively, compares his observations with his castles in the air and generally works towards the realization of his dream-construct conscientiously. There only has to be some point of contact between dream and life for everything to be in the best order. (as cited in Bloch, 1986)

As we gaze through our windows, imagining Pissarev's point of contact between utopian dream and lived reality, we are reminded of Le Guin's utopian vision for a future where every writer—every person—always comes home to the feeling of being valued and fulfilled. This is the hope that shines through the disappointment, that emerges from the backward glance to find a brighter future. From this starting point we choose to come together with each other, and with other writers and artists, in solidarity and revolution, to work towards a shared utopia in which every writer is fairly rewarded for their work, affording them financial security and access to a room of their own, and thereby achieve those other, less tangible necessities of a writing life: time dedicated to writing, mental and emotional freedom, and – the least tangible, secondary result of these needs being met—dignity.

Notes

[1] According to a survey of Australian writers conducted in 2022 by Macquarie University (using funding from the Australia Council for the Arts and the Cultural Fund of the Copyright Agency), "The average income derived from practising as an author is $18,200 with a very broad spread across the different genre groups. Education authors earned the highest average income from their practice as an author ($27,300) followed by children's ($26,800) and genre

fiction ($23,300) authors. Literary authors have a substantially lower average income from their practice as an author ($14,500), followed by other non-fiction ($12,100), creative non-fiction authors ($9,800) and poets ($5,700).” (Zwar et al, 2022, p. 3)

[2] It would be interesting to see a study of the impact of class and wealth on the sustainability of writer’s careers: do those from disadvantaged backgrounds ‘give up’ writing sooner and/or more often than their more privileged peers?

[3] Writing residencies and retreats are often toted as a way for writers, perhaps especially women writers, to access time away from their daily lives and responsibilities. While retreats and residencies do offer time and space for writing, most are expensive to attend or, if there is an application process, highly competitive. Very few, if any, accommodate or actively support writers with caring responsibilities, such as mothers. In a recent e-newsletter from the Australian Writers Mentoring Program (AWMP), an unnamed author shared that they’d recently returned from a ten-day writing retreat at The Abbey in Jamberoo and planned on a residency at Varuna, before departing for a longer retreat in Spain. In one sentence, they underscored many of the points outlined in this paper so far: writers need a space to work, this space should be free from distractions and competing responsibilities, and away from the home, but these resources are only accessible to those who can afford them. The anonymous writer of the article did not explain how they could afford such retreats, or afford the extended and contiguous periods of time away from their everyday work and life.

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