"THE BOOK OF SONG": EXPLORING THE TEXTUAL HETEROTOPIA IN SOFIA SAMATAR'S *THE WINGED HISTORIES*

Gabriela Debita
"Dunărea de Jos" University of Galaţi

Abstract: *This paper examines Sofia Samatar's The Winged Histories as a site of textual heterotopia, where narrative space is produced through language rather than geography. Drawing on Le Guin's conception of language as world-making matter, Foucault's heterotopic enclosures, Massey's account of space as ongoing trajectory, and Cixous's theory of embodied voice, the paper argues that Samatar constructs plural narrative interiors that coexist without collapse. Particular attention is given to Seren's section, where an oral, gendered practice of storytelling generates a moving interior that resists fixed inscription. However, the novel transcribes this breath-based space into writing, revealing a paradox: the archive that preserves women's oral worlds is also the structure that risks enclosing them. In tracing this tension, the paper positions Samatar's novel as a heterotopic archive that keeps language alive within the very mechanism that could still it.*

Keywords: *heterotopia; gendered voices; orality; space; Samatar;* The Winged Histories.

Two years before her passing, in 2016, Ursula K. Le Guin published one of her last prose works, *Words Are My Matter: Writings About Life and Books, 2000–2016*, a collection of essays, book reviews, and speeches. In this late work, she turns once more to the craft of writing, to the act of reading, and to the material substance of language. The title stands as a declaration, a quiet but firm statement that language constitutes the matter of fantasy. In *Earthsea* (1968–2001), naming functions as magic in its most immediate form, woven directly into the nature of things. To speak is to enter into relation with the world, and to know the word for a thing is to participate in its reality. As Le Guin writes of the trilogy, "[t]he trilogy is then, in this sense, about art, the creative experience, the creative process" (Le Guin 10), where the art is that of invention and writing. Magic unfolds here as a practice of making through language, a sustained engagement with reality through naming and narration. In the later *Annals of the Western Shore* (2004–2007), this connection gains further clarity. The gift is poetry, and the poet stands as the figure through whom reality trembles, shifts, and restores its patterns: "The artist as magician. The Trickster. Prospero" (Le Guin 9). Language moves through these imagined worlds as their animating force, the element through which their existence coheres.

This alignment of language, magic, and world-making is characteristic of women's fantasy writing, where narrative becomes a means of producing space rather than merely depicting it. In Angela Carter's fairy tale rewritings,

language is a site of resistance, a way of displacing inherited narrative geographies from within. N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-2017) goes further, constructing a world that exists because it is being narrated, binding geological force to the act of address. In Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* (2010), the use of the secret Nsibidi writing system and the rewriting of the sacred Book are material acts which can fundamentally alter the course of history. Writers like Patricia A. McKillip and Catherynne M. Valente create worlds that unfold according to poetic logic rather than cartographic realism, a narrative dynamic which recalls what Farah Mendlesohn terms ***immersive fantasy***, where the world is not explained or mapped, but **generated through continuous narrative presence**[1]. In all these works, language exceeds the role of magical instrument and acts as the generating principle for world, self, and enchantment.

Sofia Samatar inherits and amplifies this tradition, to the point where her novels construct entire narrative worlds through literary, historical, and philosophical texts, as well as through archives, testimonies, and acts of listening. *A Stranger in Olondria* (2013) is, above all, the story of a reader and a scholar whose life is commandeered by a dead girl's voice; the novel exists in the tension between the desire for silent, private reading and the disruptive insistence of the spoken voice. *The Winged Histories* (2016) goes further, fracturing narrative sovereignty entirely by presenting four women's accounts, each embedded in a different spatial, cultural, and linguistic milieu. These are not parallel testimonies, but heterotopic narratives, each housed in a distinct narrative space that holds and produces its own rhythm, language, and epistemology.

If Le Guin's fantasy reveals that language is the substance of magic, Samatar shows that narrative is the matter from which worlds emerge. Her fiction is constructed not from landscapes, but from acts of telling, retelling, and transcription. In this sense, both *A Stranger in Olondria* and *The Winged Histories* participate in what may be termed a textual heterotopia: a constructed narrative space which houses conflicting voices, temporalities, and modes of knowledge without reducing them to a single order. These texts curate coexisting narrative spaces, each governed by different rules of memory, speech, and belonging. In *The Winged Histories*, this curatorial impulse becomes a structural principle. The warrior, the scholar, the singer,

[1] Farah Mendlesohn describes *immersive fantasy* as a narrative mode that does not pause to establish its world from an external vantage. The reader is not addressed as an outsider but positioned as already within the field of the story. In such texts, geography and cosmology are not explained in advance or mapped from above; the world is experienced through the continuous movement of narration, through voice, rhythm, and the unfolding of perception in time. It is this narrative condition that I refer to here as *continuous narrative presence*.

and the socialite speak from within spaces which remain heterotopic, their boundaries defined by linguistic, spatial, and relational differences.

Among the four narrative spaces that structure *The Winged Histories*, the section associated with **Seren**, the singer and oral storyteller of the nomadic **Feredhai**, introduces a variation of heterotopia that is at once spatial and textual. The Feredhai caravan is a mobile heterotopia, akin to Foucault's boat, a continually shifting site that nevertheless sustains its own gendered language (*che*)[2], its own social codes, and its own narrative forms. Seren's story is not merely set within this space; it is produced by it and shaped by its rhythms of travel, its communal orientation toward song, and its oral circulation of memory. At the same time, her story speaks the Feredhai world into existence, an act of gendered transgression, since women may sing but do not compose or claim the role of poet. Yet once inscribed in the written novel, this orally inflected narrative does not dissolve into the logic of print. Instead, it generates a textual enclave within the written work, preserving the cadence and communal logic of orality within the solitary act of reading. Seren's section thus operates as a heterotopia within a heterotopia: a narrative space produced by movement that, in turn, produces its own literary space.

Seren's storytelling creates space through motion and relation, which requires a concept of heterotopia attuned to movement rather than enclosure. Michel Foucault describes heterotopias as "real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites" (Foucault 24), which stand in structured relation to the social order around them while maintaining their own internal logic. Foucault speaks of physical locations, yet the structure he identifies extends to narrative spaces that take shape through patterns of speech, voice, pacing, and through the boundaries placed around who may speak or remember. A narrative section can function as a heterotopic space when it holds a distinct logic of voice, access, and memory within the larger field of the text.

Once textual heterotopia is established as a narrative space with its own internal logic, the mobility of one of Foucault's heterotopic sites becomes particularly significant. In his list of heterotopic sites, movement appears as the condition through which spatial difference persists without the need for enclosure. The ship, which he calls "the heterotopia par excellence" (Foucault 27), is a place that moves across other domains without belonging to any of them, sustaining its own arrangements of life and relation as it travels. Its coherence is not anchored in location, but in the continuity of its internal order as it moves.

[2] Che names a register of women's speech within Feredhai culture, sustained through labor and daily exchange; it moves through proximity rather than public performance and does not enter the formal archive of composed song.

A related emphasis on movement as a condition of spatial coherence appears in Doreen Massey's account of space. She defines space as "the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny" (Massey 9). Space, in this formulation, arises through practice and remains in flux:

> It is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed. Perhaps we could imagine space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far. (Massey 9–10)

Space takes shape through ongoing trajectories and relations rather than through fixed location.

If Massey locates space in the intersection of trajectories, Hélène Cixous extends this logic into the field of language, treating writing as a movement that originates in the body and takes form through breath and voice. For her, expression is not a matter of recording what has happened but of generating a space through rhythm and sounding, an act closer to pulse than to inscription. "Write your self. Your body must be heard," she insists (Cixous 880), linking language to the force of embodied utterance. In this account, writing is a spatial practice sustained in the moment of its articulation, not a fixed repository of meaning. It composes space as it moves, opening a field of relation that cannot be contained within stable marks or archival order. Cixous thus names a mode of writing that aligns with movement and with the continuous making of space, a practice that speaks from within the body and resists being settled into the static ground of the written record.

The ideas of Foucault, Massey, and Cixous can be woven together to frame heterotopic space as something generated through movement, relation, and the force of the spoken word. Space coheres through trajectories that carry bodies and language at once, gathering form through rhythm, repetition, and song. In this sense, writing is only one possible means of holding space; spoken cadence can do the same work, sustaining a world in motion through the act of being sounded. From this premise, both the caravan's moving order and the shared practice of *che* can be read as forms of space-making, and writing appears not as a neutral record but as a different way of fixing or redirecting that movement.

Space in Motion: The Feredhai Caravan

In his brief taxonomy of heterotopias, Michel Foucault describes the ship as a self-contained world that "floats" across domains while holding its own order intact:

> a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea. (Foucault 27)

The Feredhai caravan in *The Winged Histories* inherits this condition of being both enclosed and unmoored. It is not defined by arrival or departure, but by continual passage. Its coherence lies in the patterns of movement that sustain it. What Foucault describes as the ship's self-contained order finds its echo here in a community whose world is made and remade through motion.

This idea of heterotopia in motion is first registered at the moment of Tav's entry: "You, riding over the fold of the mountain" (Samatar 3022, 3138, 3142, 3144, 3280, 3323, 3669)[3]. Foucault notes that heterotopias are not freely accessible; one enters only through a controlled threshold, by permission or ritual, and Tav's arrival is marked as just such a point of entry. Yet this threshold is not held by a gate or guard, but by the act of narration itself. Seren's repeated invocation of Tav's arrival follows the logic of oral storytelling, where repetition both anchors memory and sustains presence; the scene is spoken again and again because it carries personal significance for her, and so the moment is held in place even as the caravan moves forward. This repetition is mirrored in the syntax, which loops in the present continuous, naming a space that does not settle. In this tense, action does not resolve into event; it remains alive, ongoing, open to recurrence. The caravan thus becomes a sustained trajectory, a field of rhythmic labor through which its shape persists: "The men are going to war and the women are spinning. The women are spinning and the men are going to war" (3105-3106). The echoing phrase "Coming down hard like rain" (3017, 3022, 3324, 3566, 3650, 3671) accompanies Tav's approach like a refrain, transforming grammar into a spatial threshold and reaffirming belonging with each iteration.

What Foucault names in passing as the ship's "self-contained order" finds conceptual extension in Doreen Massey's argument that space is "an ever-shifting constellation of trajectories" (Massey 151). In this account, space emerges from movement, from the ongoing intersection of paths. Motion composes place through the patterned crossing of routes, and this logic is realized on the ground as the caravan moves through territory already shaped by previous journeys. Seren situates herself within this unending field of movement: "And we were moving in difficult country. Farming country, full of roads" (3171). The country is described as "difficult," yet it is "full of roads," a terrain already crossed and recrossed, marked by routes that intersect, diverge, and overlap. These roads do not belong to the caravan, but their presence testifies to movement upon movement, a landscape that holds the memory of other journeys and the traces of prior passage. In this setting, travel

[3] All references to *The Winged Histories* are based on the Kindle edition and cite location numbers rather than page numbers. Kindle locations correspond to digital position within the text and may vary slightly across devices or display settings. Readers using a different edition may locate the quoted passages by referencing the accompanying phrasing or by searching key terms within the text.

does not unfold on open ground but along lines drawn by past and present motion, so that the caravan's progress is shaped by the density and direction of roads already in place.

The spatial order of the caravan itself is mapped through roles, movement, and patterns of care: "The men and boys follow the cattle, the women keep the children and old ones safe" (3256). Who moves and who remains are both necessary to the circuit of travel, each sustaining the group's passage through alternating acts of care and motion. This usual division is shattered by war: so many men have been lost that the women must now take their place in driving the cattle. "And we are taking the cattle north and east. We are traveling without women. We laugh about it for hours, for days" (3661). The laughter that runs through this scene is edged with absence. It is both a response to the strangeness of new roles and a means of coping with grief, a way to hold the group together and keep moving despite the losses that have forced this change.

Yet it is not only laughter that binds the caravan through loss. Song and music become equally potent, drawing the group into moments of shared sensation and memory that reach across generations.:

> Music makes men immortal. Listening, I saw Tir again, alive, his silver body, and I saw him broken to pieces on the crags. Music so potent you could swoon. A sort of communal fever." (3093)

The phrase names a collective trance, a moment when memory and sensation pulse across multiple bodies at once. Tir appears alive and shattered in the same vision, suspended in the present of listening. Here, Seren is referencing one of the great *hawayn*, the ancestral songs of the Feredhai, and the people cry for someone who died hundreds of years ago as if he were among them. In this fever, history enters the present; the dead inhabit the same moving space as the living, drawn into proximity through listening. Instead of keeping the rhythm of the journey, the music gathers the listeners into a shared inwardness that moves with them.

Sometimes, presence can condense around a single site. Amlasith's tent becomes a gathering place for women at her moment of greatest grief: "Amlasith sat on her bed, surrounded by women as always, beautiful as always, dripping with gold, but in white now, in mourning for Fadhian" (3225). In this scene, gold marks Amlasith's status, while the white clothing signals mourning, and the women gathered around her create a concentrated center within movement, a chamber of grief inside a caravan that does not stop. This is density rather than stillness, the caravan folding inward for a moment as grief takes spatial form in the gathering itself, in the proximity of bodies, and in the focused presence around the bed. When Seren enters the

tent, the outward movement of the caravan gives way to the close, still presence of the women gathered around Amlasith. In this pause, the tent becomes a temporary center of gravity within the moving caravan, a space where grief is shared and the continuity of the journey is momentarily held in collective presence.

It is here that Seren invokes the Song of Lo, naming it not as a composition but as infrastructure:

> But there is a song, our greatest song, the longest. The Song of Lo. Most think of it as many songs, they say 'the songs.' But really it's just one song: prophecy, prayer and map. If you know it, you'll never get lost on the plateau. You sing. You sing and you walk. The line for this place, where we are now, is: 'I am a fountain and a field of clay.' And if you walk north, to that ridge of hills, the song becomes: 'Clay on my boots, clay in my heart, I am of clay like the Firstborn.'
>
> If you know the Song of Lo you can walk anywhere. It is more faithful than the stars.
>
> I sang a line of it, there in Amlasith's tent. I am a fountain and a field of clay. I said we'd go, we'd walk, I'd take us away, alone across the sands." (3233)

The Song of Lo is not only a practice of wayfinding that divides the plateau into knowable segments, but an embodied form of making space, for each line is a spatial marker, an act of orientation and creation. As Seren recites a line, she is not simply recalling direction, but actively shaping the land into a traversable route, joining memory, language, and ground. Within the tent, this invocation becomes more than collective orientation: in the words, "I said we'd go, we'd walk, I'd take us away, alone across the sands," Seren quietly asserts the possibility of departure with Tav, a gesture that is both a new direction and a subtle act of defiance. Among the Feredhai, two girls may experiment together, but for two women, such intimacy is forbidden; to voice this desire in Amlasith's tent is to challenge the caravan's social boundaries as well as its spatial ones. The Song thus becomes not only a map, but a medium for transgressing limits, allowing desire itself to generate new space, even within the enclosure of grief.

If the Song of Lo maps the plateau for the caravan as a whole, Seren adapts its logic to plot a private route, an itinerary she might follow with Tav. She names the directions explicitly: north, east, and again north. These become coordinates for a shared journey and expressions of personal longing. "We'll move. You'd like to go north, you say, to see if there's anything left of the forest of hetha trees your uncle sold for timber" (3596). Here, movement is not just necessity but a way of sustaining connection with Tav, a journey that holds both memory and possibility. As Seren names each direction, she does

so in the language of the Song itself: "North. Clay on my boots, clay in my heart, I am of clay like the Firstborn. East. With her necklace of glass beads" (3590). These lines mark the terrain intimately, but their meaning is shaped by Tav's presence and by the hope that direction and companionship might coincide. The song becomes a form of orientation grounded in desire; direction is embodied, felt as clay and beads. Each turn of phrase serves as both a line of travel and a declaration of longing. In this way, Seren uses the Song of Lo to carve out space for herself and Tav, even within the constraints of custom and loss.

In Feredhai culture, the word for this shared space is *Chadhuren*[4]:

> Father and mother stay in one tent only when he is home: when the season permits it, when there isn't a war. Such a golden atmosphere, when the men and cattle come back to us in the spring. The season of 'earth ringing.' Ringing bells. A bull slain, meat for all. Lovers in each other's arms again, at last. Chadhuren, we call it: 'tent heart.' (3256)

Chadhuren marks the moment when movement allows relation to constellate into dwelling: lovers reunited, families gathered, bodies briefly enclosed under the same roof. The language describing *Chadhuren* is dense with spatial cues and material signs. The "golden atmosphere" signals reunion, the transformation of absence into presence and the reconstitution of social and affective ties that have been loosened by travel or separation. It marks a shift from dispersed labor and distance (men and cattle gone, families separated by the demands of movement or war) to a renewed intensity of relation: bodies in proximity, daily routines rejoined, the possibility of intimacy and shared ritual temporarily restored. The ringing bells announce the celebration and guide scattered members back to the heart of their community. The slaughtered bull, whose meat is shared, is both a sign of abundance and a ritual of temporary unity. This festive atmosphere arises from light, sound, taste, and touch, but also from the heightened awareness that nearness and celebration are provisional, dependent on the season and the uncertain intervals between departures. *Chadhuren* thus arises not as a permanent site, but as a spatial configuration maintained by cycles of movement and ritual. In naming this, the Feredhai recognize that what endures is not the tent itself, but the recurrent possibility of coming together: a home made and remade within the larger rhythm of travel and loss.

---

[4] The term *Chadhuren* closely echoes Persian **چادر (**commonly transliterated *chador***)**, meaning "A black tent, a nomadic tent. One who lives in a black tent" (Hayyim 1222). The proximity in sound and meaning to Samatar's gloss "tent heart" suggests a plausible resonance with Persianate nomadic vocabulary, in which the tent functions as both domestic space and mobile dwelling.

To describe the Feredhai caravan as a mobile heterotopia is to recognize that its world endures not through fixed ground but through the persistence of its practices: the gendered roles, the regulated thresholds of entry, the oral refrains that anchor memory, the Song of Lo that maps direction through voice, and the revival of *Chadhuren* when return draws bodies into nearness. Each of these acts sustains a distinct order even as the caravan remains in motion. Seren's narrative does not simply take place inside this structure; it arises from it. Her telling repeats the rhythms of travel, adopts the cadence of song, and uses naming as a means of shaping space. In speaking Tav's arrival again and again, in invoking song as map and *Chadhuren* as return, Seren does more than recount a journey: she generates the heterotopic space through narrative, ensuring that the caravan's world continues to exist in language as it moves.

Song in Motion: Che, Writing, and the Making of Women's Space

> When I was writing my dissertation, one of the things I was looking at was the Sirat Bani Hilal, which is an epic oral poem of North Africa. […] And this inspired, or created, a section of my second novel, The Winged Histories, which is about an oral culture in which only the men are poets. This comes out of my dad's research, as well – he was a scholar of Somali oral poetry, and he would always be listening to poetry on tapes when I was growing up, and it was all men. Not to say that there aren't Somali women poets, but there's a very, very masculine tradition, and Arabic poetry is the same way. I mean, you can always find the women if you look, but you could also easily not find them if you didn't look, you know? And so, there's a young woman who's a poet in that section of the novel. That was a question of the archive for me: the gender of the archive. When you're talking about an oral body of work, somebody has to pick it up and pass it on if it's even going to remain. It's a question of whose poetry gets recited again and again, and whose fades away and disappears. This is true for written archives as well, but with oral narratives the archive is alive. It's not in a library. It's carried in the bodies of performers. It's interesting to think about what that does, in terms of temporality. With written works, there's an idea of preserving the past. The words can always be reinterpreted, but they are, in a sense, frozen. With an oral archive, an embodied archive, there are always shifts in the language, sometimes subtle and sometimes huge. The time of oral narrative – even with the very oldest works – that time is always now. (Hageman and Samatar 150–151)

Samatar's invocation of "the gender of the archive" does not oppose orality to writing; rather, it reveals that both are already divided by gender. Formal orality, marked by the figure of the male poet, enters the archive through recitation, repetition, and attribution; its survival depends on being recognized, named, and carried forward as part of collective memory. Alongside this visible line of oral transmission exists another: an embodied practice of song held by women, repeated without authorship or formal preservation. If the

male poet recites into history, the women sing into continuity, sustaining a living present that does not accumulate as record but endures through repetition in the body. The question of the archive here becomes a matter of whose speech is allowed to enter memory as event, and whose remains in motion, unclaimed.

To place Seren at the center of a narrative, then, is already to intervene in this hierarchy. Her voice strains toward composition, toward a form that can hold women's language without submitting it to the conventions that govern male poetry. Samatar does not elevate *che* into the status of *hawan*, nor does she translate it into the neutral register of written record. Instead, she gives space to a literacy that begins in orality but moves toward invention, allowing Seren to imagine a song that is neither inherited nor sanctioned: "We need new songs" (Samatar 3130, 3188, 3614), she insists throughout her section. In writing *che* without fixing it into the logic of official memory, the novel opens a space where women's speech may begin to compose itself as something new.

Language gathers first in the body, rising as breath before it becomes word, a movement closer to pulse than to form. Sound is carried through the body before it settles into speech, what Cixous names "first music from the first voice of love which is alive in every woman" ("Medusa" 881), a vibration that moves through flesh before it becomes phrase. It spills forward as "flux immediately text" ("Coming to Writing" 58), where utterance and movement occur in the same instant, without the pause that separates voice from event. In this state, sound remains "singsound, bloodsong" ("Coming to Writing" 58), running through the body as circulation rather than as sign. To speak is to let the body write itself, "text: my body, shot through with streams of song" ("Medusa" 880), the voice carrying space around it as it moves. What emerges here is a form of composition that happens in transit, sustained not by preservation but by continuation, held in the shared breath of those who repeat without claiming.

Che sustains space as language held in a line of women. It moves from mother to daughter in the same breath that carries instruction, correction, tenderness, and rebuke, drawing a continuity between bodies that have shared tasks, shelter, and speech. Seren names herself within this chain of relation:

> I who sing am Seren the daughter of Larya of the seventh ausk of the Blue Feredhai of Tosk. I am a singer. I sing and I shout and I love, that's mostly what I do all the time, I don't believe I am complicated."
>
> (Samatar 3265)

The act of naming through the mother gathers her voice into a maternal current, aligning speech with the one who taught breath, tone, and timing. *Che* circulates through these inheritances, marking a space made by women who speak while their hands move and who bind each day's repetitions into a

shared interior through the persistence of their language. The cadence that follows, the rise and fall of voice threaded through work, extends from this lineage, carrying the shape of relation forward across time.

Memory moves along this same maternal line. The women carry loss through repetition, returning to the same phrases with each grief and allowing the body to keep record through the marks it bears. Seren recalls her grandmother:

> My grandmother had scars on the sides of her face where she had torn the skin with her nails. Most old women have these scars, it's normal […] She sang like a woman. Always coming behind, picking up the bones that look exactly the same. (3345)

Her lament follows the established line, placing her fallen husband's name among fixed images of ice, bone, and horse, arranging grief inside a held pattern of language. The act of mourning takes shape as insertion, each name fitted into a form already shaped by generations of women speaking loss. The scars appear as points where language and flesh meet, where mourning passes through the body each time the known phrases rise again. *Che* carries memory forward through this return, allowing grief to remain in motion within the breath of those who speak.

Che enters at the edge of battle, present in the women's urging voices that drive the men forward and present again in the aftermath when the fighting has already closed. The women sing the *hawan* that honors the dead yet do so within a form already set, for the right to compose belongs to the one who saw the moment of death and fixed it into the first telling: "We are always too late for the battle […] we come behind it, we compose little songs" (3037). Their voices rise before the strike, heating the men's blood, and they rise again once the field has emptied, placing the fallen into familiar imagery. This timing gives *che* its position: it moves with the men as incitement and returns with the women as continuation, holding the event in breath after the formal composition has been set.

The women's voices carry fire:

> The terrible voice. The men sing songs about the nagging voices of women. Your voice is a rain of hot salt. My grandmother proved them right every day. (3364)

The words mark the women's speech as abrasion, something that strikes the ear and stings skin like salt, marking it as something to be endured even as it drives the camp forward. The naming works to diminish it, yet the sound continues, pouring through the camp with a heat that cannot be held at the edge. *Che* persists in this atmosphere, speaking through command, mourning, and laughter. It stays in the air, close to the body, present in every movement.

Despite the fact that *che* thickens the air with heat and salt, the boys breathe it in with every word spoken around them: "They drink it like milk […] Growing fat and happy on the *che*" (3503). The language settles in their bodies through proximity to their mothers and other women. When a boy speaks in this register, a hand meets his head in time with the phrase: "don't talk like that, don't say that, say it like this!" (3503). The slap aligns his mouth with the cadence expected of him, steering him away from the women's rhythm that has already taken root in his breath. Laughter follows, "shrill, blood-tinged laughter" (3503), reinforcing the separation through affection and force in the same motion. *Che* enters him fully but remains a register he may not carry forward; his voice must harden into the patterns of those who leave for battle and return in *hawan.* The correction sets the boundary of the heterotopic space, keeping *che* as a women's linguistic space and shaping the boys' speech towards the masculine sphere.

Seren carries *che* in her mouth, yet the cadence begins to unravel: "Tav, I'm spinning. Tav, I feel like I'm spinning around" (3528). She lies beside a warrior woman, sings in the ritual spaces of the camp and in the marketplace for coin, her voice passing between blessing and transaction as needed. The old images, horse, bone, salt, rise through her as through the others, but they do not contain Tav, nor the exchange of song for money, nor a woman who urges men to battle and then walks away from the field with another woman at her side. The language tightens around her life, carrying everything except the shape she now inhabits. In this tension, a line begins to return. "We need new songs" (3130). It does not come once but rises again later, and again further on, a phrase that keeps appearing at the edge of *che*, each time pressing a little more upon the held pattern: "A great song, though. A *hawan*. In the *che*" (3528). Spoken first as breath, spoken again as insistence, it enters the air at the front of the cadence instead of folding back, marking the moment when another interior begins to form inside *che*, carried in the mouth of a woman whose life no longer rests within the lines she was given: women need new songs, this time composed by a woman.

Orality holds time in the present. In the interview cited at the beginning of this section, Samatar names the oral archive as an embodied one, shifting with every breath, its time "always now" (Hageman and Samatar 150–151). Seren's voice belongs to this register: it lives in movement, passed mouth to mouth, held in the breath of those who speak. Each line exists only as it is sounded, returned to the air with every repetition. *Che*, in this sense, is not remembered but continually remade, its life bound to circulation rather than record. Its endurance lies in the fact that it is carried in bodies, not stored in pages.

Writing enters the world of the nomadic Feredhai as a tool of control:

> They used to stop us with paper. Look, you can't go here, look, it's written. No grazing here. No water. There was writing around the wells. […] Little black marks, little red marks on a page you could chew up and swallow, and they were stronger than us. (3056)

Paper appears as a boundary laid across their routes, a fixed surface that speaks with an authority stronger than bodies, thirst, or the needs of animals. The script assigns ownership to land that had been held in passage, replacing movement with restriction. A written notice driven into the ground operates like a wall: no caravan can cross it without submitting to the mark. Writing holds its power through immobility, pinning language to a post and making it speak in place of those who wrote it. For a people whose space exists in motion, the written sign stands as a command that does not move.

It is into this logic of script that Seren's speech is drawn. Tav writes while Seren speaks:

> Your furious scribbling. Nearly as fast as I speak. You miss almost nothing. Your terrible soldier's hand grasps the pencil like a standard. You say you'll make copies, leave copies of my words everywhere […] Copies for others to read. Who? (3311, 3320)

The soldier's hand that once held a weapon now holds a pencil, capturing words that were meant to live only in the breath of those who heard them. The act of copying extends Seren's voice beyond its immediate space, sending it out among readers who were never present at the speaking. What was held in the women's interior begins to move through another circuit, one governed by script rather than breath.

The novel itself repeats this gesture. Samatar fixes Seren's oral cadence into writing, binding it into a book that can be entered, cited, and analyzed by any reader. The oral heterotopia becomes a written one, preserved by the very force that once stood against the caravan's movement. Writing holds Seren's voice in place, yet it also risks pulling it out of the women's space and into the open field of archival memory, where it may be claimed, cited, and owned.

To write *che* is to enter a second heterotopia, one nested inside the first. Seren's voice continues to move through the novel with the rhythm of breath, yet it is held inside a structure that keeps it from vanishing. The mark on the page arrests movement and carries it forward at once. In this way, writing becomes both breach and shelter: it interrupts the oral cadence and gives it endurance. The space that forms on the page holds the trace of breath within a surface that does not breathe. Here, the heterotopia of *che* passes into another realm, no longer only sounded in the air but suspended in the written field, where movement persists inside stillness.

Conclusion

The Winged Histories creates space through language in the precise sense that Le Guin describes: each voice speaks a territory into being, and these territories hold. The warrior, the scholar, the singer, the socialite – each moves through the world with a rhythm that gathers substance around it, forming a lived enclosure in the act of speaking. These enclosures do not resolve into a single narrative field but remain adjacent, a set of coexisting heterotopias held within the written form. Seren's section sits among them as a site where breath, body, and repetition generate a space that lives in motion even as it is transcribed. Writing captures the cadence without absorbing it, fixing the trace of women's speech while allowing its interior pressure to continue. The page becomes a surface where movement persists inside containment, where an archive forms without closing over its contents. Samatar's book enters the field of written memory not as a finished record but as a layered site of ongoing habitation, an archive built to keep language alive rather than to bring it to rest.

Works Cited

Cixous, Hélène. "Coming to Writing." Trans. Sarah Cornell, Deborah Jenson, Ann Liddle, and Susan Sellers. *"Coming to Writing" and Other Essays*. Harvard University Press, 1991: 1–58.

-- "The Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs* 1.4 (1976): 875–893.

Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces." Trans. Jay Miskowiec. *Diacritics* 16.1 (1986): 22–27.

Hageman, Andy, and Sofia Samatar. "A museum, like a tomb, is a whole theatre of weird temporality: an interview with Sofia Samatar." *Studies in the Fantastic* 9 (2020): 145–161. Project MUSE, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sif.2020.0006.

Hayyim, Sulayman. *New Persian-English Dictionary*. Librairie-imprimerie Béroukhim, 1934-1936. *Digital South Asia Library*, University of Chicago, https://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/hayyim/.

Le Guin, Ursula K. *Dreams Must Explain Themselves: The Selected Non-Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin*. Gollancz, 2018.

Massey, Doreen. *For Space.* Routledge, 2005.

Mendlesohn, Farah. *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Wesleyan University Press, 2008.

Samatar, Sofia. *The Winged Histories*. Kindle ed., Small Beer Press, 2016.