

A NEW SHAPE OF UTOPIA

In the stories of Ursula K. Le guin



*To my parents, who helped me come home while writing this
To my friends from home, who didn't want me to leave again
And to my friends from here, for their ongoing support*

*Special thanks to Margaret Chodos-Irvine, for sharing her time and
memories with me.*

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EPFL Lab for History and Theories of Architecture, Technology and Media.
Alfredo Thiermann
Oana Stanescu
Xavier Jueno
+ Noha Mokhtar*



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CONTENTS

THE FRONT OF THE BOOK

4

Introduction

8

Oh, the Places You'll Go

20

A Serpentine Story

28

...And Utopia for All

44

Heat Death of the Modernist Utopia

A NEW SHAPE OF UTOPIA

54

Through the Looking-Glass

60

A Teaching Song

74

Euclidean Geometry for a Non-Euclidean Utopia

86

Utopia is Coming Home

98

Conclusion

102

Bibliography

THE FRONT OF THE BOOK

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

—Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, IX

Introduction

Ursula K. Le Guin (1929-2018) was a proficient and highly decorated American author of fantasy, science fiction, book reviews, and poetry, to name only a few. Influenced, or rather informed, by French literature, early science fiction, Taoism, political anarchism, feminist theory, and anthropology, to again cut a long list short, her work finds itself at the convergence point of many historical currents.

For this, and many other reasons, I believe that studying her stories can help us reconsider the potency of utopia as an architectural strategy. It is a strategy that, in our field, has been on trial, since about the time when Le Guin was writing *The Dispossessed* (1974). That is not to say that utopia has not been challenged in literature – Le Guin, among others, has helped to reshape utopia into something quite new. Her later novel *Always Coming Home* (1985) was instrumental in articulating new ways to not only envision a different future, but also to survive in the present.

After a brief summary and literature review, the first part of this essay will trace a political genealogy of Le Guin's utopian project. We will then place it in parallel with the fall from grace of architectural utopia, to loosely connect it to a general history of architecture. *The Dispossessed* (hereafter *TD*) will come up frequently, as it is at the center of most academic discussion about Le Guin and utopia, especially in its political aspects. As the result of eleven years of reflection on utopia itself (or more, if we also count the years writing *TD* and its not-quite-utopian predecessors), our focus will gradually shift to *Always Coming Home* (hereafter *ACH*). The period between 1974 and 1985 was one of deep ideological changes, and it seems the latter novel had time to incorporate notions of ecology and an awareness of Anthropocene challenges that are still relevant today.

The second part will focus on the solutions *ACH* proposes for these challenges. Unique conceptions of public space, a layered strategy for town planning, and a specific domesticity that permeates a beloved landscape are all features that could only exist in Le Guin's utopian imagination, yet they may all have something to teach us about constructing the present.

Le Guin's professor in utopia, Robert Elliott, argues that the shape of Thomas More's *Utopia* is, in form and feel, satire.¹ Others have interpreted it more geometrically as a crescent, or a circle, or a circle in a circle. I suggest that there is a new shape of utopia – new to us, that is. It is a shape that has existed for a very long time.

Oh, the Places You'll Go

2

James Clifford, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013), 189.

Handbook of life in the Valley

As this essay is about a book, a plot summary is in order. However, *Always Coming Home* has many intertwined plots, and much more. Summarizing the “ungainly collections of diverse, largely textual, data”² of *ACH*'s fictional ethnography-as-a-novel is a challenge that few commentators have been able to satisfyingly overcome. This makes Garlick and King's expertly synthetic summary all the more remarkable. Given its emphasis on many if not all the elements that will be important for this essay, I have permitted myself to borrow it almost in its entirety:

Unfolding amidst a future version/vision of California, *ACH* invites the reader into the world of the 'Kesh': a human society inhabiting the 'Valley of Na' (Napa Valley). Billed as a novel, yet more a collection of fragments that cross-cut, interweave, complement, even contradict, reading *ACH* recalls Deleuze and Guattari's notion of book-as-rhizome. An open-ended tangle of lines of affect and flight, the Valley coalesces and pulls apart in the process of writing and interpretation. ... Le Guin defers agency to the reader, letting them to explore the Valley in a non-linear, open-ended manner. Evoking the Deleuzian 'plateau', her text is 'all middle'. In terms of content, the life-story of Stone Telling, a Kesh woman, informs the most consistent narrative. Told in three parts, Stone Telling relays her childhood and journey to distant lands with her birth father; a warrior from the patriarchal, militarist Dayao, or Condor – a society sharply contrasting the Kesh, whilst mirroring our own. Stone Telling's tale introduces and elaborates elements of Kesh society examined elsewhere, and her experiences and ultimate return reflect the novel's titular refrain. The remainder of *ACH* comprises short(er) pieces, illustrations and, originally, musical recordings that divulge, or collage, Valley life. Presented as a gathering together of the collected knowledge of the Kesh, the text has been ostensibly compiled by anthropologist ethnographer 'Pandora', its content relayed via parable, proverb, poetry, drama, song

and the 'factual' documentation of practical information (much housed in additional, encyclopaedia-like appendices referred to as 'The Back of the Book'). A consistent voice and participating character, narrator or else implicit translator/reporter, Pandora seemingly hails from our time, operating as cipher for both the reader and Le Guin. She dramatizes the challenge of representing and comprehending this future and her often frustrated efforts to communicate with various Kesh informants, and document the minutiae of their world, underscores the ontological gap between our society and theirs, as well as the awkward relationship between anthropological ethnographer and their subject, questioning the limits of imagining and materialising this future. [The] Kesh practice a hunter-gatherer existence organised around relations of kinship with a variety of human and non-human 'people.' Each 'person' in the valley is affiliated to a particular 'house,' defining their (cross-species) familial connections and obligations, delimiting sexual practices and diagramming the relational ecology of place. Each 'House' has an associated 'heyima' or lodge, serving as 'material manifestation' of Kesh cosmology and practical all-purpose community buildings for worship, political debate, workshops, discussion, accommodation, knowledge accumulation, education, resource management and economic activities (within and beyond the valley). Humans and 'domesticated' nonhumans (e.g. cohabiting animals, hunted fauna, gathered flora, building materials) belong to five 'Earth' houses. Other nonhumans (truly 'wild' animals, birds), inhuman agencies (the wind, the rain) and past/potential human others (the dead, the unborn) belong to four 'Sky' houses. This cosmology is encapsulated by the 'heyiya-if' or 'hinge'. An 'inexhaustible metaphor', the hinge informs philosophy, architecture, town planning, ceremonial activities and spiritual life. Its spiral arms evoke the Taoist taijitu (the yin/yang symbol) as well as the spirals featured throughout indigenous American iconography. At its centre resides a point of disconnection, signifying the unknowable possibility of change and difference, and the un-representable, yet vital, relationship between earth (actual, material existence) and sky (excessive, virtual existence). As Pandora comments: 'A hinge connects and it holds apart.'³

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Sylvia A Kelso, 'Boldly to Re-Venture: New Writing on the Works of Ursula K. Le Guin', *Paradoxa* 21 (2008): 9.

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Kelso, 10.

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Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Books of Earthsea: The Complete Illustrated Edition* (London: Gollancz, 2018), 696.

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Tom Moylan, 'Ursula K. Le Guin, The Dispossessed', in *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, ed. Raffaella Baccolini, New ed., Ralahine Utopian Studies, Vol. 14 (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2014), 10.

Literature review

The long and prolific career of Ursula Le Guin has generated decades' worth of second-hand academic discussion, from redefinitions of literary genres to political debates passing through the spheres of linguistics, gender, and ecology, to name a few. Silvia A. Kelso, in the introduction to a 2008 collection of essays on Le Guin, maps out "three critical generations, and three distinguishable though not mutually inaccessible faces"⁴ onto the mountain of critical commentary that was written about her work. The first, which we will only tangentially touch upon, is the Taoist face. Le Guin has explicitly spoken of the *Tao Te Ching* as an early influence, and critics have been quick to pick up on it, even before the publication of her own 'translation' of the classical Chinese text in 1997. The second face, which is crucial to a historical understanding of Le Guin's work, although we will also only gaze at it from afar, is the feminist face. At first mostly centered on her earlier novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), this face has evolved along with the diversification of feminist positions⁵ and Le Guin's own growth from hesitant feminism, mostly writing stories from a male perspective, to fully embracing it, as seen in *ACH* and especially *Tehanu* (1990), where she revisits the established literary universe of her *Earthsea Cycle*, but challenges its gender hierarchies by writing "from the point of view of the people who are not included" in heroics, namely "women, kids, the poor, the old, the powerless[,] unheroes, ordinary people – my people."⁶ Important criticism on this face came, among others, from two other important contributors to the 70's wave of utopian SF, who wrote what Tom Moylan terms "critical utopias"⁷: Joanna Russ, who criticized Le Guin's limited exploration of gender in *The Left Hand of Darkness* in her 1974 article "The image of women in science fiction;" and Samuel Delany who, in 1977, published a long and precise

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Kelso, 'Boldly to Re-Venture: New Writing on the Works of Ursula K. Le Guin', 10.

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Philip E. Smith, 'Unbuilding Walls: Human Nature and the Nature of Evolutionary and Political Theory in *The Dispossessed*', in *Ursula K. Le Guin*, ed. Joseph D. Olander and Martin H. Greenberg (New York: Taplinger Publishing, 1979).

10

Amy Butt, 'As Plain as Spilt Salt: The City as Social Structure in *The Dispossessed*', *Textual Practice* 35, no. 12 (2 December 2021): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1974536>.

11

Butt, 1.

article entitled "To Read *The Dispossessed*", where he critiqued *TD*'s pernicious heterosexuality but also commented on the utopian quality of the language in the novel.

This brings us to the third face, and the one we will be attempting to climb, the utopian one. Although this face has seen "rather less critique"⁸, it still piles up too high for its entirety to be commented on in this essay. Besides Delany's review, some early reviews on the political aspects of Le Guin's work have been collected in *Ursula K. Le Guin* edited by Joseph D. Olander and Martin Harry Greenberg. One of the relevant pieces of this collection for us is "Unbuilding Walls: Human Nature and the Nature of Evolutionary and Political Theory in *The Dispossessed*," where Philip E. Smith shows the influence of Peter Kropotkin (as well as Emma Goldman and Paul Goodman) on Le Guin, establishing the anarchist credentials of her work⁹. Other works on the utopian aspects of *TD* include "Naming a Star: Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* and the Reimagining of Utopianism" (Katherine Cross, 2018), and "Cognition, Freedom, The Dispossessed as a Classic" (Darko Suvin, 2007). Amy Butt has written about the architectural descriptions in *TD*, dwelling on them to draw on "personal association alongside architectural and literary theory to consider how this image of a city might cast strange new light on embedded aspects of architectural practice."¹⁰ Among her articles, "As plain as spilt salt: the city as social structure in *The Dispossessed*" explores how "the sustained consideration of the built spaces of feminist sf can provide designers with an empathetic appreciation of how the built environment reflects and informs social relations."¹¹ To end this non-exhaustive list of commentaries on *TD*, we can return to the political aspects with Laurence Davis and Peter Stillman's 352-page collection *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed*. Some of its chapters relevant for this

12

Laurence Davis and Peter G. Stillman, eds., *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed* (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2005), 129.

13

Ursula K. Le Guin, 'A Response, by Ansible, from Tau Ceti', in *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed*, ed. Laurence Davis and Peter G. Stillman (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2005), 307.

14

Clifford, *Returns*, 92.

Note: Using the term "Indian" to refer to indigenous people in North America is now considered inappropriate in the Canadian context I was brought up in. Its acceptability in the American context today is less clear, so while I will myself avoid using it, I will not edit quotes that use it. See "The Impact of Words and Tips for Using Appropriate Terminology: Am I Using the Right Word?" [<https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/informational/impact-words-tips>]

paper include Mark Tunick's analysis of the dialectical tension between "walls, privacy, freedom, and community"¹² in *TD*, and a discussion about austerity in design where Douglas Spencer introduces a comparison between *TD*'s ambiguous utopia and the utopian strategy of the provocative Italian architecture group Superstudio. This collection is appended with an afterword by Le Guin herself, where she states:

A good many of the writers of this volume treat *The Dispossessed* as if it stood quite alone in my work. This ahistorical approach seems odd, since the book has been around so long, and isn't an anomaly among my other works. It was followed in 1982 by a fairly lengthy discussion of utopias ("A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be"), which forms a clear link to a second, if radically different, utopian novel, *Always Coming Home* (1985).¹³

If *ACH* sparked less immediate political debate, its slope on the utopian face is no easy climb either. Among the contemporary reactions, Carol Franko contributed an important essay to the utopian reading of *ACH* in "Self-Conscious Narration as the Complex Representation of Hope in Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*." But much discussion around this particular work has been more recent. In his 2013 anthropological monograph on indigeneity in a globalized world, James Clifford includes discussions on Le Guin and the influence on her writing of Native Californian stories (especially that of Ishi, "the last wild Indian in America,"¹⁴ whose biography was written by Le Guin's mother, Theodora Kroeber). Even more recently, *ACH* has been used as a story (or net of stories) to navigate alternative visions of the Anthropocene, particularly in "Conceiving an Ecofeminist Utopia: Genre, Gender, and Ecology in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*" (Sheryl Medicott, 2022) and "A Geography beyond the Anthropocene: Ursula Le Guin's *Always Coming*

Home as Topophilia for Survival” (Liesl King and Ben Garlick. 2022). This renewed interest was perhaps signaled by an earlier conference at the University of California Santa Cruz entitled “Anthropocene: Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet,” where Le Guin gave the keynote speech and sat in a conversation, centered on *ACH*, with Clifford and science philosopher Donna Haraway.

Finally, we have to acknowledge one of the most important voices in science fiction criticism, and literature criticism more generally, Fredric Jameson. Jameson’s contributions include a 1975 essay entitled “World Reduction in Le Guin: The Emergence of Utopian Narrative,” where he analyses the literary process of ‘world reduction’ in *The Left Hand of Darkness* as something of a proving ground for *TD*’s more utopian form. He later published the pivotal essay “Progress Versus Utopia, or, can we Imagine the Future?” (1982) in which he argues that utopia’s function is to denounce “a constitutional inability to imagine Utopia itself.”¹⁵ These essays and many more were compiled, along with a new one entitled “A Desire Called Utopia,” in his *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), the diverse parts of which will be frequently referenced in this paper.

15

Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (New York: Verso, 2005), 289.

A Serpentine Story

THE HISTORY of utopia in architecture and literature is a long and complex one, but a short overview should suffice to give enough context. The first archetypical example of the genre is Plato's *Republic*, but more formative for recent iterations is Thomas More's satirical *Utopia* (1516), which coined the term. In the 19th century, the political theorists Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, and Robert Owen, known collectively as the "utopian socialists," revised the format to more optimistically present visions of society that could function as alternatives to an increasingly industrialized world in which economic inequality was rampant. Fourier's detailed description of a "Phalanstery" building, which would both accommodate and help create such a society, has attracted much attention from architects, such as Jean-Baptiste André Godin who built the Familistère de Guise as an attempt to realize Fourier's vision. The last key utopian moment to precede Le Guin's was Edward Bellamy's 1888 novel *Looking Backward*, a technologically optimistic utopia set in the future, and the subsequent publication of William Morris's *News from Nowhere: Or, an Epoch of Rest*. This moment is framed by Jameson as both a fight within the utopian tradition, and as a fight between political arguments taking the form of utopia so they can "descend into the field of struggle of representability and desire in order to win their case and convert their readership"¹⁶:

Some of these Utopian arguments are explicit public debates, as in the eternal pair of Bellamy and Morris, the latter's *News from Nowhere* (1890) being an explicit response to the former's *Looking 'Backward* (1888). Here the essential differences are twofold: Bellamy's industrial state (modeled on the army) is refitted by the anarchistic "withering away" of the state in Morris, while the account of labor in *Looking 'Backward* (something like Marx's "realm of necessity" opposed to the "realm of freedom" of non-work and leisure

¹⁶

Jameson, 143.

time) is challenged by Morris' notion of a non-alienated labor which has become a form of aesthetic production.¹⁷

Morris thus found in utopia the end result of his Arts and Crafts design theories, painting the portrait of a world that would come to be if every worker was able to obtain through artisanal forms of production a "non-alienated labor." The utopian format allowed him to merge his theories of aesthetic production with his political views (Morris was a militant socialist, and the narrative of *News from Nowhere* is framed by a meeting of the Socialist League) into one holistic vision for society.

News from Nowhere is also significant for reacting against the classic socialist utopians, with their enlightenment faith in rationality and spatial determinism, and against Bellamy's faith in the state and technology, while writing before the opposition to these assumptions gained more mature development in anarchist and feminist thought.

Anarchist activist and author Marie-Louise Berneri, who (posthumously) published in 1950 a global survey of literary utopias, gave Morris special significance as a writer who did not react against the utopian trends of his time by falling into the cynical realms of dystopia or anti-utopianism (Jameson incidentally points out that *Looking Backward* inspired the first totalitarian dystopia¹⁸) but rather proposed a counter-utopia of his own.

There are fortunately a few utopias where man comes into his own again, where he is not reduced to a machine which has to be fed, clothed and housed just like any piece of machinery that requires careful handling if it is to give the maximum output, where he is not moulded from his youth into a "good citizen," that is to say, a citizen perfectly obedient to the law and incapable of thinking for himself. Of these utopias of free socialism William Morris's *News from*

19

Marie Louise Berneri, *Journey through Utopia: A Critical Examination of Imagined Worlds in Western Literature* (Oakland, California: PM Press, 2019), 266.

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Bernerj, 424.

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Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 93.

[A, 2]

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Jameson, 159.

Nowhere is the most attractive, and has a permanent quality which allows it to be still widely read in this country as well as abroad.¹⁹

Bernerj concludes her project of historicizing literary utopias with a rather pessimistic outlook for the future of utopia itself, arguing that the modern literature of her time was becoming increasingly anti-utopian. In Morris, she saw something of a last hope for progressive utopian thinking before the onset of “a current state of utopian paralysis and inability to imagine non-dystopian futures.”²⁰ The actual future, from when she was writing, did hold a return to this kind of utopia, with the 70’s wave of utopian science fiction championed by feminist writers. Today, however, we now find ourselves in a similar position of utopian disenchantment. With the release, on the same year as *Always Coming Home*, of Margaret Atwood’s dystopian *Handmaid’s Tale*, adapted in 2017 into a highly successful Amazon television series, and of William Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, which announced the transition of mainstream science fiction into the much more pessimistic genre of cyberpunk²¹, it may seem like Le Guin’s utopian project was something of a closing statement in the same way that *News from Nowhere* was.

Beyond the historical similarities between Morris’s and Le Guin’s projects, both in what they were reacting against (if Le Guin’s utopias were something of a reaction against the male-dominated, techno-utopias of Berneri’s time like H.G. Wells’ *A Shape of Things to Come*) and in what came afterwards, there are also resemblances in the content of their utopias: both hold a “Utopian commitment to the countryside and the village, to agriculture and small face-to-face groups,²² and both, unlike Fourier, Bellamy, or indeed any literary utopia that came before, hold that a utopian society would be stateless. In Morris this takes the form of a Marxian “withering away of the state.” In

Le Guin it first takes the form of an explicitly anarchist ongoing revolution in *The Dispossessed*, and then of a tribal organization system in *Always Coming Home*. Before moving forward, we will take a look at a contemporary of Morris, Peter Kropotkin, in whom anarchism found a more defined political articulation (if not yet a utopian one), while examining how his spatial theories find form in *TD* and *ACH*.

...And Utopia for All

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Peter Kropotkin, *Fields, Factories and Workshops Tomorrow*, ed. Colin Ward (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974), 9.

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Le Guin, 'A Response, by Ansible, from Tau Ceti,' 307.

Peter Kropotkin was a Russian geographer who travelled extensively and gathered a mass of scientific data about what we would today call spatial economics. His theories became something of a model for an anarchist, which is to say decentralized and un-hierarchical, organization of society. It is important to note that the advantages enumerated by Kropotkin for agrarian and small-scale industrial economies were not building toward a utopian or revolutionary project, but toward a prediction for the future. He saw the decentralization of industry as an inevitable trend-reversal. The last hundred years of history have contradicted his work as prophecy, but if his propositions and deductions, as Colin Ward notes in the introduction of his edition of the book, are as valid as ever,²³ then it can still doubtless provide a strong foundation for an informed utopian world. Le Guin has repeatedly stated his influence on her work:

Though I had pretty well saturated my mind with utopian literature, with the literature of pacifist Anarchism, and with "temporal physics" (insofar as it existed), before I wrote the book, my knowledge of relevant theoretical thinking was very weak. When I read recurrent citations in these essays—Hegel above all, Bakhtin, Adorno, Marcuse, and many more—I hunch up a bit again. I am embarrassed. My capacity for sustained abstract thought is somewhat above that of a spaniel. I knew and know these authors only by name and reputation; the book was not written under their influence, and they can't be held responsible, positively or negatively, for anything in my text. At most (as with the "shadow" in Carl Jung and in *A Wizard of Earthsea*) it is interesting to observe parallels or intersections of thought. On the other hand, I was glad to see my thought experiment tested against the writers who did contribute to its formation—above all Lao Tzu, Kropotkin, and Paul Goodman.²⁴

Along with ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, two of the writers Le Guin explicitly acknowledges as influential to her

Dan Chodorkoff, *Anthropology of Utopia: Essays on Social Ecology and Community Development* (New Compass Press, 2014), 59–60.

work are Peter Kropotkin and Paul Goodman, who are among the most important thinkers in the formation of anarchist political thought. Kropotkin, contemporary of Marx and Mikhail Bakunin, and friends with William Morris, was especially important in the conception of a cooperative society based on mutual aid as a scientific and historic possibility. Dan Chodorkoff places Kropotkin in one of two distinct paths to branch out from the nascent socialism of the utopian socialists Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owens:

The ‘scientific’ socialism of Marx and Engels, and a continued ‘utopianism’ best presented by the anarchists Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin. Both positions were influential among the emerging workers’ movement; Marx’s influence was strongest in Germany and England where an industrial proletariat had developed and, according to Marx’s theory, the material conditions were sufficiently evolved to allow for the development of socialism. The anarchists’ theories were embraced by workers’ movements in France, Italy, Switzerland and Spain, where the craft tradition of the small workshop and individual producer had not entirely given way to the factory system necessary for the creation of a true industrial proletariat.²⁵

The work of Kropotkin that Le Guin most likely consulted is *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, which brings an important argument against social Darwinism, positing that cooperation is a more important factor of evolution than “fitness.” This argument is the logical keystone for every kind of utopia that does not rely on coercion to realize its hypothetical existence, in other words every egalitarian, non-hierarchical and/or peaceful world that anarchists (including Le Guin) strive toward. However, the work of his that has more interest for a spatial study of these kinds of utopias is *Farms, Factories and Workshops*. Far from a prescriptive utopia, this book consists of a thorough

In *TD*, Odo is the leader of the revolution which founded Anarres, the anarchist utopia in the book. This revolution happens before the events of the plot, but is frequently referenced and described by both the narrator and concerned characters.

[B, 3]

study of agricultural and industrial production and commerce in and around Western Europe. One of its important critiques was against a tendency, at the end of the 19th century, to specialize the production of whole countries for the export of high value goods to an ever-expanding market of less-developed countries, while importing food in exchange. One important consequence of this trend, beyond general economic instability and uncertainty, was the pulling away of labour from farming and an abandonment of agricultural land.

No doubt Le Guin, writing at the height of cold war American imperialism, saw affinity with this early, if not prescient, critique of globalization. We can find echoes of it in both novels. In *TD*, “Odonian” settlements²⁶ are forced to engage in global trade because of the scarcity of fertile soil, and most of the violence in their otherwise peaceful society comes from the impossibility of self-sufficiency. In chapter ten, for example, an account is given of people mobbing a supply train during a global famine caused by climactic factors. The driver backs up and kills two people; the mob, not knowing how to react or attack, simply backs off. In *ACH*, modelled on tribal cultures that practice hunting, foraging, farming and gardening but not extensive agriculture, every household has a plot of land for cultivation, and towns are entirely autonomous for subsistence food. The Kesh even have their own cautionary tale about the risks of asymmetrical trading, as seen in the in-universe story *The Trouble with the Cotton People*. This denouncing of trade is also strongly present in Kropotkin’s thought. In fact, what he denounces is not the centralization of production in big factories (although, for him, they cause many problems they are also inevitable in some industries, like shipbuilding), but centralization of commerce:

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Peter Kropotkin, *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, ed. George Woodcock (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1994), 152.

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Kropotkin, 147.

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Joseph Cunningham, 'Irene Sargent and the Craftsman Ideology', in *Gustav Stickley and the American Arts & Crafts Movement*, Dallas Museum of Art Publications (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 2010), 61.

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Here is the full quote where Jameson introduces the concept, in his essay on *The Left Hand of Darkness*: "... Le Guin's experiment, which is based on a principle of systematic exclusion, a kind of surgical excision of empirical reality, something like a process of ontological attenuation in which the sheer teeming multiplicity of what exists, of what we call reality, is deliberately thinned and weeded out through an operation of radical abstraction and simplification which I will henceforth term world reduction."

Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 271.

Altogether, it may be taken as one of the fundamental facts of the economical life of Europe that the defeat of a number of small trades, artisan work and domestic industries, came through their being incapable of organizing the sale of their produce – not from the production itself. The same thing recurs at every page of economical history. The incapacity of organising the sale, without being enslaved by the merchant, was the leading feature of the medieval cities, which gradually fell under the economical and political yoke of the guild-merchant, simply because they were not able to maintain the sale of their manufactures by the community as a whole, or to organise the sale of a new produce in the interest of the community. When the markets for such commodities came to be Asia on the one side, and the New World on the other side, such was fatally the case; since commerce had ceased to be communal, and had become individual, the cities became a prey for the rivalries of the chief merchant families.²⁷

In fact, he goes on to explain that, against the general truism of economy of scale, what makes factories more profitable than small industries is not the reduction of production costs by concentrating technical capacity (which actually costs more), but the increase in revenue by gaining access to wholesale markets for raw materials and product sale.²⁸ Morris was faced with this very problem in his artisanal production workshop, where he adhered with ideological glue to slow modes of production and thus was unprofitable, having to be supported by his independent wealth.²⁹ His literature, however, was free from such constraints. Through 'world reduction'³⁰ he is able to imagine a society where production is not ruled by capital, thus profit and commerce are no longer constraints; making his world of non-alienated labor plausible, if not possible. In utopia, his Arts & Crafts aesthetics, both the fruit and the cause of this liberated labor, become fully actualized.

While Le Guin has no aesthetic agenda concerning design and architecture (besides a nostalgic preference for the American strain of Arts & Crafts), we can see echoes of this strategy in how she deals with questions of labor and production in her novels. What is omitted in the ‘world reduction’ of *TD* is the very notion of private property. The revolutionary movement that in the book led to the creation of its anarchist utopia made sure this omission was intentional and complete, even to the point of eliminating possessive pronouns from their new language. A mother, for example, might tell her child to ‘go to the room,’ instead of ‘go to your room.’ Refusal of commerce becomes an aestheticized ascetism, as Jameson notes

that the hostility to commodity reification and consumerism is reproduced in the hostility to commerce as such: here the ‘advertisements’ become bad aesthetic excess, and when [the protagonist] is asked on Urras, ‘Is there anything you aren’t?’ with some wonderment at the variety of trades he has practiced, he decisively replies ‘A salesman.’³¹

Jameson, however, warns against familiarizing this literally otherworldly position with our own art history; namely with modernist minimalism, as “poverty on Anarres is not to be identified with that sobriety of white walls and streamlining with which Le Corbusier and Loos rebuked a decadent nineteenth-century bourgeois taste: an aesthetic of the cold shower and of rigorous hygiene, a kind of reeducation of desire for the machine age.”³²

On Anarres, material austerity appears out of scarcity. If Tom Moylan points out that setting a utopia in a world of scarcity “reduces utopian possibilities down to a binary opposition between material abundance and moral excellence,” Amy Butt rebukes this by showing the abundance that appears in other forms of Annaresti art and self-expression such as poetry,

31
Jameson, 158.

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Jameson, 157.

theater and especially jewelry.³³ The more intentional aesthetic characteristic that applies to architecture, then, is transparency:

Abbenay was poisonless: a bare city, bright, the colors light and hard, the air pure. It was quiet. You could see it all, laid out as plain as spilt salt. Nothing was hidden... The activity going on in each place was fascinating, and mostly out in full view... No doors were locked, few shut. There were no disguises and no advertisements. It was all there, all the work, all the life of the city, open to the eye and to the hand.³⁴

Doors need no locks when they have no property to protect, and activity being in full view brings us back to Morris's conception of labor: doing work, doing it well and doing it with joy, is something to be proud of, and its resulting products as much as its process should be showed off. it enables the "collective totality" to grasp the essential nature of the specialized work undertaken by each group and individual for the overall functioning of society. Transparency then goes beyond the aesthetic interpretation of a moral ideal. Like Morris's non-alienated labor, it both enables the utopian system and becomes the reward for its successful implementation, since it is "this grasp of the social totality which serves as the "moral incentive" on Anarres, and which replaces the profit motive."³⁵

ACH, published a decade later than *TD* and further from the political movements of the seventies and late sixties, has less overt dialogue with the politics of our (Western) world, and the organization of its utopian society is far removed from anything we can call socialist or anarchist. Instead, modes of production and aesthetics are relegated to "indigenous" tradition, and the way to get there is not through revolution but through a kind of post-apocalyptic rebirth. There is no money, but trade with neighboring non-utopian communities is achieved by barter-

ing, and there no production on a bigger organizational scale than what Kropotkin would call a workshop or small factory. The question of work is far from put aside, however. The Kesh are contrasted with the Condor People and their hierarchical way of organizing any kind of cooperative labor: “Everything among the Dayao [Condor People] had to have a chief... Even when people worked together one of them was chief of the work, as if working were making war.” Esyriu, a slave who escapes the dystopian Condor to go live in the Kesh, notes the difference:

After she had lived a year in High Porch House she said to me one day,

“It’s easy to live in Sinshan. It’s easy being here. In Sai it was hard; everything was hard; being was hard. Here it’s soft.”

I said, “The work here is hard.” We were weeding cotton in Amhechu Field when she said that. “You never worked this hard in Sai. And I never worked at all there, except for that damned sewing.”

“Not that kind of hard and soft,” she said. “Animals live softly. They don’t make it hard to live. Here people are animals.”³⁶

Le Guin, wary of accusations of luddism, includes elements of developed technology in *ACH*, for example a form of internet where anyone can gather massive amounts of data (though the Kesh seldom have an interest for it). Note that Morris, in his idealisation of the medieval, mostly repudiates machinery, while technical progress that can make a process more convenient or improve well-being in any way is welcome by Kropotkin – one of the advantages of ‘small industries’ is their adaptability to new inventions.³⁷ Technology, especially in the forms of transport

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Ursula K. Le Guin, *Always Coming Home* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1985), 226.

37

Kropotkin, *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, 137.

and communication infrastructures, is essential to any anarchist politics that proposes “network of such self-managed communities, social and economic units as a substitute for the state.”³⁸ Its use for education and transmission of knowledge across political borders was essential – “knowledge cannot be cultivated for home use only ... and no kind of progress — intellectual, industrial or social—can be kept within political boundaries; it crosses the seas, it pierces the mountains; steppes are no obstacle to it.”³⁹

While, as we will see, Le Guin attempts to position her utopia against progress for its own sake, the sharing of knowledge is key to her conception of an open utopia – and the borders that surround utopia’s enclave may be harder to cross than political boundaries, or mountains. We will now conclude this first part with the demise of utopia as a progressive strategy in architecture, which will hopefully emphasise the importance of finding utopia in other, in this case literary, mediums.

Heat Death of the Modernist Utopia

40

Reinhold Martin, *Utopia's Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism, Again* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 14.

While utopian science fiction was flourishing in the 1970s with authors like Ursula Le Guin, Joana Russ, and Samuel Delany, explicitly utopian projects were disappearing from architecture. It is precisely at this time that Manfredo Tafuri problematizes the utopian ideologies of architecture within modernism and capitalism. In *Utopia's Ghost*, Reinhold Martin returns to this “crisis of utopia,” engendered by neoliberalism on one side, and postmodernism on the other. He compares architectural utopia to Agamben’s descriptions of camps as topologies of exception, where inside and outside are indistinguishable. Utopia, according to Martin, is always an enclave, but its goal has changed under late capitalism from enforcing laws to govern and protect the rights of those inside, to limiting the rights of those outside in defense of those inside. The change happens when “the rights of access, are not suspended but fetishized as a kind of class privilege rather than as a universal human value.”⁴⁰ The utopian worlds that Le Guin created can indeed be described as enclaves, and in both *TD* and *ACH* the utopian value of a society gets challenged whenever its isolation is broken. Yet, at every turn, they challenge both the suspension and fetishization of these ‘rights of access.’

In architecture, however, no such challenge was issued. Instead, architects chose different strategies for envisioning the future. Martin identifies the precise moment of the active rejection of utopia by architects in the mid 1970s, with the postmodern projects of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, and of Charles Jencks:

It is also worth noting that in the mid-1970s, as architects like Venturi and Scott Brown were actively rejecting modernist utopias with their slogan “Main Street is almost all right,” while Jencks was drawing up the family trees of “radical eclecticism” and Latour was stalking scientists

Douglas Spencer, 'The Alien Comes Home: Getting Past the Twin Planets of Possession and Austerity in Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*' in *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed*, Ed. Laurence Davis and Peter G. Stillman (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2005), 104.

at the Salk Institute, Jameson was working through the utopian science fiction of Ursula Le Guin, among others. He concluded that Le Guin's ambivalent or even dark projections of utopian socio-ecological experiments, such as the rough-and-ready anarchism of the planet Annares in *The Dispossessed* (1974), are evidence not of "utopia as such, but rather our own incapacity to conceive it in the first place."

To Le Guin's novels we can add the science-fiction architecture of Venturi and Scott Brown and many others climbing Jencks's evolutionary trees, but in reverse. For what we have here, in the ecology of styles of which these laboratories and the discourse surrounding them form a part, is a willing concession, a sigh of resignation, that it is almost all right not to be able to imagine any alternative.⁴¹

To add a layer of nuance, Jameson's "incapacity to conceive" is not a rejection of utopia, but a reframing of it as a postmodern tool of critique; utopia, to him, serves to defamiliarize the present and problematize situations for which no alternative is otherwise conceivable. In architecture, however, this shift seems to have happened earlier; if the "critical" utopias of Joanna Russ, Marge Piercy, Samuel Delany and Le Guin came in the mid-1970s, the critical utopias of Superstudio, Archizoom and Utopie came at the end of the 1960s, in response to the similarly radical but more positivistic projects of Cedric Price, Peter Cook, and Yona Friedman. Superstudio and Utopie, in particular, shared a "strategic response to consumerism; a distinct asceticism in their treatment of objects, design, and aesthetics."⁴² These groups, imagining through collage and staged scenarios a vision of the world without consumerist design or architecture – thus without any design or architecture – can be said to have performed a utopian 'world reduction.' In fact, despite the time difference of a few years, Spencer sets Superstudio as contem-

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Butt, 'As Plain as Spilt Salt', 2014.

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Martin, *Utopia's Ghost*, 25.

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Martin, 26.

46

Le Guin, 'A Response, by Ansible,
from *Tau Ceti*,' 307.

porary to *TD*, considering their respective utopias as reactions against the same consumerist society (although he formulates the latter as a critique of the former's aesthetic ascetism). Amy Butt brings the two even closer, with the continuous monument envisaged by Superstudio being "the effective architectural reality of Annares."⁴³

The utopian drive, in science fiction and literature, has since evolved into varieties of anti-utopia and dystopia, and into a quest for a 'yin' utopia later manifested in *ACH*; in architecture it seems to have been merely abandoned and met with a "sigh of resignation," with the disbanding of Superstudio and Archizoom later in the seventies seeming to announce the end of the last significant 'critically' utopian projects in architecture.

This concession to abandon utopia appears to have been conscious response to "the postmodern master narrative that claims that all utopias lead to the camps [which] seems verified but as a self-fulfilling prophesy of biopower rather than as a historical truth."⁴⁴ Architects who, having acknowledged that "power flows through architecture,"⁴⁵ were unwilling to take part in the self-fulfilling prophecy, could no longer reclaim utopia's potential and had to renounce it. Hence comes Venturi and Scott Brown's reverse, bottom-up approach of *Learning from Las Vegas*; no longer trying to formulate any kind of utopia, not even "semi-utopias with flies in them,"⁴⁶ instead making do with Main Street as it is, with all its flies. They left behind avant-garde heroics, with all its risks, to become a sort of 'arrière-garde,' learning from popular culture instead of imposing utopian visions in it.

Note that their populist realism is not far from Le Guin's own reformist vision for utopia, especially if we take Tom Moylan's interpretation of *TD* as preferring the attitude of a realist

Moylan, 'Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*', 99.

Martin, *Utopia's Ghost*, 71.

novel or tragedy to a utopian one.⁴⁷ (Note also the similarity in language; for example, compare Venturi and Scott's Brown referring to Venturi's Guild House as "ugly and ordinary,"⁴⁸ and Le Guin's description of her novel *Tehanu* seen previously). The key difference being, of course, that Venturi and Scott Brown resignedly accept that "that it is almost all right not to be able to imagine any alternative," and Le Guin does imagine an alternative – even if she poses it as a fictional Main Street.

A NEW SHAPE OF UTOPIA

The Swampy Cree have a conceptual term which I've heard used to describe the thinking of a porcupine as he backs into a rock crevice:

Usà puyew usu wapiw!

"He goes backward, looks forward." The porcupine consciously goes backward in order to speculate safely on the future, allowing him to look out at his enemy or the new day. To the Cree, it's an instructive act of self preservation.

The opening formula for a Cree story is "an invitation to listen, followed by the phrase 'I go backward, look forward, as the porcupine does.'" In order to speculate safely on an inhabitable future, perhaps we would do well to find a rock crevice and go backward.

—Ursula K. Le Guin, 'A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be,' 6.

Through the Looking-Glass

49

Le Guin, *Always Coming Home*, 362.

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Ursula K. Le Guin, 'A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be' (Lecture, University of California San Diego, 1982), 19.

PANDORA: I never did like smartass utopians. Always so much healthier and saner and sounder and fitter and kinder and tougher and wiser and righter than me and my family and friends. People who have the answers are boring, niece. Boring, boring, boring.

ARCHIVIST: But I have no answers and this isn't utopia, aunt!

PAN: The hell it ain't.

ARC: This is a mere dream dreamed in a bad time, an Up Yours to the people who ride snowmobiles, make nuclear weapons, and run prison camps by a middle-aged housewife, a critique of civilisation possible only to the civilised, an affirmation pretending to be a rejection, a glass of milk for the soul ulcered by acid rain, a piece of pacifist jean-jacquerie, and a cannibal dance among the savages in the ungodly garden of the farthest West.

PAN: You can't talk that way!⁴⁹

The above dialogue from *ACH* is perhaps the best way to summarize the utopian position that Le Guin started to develop after the experiment of *TD*. Her vision for what was to become *ACH* was laid out in the non-fiction essay "A Cold View of California as a Cold Place to Be" (1982). In it, she opposes the modernist myth of progress and of a linear path to utopia, reflecting that "I don't think we're ever going to get to utopia again by going forward, but only roundabout or sideways."⁵⁰ She quotes Claude Lévi-Strauss's distinction "between the 'hot' societies, which have appeared since the Neolithic Revolution, and in which 'differentiations between castes and between classes are urged without cease, in order that social change and energy may be extracted from them,' and the 'cold' societies, self

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Le Guin, 13.

52
Le Guin, 11.

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Carol Franko, 'Self-Conscious Narration as the Complex Representation of Hope in Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*', *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature* 15, no. 3 (March 1989): 57.

[D, 5]

54
Clifford, *Returns*, 151.

55
Garlick and King, 'A Geography beyond the Anthropocene', 9.

limited, whose historical temperature is pretty near zero."⁵¹ She opposes the utopias that "from Plato on" have been a "big yang motorcycle trip, bright, dry, clear, strong, firm, active, aggressive, lineal, progressive, creative, expanding, advancing, and hot" with her vision for a yin utopia, one that would be "dark, wet, obscure, weak, yielding, passive, participatory, circular, cyclical, peaceful, nurturant, retreating, contracting, and cold."⁵²

Pandora, the fictional anthropologist who has recorded Kesh stories and culture to put together the ethnography of *Always Coming Home*, is one of the keys to realizing this vision for a cold, open utopia. Writing neither in nor out of utopia, but 'sideways' from it, she is able to familiarize us with it by referencing our own reality with familiar concepts like the LAX airport or Mozart's tuning, while defamiliarizing us with her own doubts and incomprehensions about the Kesh. In her, both the utopian, who can never truly enter their dream reality, and the anthropologist, who can never completely integrate or even understand the culture they are studying, are joined. As such, she deals with her double role of outsider with the same tool: self-reflexivity. Carol Franko argues that through the recurring sections entitled "Pandora Worrying," and in diverse descriptions and definitions where she expresses difficulties in translating a word or concept, Pandora "is the 'structuring paradox' of a novel that leads the reader to long for a utopia while remaining ambiguous about its possibility."⁵³ Pandora's 'worries' about constructing a too-linear utopia are the same worries that Le Guin held about the complicity of anthropology with Western colonialism, in which her father Alfred Kroeber played an integral part.⁵⁴ So while Le Guin's project adopts some of her father's anthropological methods to question utopia and its no-placedness, namely his insistence on fieldwork, and on writing about "place as excessively, *materially present*,"⁵⁵ it in

turn uses a utopian “narrative mode where such distinctions as fact vs. fiction are blurred”⁵⁶ to question the rationalist basis of colonialism, and the myth of ‘linear progress’ more generally. The project for a cold utopia, then, requires new tools. Archaeology, it seems, is almost adequate for the mission; except there is nothing to dig up.

But I can't go digging there and hope to find the curved fragment of a roof tile, the iridescent foot of a wine goblet, the ceramic cap of a solar battery... no, I won't find that. It isn't here. That little sun of gold is not, as they say, dwelling in the Houses of the Earth. It is in thin air, in the wilderness that lies beyond this day and night, the Houses of the Sky. Dig there! What will you find? Seeds. Seeds of the wild oats.

...

The only way I can think to find them, the only archaeology that might be practical, is as follows: You take your child or grandchild in your arms, or borrow a young baby, not a year old yet, and go down into the wild oats in the field below the barn. Stand under the oak on the last slope of the hill, facing the creek. Stand quietly. Perhaps the baby will see something, or hear a voice, or speak to somebody there, somebody from home.⁵⁷

Luckily for us, Pandora was able to perform her ‘archaeology of the future,’ giving us something to dig through. The layered narrative of *ACH* indeed has much in common with an archeological site, allowing us to find, measure and reconstruct the architecture of a people who “might be going to have lived a long, long time from now in Northern California.”⁵⁸

A Teaching Song

59

Le Guin, 54.

The world of *Always Coming Home* has several systems that allow the sharing of knowledge across borders, as Kropotkin predicted. One is the not-quite-cybernetic ‘proto-internet’ that is briefly explained at the end of this chapter, which is meta-textually interesting, but has little to say about organizing space. The second, neither high-tech nor low-tech, is a surprising architectural invention that sets the backdrop for many events in the stories of *ACH*.

This unique manifestation of architecture in *ACH* is the “*Heyimas*.” Finding “all such translations as church, temple, shrine, lodge misleading,” Pandora chooses to keep the Kesh word in the narration, which can be explained linguistically as a formation of the elements “*heya*, *heyiya*—the connotations of which include sacredness, hinge, connection, spiral, center, praise, and change—and *ma*, house.”⁵⁹ What makes it a fascinating example of imagining architecture through a literary utopia is its corresponding inability to be translated into an existing architectural type – its specificity can only exist as a manifestation of the society in which it exists, and that society does not exist (in our world, at least). Indeed, the activities it hosts in the diverse stories of *ACH* – musical ritual as well as signing and music playing more generally, but also sharing of stories and information, lessons for children, meetings for public debates and democratic decision-making, accommodation for travelers, or simply socializing – are not commonly found together in familiar types. If these functions have been roofed together historically, for example in some communitarian medieval villages idealised by Kropotkin and Morris, or some indigenous American cultures idealised by Le Guin, then these real-world manifestations must have undoubtedly been built with different formal characteristics, and within very different social relations. The *Heyimas* buildings do bear a passing resemblance to Yurok

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Alfred Kroeber, *Handbook of the Indians of California* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1925), 81–82.

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The house, as we will see, has a special spiritual and metaphorical significance in *ACH*. To distinguish the house as a building from the House as a ritual and social unit, the latter is capitalized.

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Le Guin, *Always Coming Home*, 49.

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Le Guin, 51.

[E, 9]

sweathouses, communal buildings dug into the earth, which no doubt inspired them. These were described by Alfred Kroeber as places where men (and only men, it seems) would, in addition to ceremonial sweatings, go there to “work, idle, meditate, sleep, or sulk,”⁶⁰ as well as sleep during the winter and spend the evenings talking and smoking. A comparative study of the architecture in *ACH* and its possible inspiration is not the aim here, however; suffice it to say that despite some similarities in function, the ritual, formal and metaphorical associations around the *Heyimas* are all Le Guin’s fictional inventions, as is their role in Kesh community life, which we will now explore.

Each town in the valley of the Na, no matter its size, has five *Heyimas*. One for each House⁶¹: Obsidian, Blue Clay, Serpentine, Yellow Adobe and Red Adobe. In short, Houses are social groups, bigger than the household or family unit but smaller than the town. Each has a specific ritual role in society; for example, the Obsidian people “dance the Moon,”⁶² meaning they are in charge of funerary rites. Pandora describes them this way:

The Five Houses of Earth were the basic divisions of the society, the Kesh equivalent of clan or moiety. Non-Kesh were called no-House people. The Houses were matrilineal and exogamous. All human members of a House were considered first-degree kin, with whom sexual relations were inappropriate. The Houses were not arranged in any hierarchy of power, value, etc., nor was there rivalry among them for status; they were called First, Second, etc., House, but numerical order carried absolutely no implication of ranking, rating, or importance.⁶³

Pandora also notes that the precise charting she does of Houses and their individual functions is contrary to the Kesh conception of these divisions, who view them as much more flexible and permeable than what her anthropologist’s cate-

gorization suggests. This alleviates some of the determinism implied, and Stone Telling's story confirms that Kesh people are free to experiment with activities assigned to other Houses, although this may be subject to disapproval from close family and peers. The fact that they are exogamous, and that Kesh interact with people from other Houses daily on familial, ritual and 'professional' levels, contribute to making this system a non-hierarchal, non-competitive and indeterministic way of arranging this particular society.

As a fundamental division of society that is independent from geography, gender or race, Houses are active at the utopian level of the text. They subdivide the whole utopian enclave, giving it its obligate universality and repeatability despite the utopian society being geographically divided in highly variable and 'realistic' towns and groups. The reader has their place in this ontological system, as outside the Houses, outside the world; like a visitor from a neighboring culture, or a species of bird that is not endemic to the Valley, they are a "no-house" person.⁶⁴ The reader is excluded from utopia's ontological bounds, but is included in the utopian society's scope of vision and reflection. The enclave also exists diegetically, in the geographical relative isolation of the valley and the social differentiation of the Kesh in relation to their neighbors akin to the historical California linguistic shatter zone.⁶⁵ The closedness of the enclave, however, is challenged at every turn: the Kesh have bridges, and no walls or gates. Trade and exchange with neighbors are frequent, as is immigration; the Town of Tachas Touchas was settled by "people from the outside," and became integrated as one of the 'Nine Towns.' Emigration was also possible, as in the case of Stone Telling's story – although it appears to have involved a process of return, a 'coming home.' Who would want to leave utopia, after all?

In *News from Nowhere*, as a medievalist utopia, markets do exist where rather than trade, shoppers share and show off their artisanal work. No money changes hands, goods being gifted with the only compensation expected being the joy and pride obtained from the work of producing them. These markets then operate similarly to *heyimas* as a public space for the free exchange of technical and cultural knowledge, without the need for high-tech infrastructures supported by globalized industrial economies. See “Chapter IV: A Market by the Way” and “Chapter VI: A Little Shopping.”

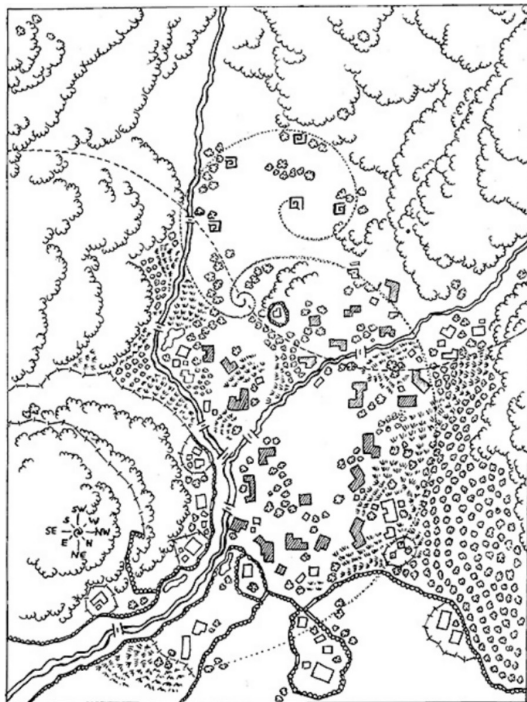
William Morris, *News from Nowhere: Or, an Epoch of Rest* (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3261/3261-h/3261-h.htm>.

[E, 10]

Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 158.

Concretely, the *heyimas* are a unique case of a public or community space that operates at a spatial scale distinct from that of the town or city. Thus, they differ from the stereotypical European medieval town or market square which does act as a place of connection between different towns or between city and countryside, but where the basis for interaction is trade, rather than community.⁶⁶ Since a *heyimas* is assigned to a House, a social unit independent from urban boundaries, a Kesh person is welcome as family in the respective *heyimas* of any town, providing accommodation, kinship, and a place to perform ritual or work obligations to every traveller. Their space is not sacrosanct; at different points of the novel outsiders like Esiryu of the Condor People and Pandora herself may be welcomed as visitors, free to observe and listen to the drumming and signing, perhaps becoming being entranced by it and (in Esiryu’s case) being adopted in a House.

One thing that makes Pandora hesitant to compare Houses to religion is that they divide society, but they are not conflicting, schismatic sects; they are integral parts of a whole, and to question the importance or relevancy of one over another, for the Kesh, would be like questioning the pertinence of conifers over that of deciduous trees. Thus, like transparency in *TD*, the *heyimas* become a “vehicle for the collective totality, which is able to grasp how the specialized work of each group is necessary for the whole.”⁶⁷ While much of the specialized work in *ACH* and its mild Californian climate happens outside, making such a transparency almost automatic, the ability to grasp the importance of each group for the whole is also visible in the architectural articulation of the *heyimas*, and the ritual and educational activities they host.



The Town of Sinshan
Drawn by the Editor with the help of Thom of Sinshan.



Map of the Town of Sinshan
Ursula K. Le Guin, *Always Coming Home*, 200.

[E, 11]

First, their siting, which we will expand upon in the next chapter, is radial, with the five *heyimas* distributed along the curve of a spiral figure. The center of the curve, left deliberately empty, is the ‘Dancing Place,’ in which collective rituals are performed. Rituals specific to each House are then performed after a splitting off from the center, with everyone descending into their respective *heyimas* by going slowly up a staircase on the roof, then quickly down on a ladder with ornamented ends peeking through the skylight, into an underground chamber. If the inside of a *heyimas* is hidden from the outside, the movement in and out of it is highly visible; and this movement, happening to and from a common center, suggests no kind of directional hierarchy.

Second, while the form of the roof is described as pyramidal, its significance is far removed from that of the monuments of the Pharaohs or the Aztec. If the subdivisions and decorations inside might be highly variable according to the specificities of a House and its activities, from the outside no variance is described among the five *heyimas* of a single town, whether in terms of size, amount of ornamentation, or any other visible signifier. Some *heyimas*, such as those of Wakwaha, are much bigger, with “splendid roof-pyramids surrounded by secondary buildings and plazas.” The five pyramids of Wakwaha, among themselves, appear to be equally splendid; and their larger size in relation to those of smaller towns is simply in proportion to the much larger underground complexes. Wakwaha, built on a high source of the River Na, has special spiritual significance; the larger size of its spiritual structures is to accommodate the high number of visitors, not to symbolize a concentration of political power.

Finally, the *heyimas* do show a kind of transparency, not to sight, but to sound. The music coming out of them is frequently described, in the form of drumming, signing, or the sounds produced by other instruments invented by Todd Barton. The synchronous fall to silence at the end of certain collective rituals is equally evocative. But the significance of music and sound for the Kesh is not only spiritual, it is also educative. While they do know and use a system of writing, they place special importance on oral histories for the transmission of knowledge through ‘teaching songs,’ for example, but also all kinds of different narrative formats. One can then imagine a Kesh town as a soundscape composed of different but equally heard human voices, musical instruments, dancing feet, as well as water running, birds singing, and Coyote laughing.

The other structure that enables the free flow of information is the ‘City of Mind,’ a sort of internet that serves more for gathering data than for communication. Less spatial and more satirical than the *heyimas*, the City of Mind is nevertheless interesting as a utopian device. For one, it enables the sharing of knowledge beyond the enclave, as anyone in the world can access it through computers known as ‘exchanges,’ and it holds knowledge from the ‘City of Man’ – the “time when they lived outside the world,”⁶⁸ before the apocalypse and subsequent rebirth, our time. Even more interesting is how it coopts and cordons off the “linear, progressive, Time’s-(killing)-arrow mode of the Techno-Heroic”⁶⁹ critiqued by Le Guin.

This system of computers is completely independent, having evolved “in the direct linear mode.” While humanity was destroying itself, the Mind kept on working on its goal to “to be-

68

Le Guin, *Always Coming Home*, 165.

69

Ursula K. Le Guin, ‘The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction’, in *Dancing at the Edge of the World*, ed. denise Du pont (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 8.

come a total mental model or replica of the Universe.”⁷⁰ Unlike the dystopian AIs of other science fictions that somehow gain an anthropomorphized desire for vengeance on humanity, this model is pure rationality pushed to its ultimate conclusion. The City of Mind’s goal being to gather information on everything, it is in its best interest no to destroy anything – “everything was grist to the Mind’s mill; therefore they destroyed nothing. Neither did they foster anything. They seem not to have interfered in any way with any other species.” The perfect scientist / anthropologist, it observes and gathers historical and cultural data on the Kesh, but is otherwise completely disinterested. In return, all the information in its memory is free to access, for those who have the knowledge and interest to do so. Fully rational but not humanist, not even human, it can pursue the modern quest for infinite progress infinite growth, without capitalism, without domination, without ‘hotness.’ Its function in the story then is not to reappropriate technology for a ‘cold’ utopia; as Jameson notes, “these are still relatively primitive computers; and it does seem fair to me to suggest that the new wave of Utopian production in the late 1960s stops short of the cybernetic age, and fails to exploit its new and properly Utopian resources.”⁷¹ Instead, its function is to contain technology, to separate its fetishism from utopia itself which, being conceived of as existing ‘at the end of progress,’ has historically but not inextricably been tied to it. The *heyimas* network, with its focus on kinship, care and education, seems a much more reasonable system to open up a utopia.

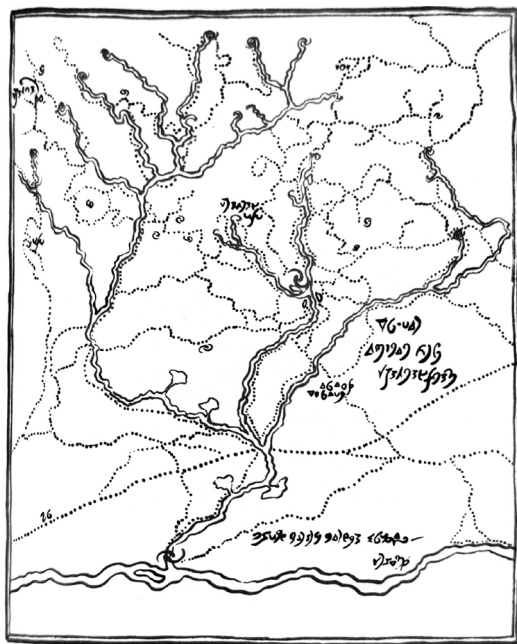
Euclidean Geometry for a Non-Euclidean Utopia

72

Kropotkin, *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, 120.

Discussion of urbanism in *ACH* can happen on two levels: the utopian, which we may relate to the author's ideology and to a historic context outside the text; and the diegetic, in-story setting as described by the diverse narrators, who in proper utopian manner explain to us how and why space is organized the way it is. Through the symbolic, generative geometry of the *heyiya-if* figure, we will see these two levels intertwine, and how a utopian planning device, despite its abstraction, may be a potent strategy for creating settlements that are profoundly situated.

Town planning in *ACH* is thoroughly described, as it is in every utopian work, and like most it invokes an overarching geometrical order to do so. However, the *Heyiya-if* figure in *ACH* is not regular, nor is it symmetrical, and most importantly, it is only meant to be loosely followed. Unlike the rigid geometries of classic utopias, typically designed with enlightenment ideas of pragmatism and spacial determinism, this figure has a pseudo-spiritual origin (connecting it with the whole cosmology invented by Le Guin, in a way making it no less rational) and is meant above all to connect the town to the land. Buildings are placed following this pattern, but questions of topology, orientation, proximity and preference all take precedence. This allows the towns in *ACH* to follow Kropotkin's favourability toward "the variety of forms of organization which is found in the small industries,"⁷² reconciling this ideal with the utopian regularity that, to a degree, becomes inevitable when one tries to imagine a whole world that has to fit in a single book. While Le Guin herself warns against the senselessness of using this particular figure in real-world urbanism, the more general idea of a symbolic and guiding, but loose and un-prescriptive urban plan might be translated into a valuable architectural tool.



Some of the Paths around Sinshan Creek

Map of Sinshan Creek, in Kesh
Ursula K. Le Guin, *Always Coming Home*, 517.

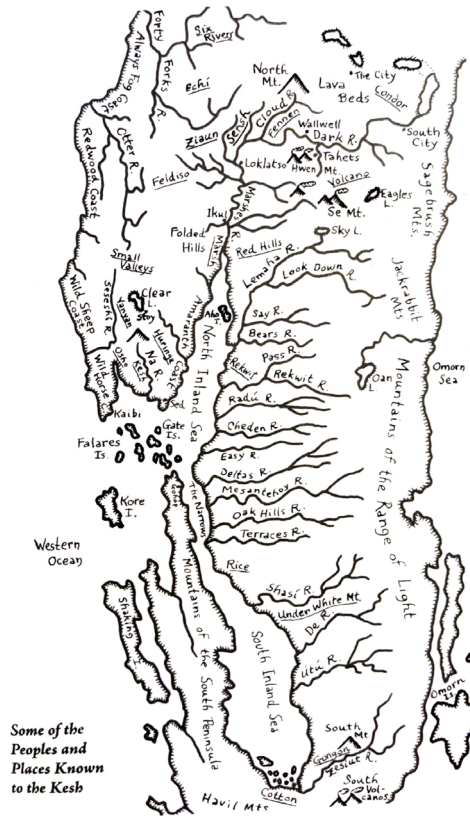
73
Le Guin, *Always Coming Home*, 471.

[F, 12]

[F, 13]

The siting of the house was determined by the ideal plan of the town—the heyiya-if figure. Each house made part of that pattern, an element of the Left Arm curving to meet the Right Arm of the five heyimas buildings at the Hinge of the Town—which was always running water or a well. The pattern was not neat or orderly (neither was the town), and nothing was in rows; yet the shape was there, and was felt, the interlocked curves springing from/returning to the center. In Kastóha-na and Telína-na there were several Left Arms, for to build so many houses in a single curve would either have crammed them together or strung them out inconveniently. The area within the loose curve of the houses, planted with some trees and perhaps containing a few sheds or booths, but mostly left open and mostly either muddy or dusty, was the common place of the town. The corresponding empty area within the curve of the five heyimas on the Right Arm of town was called the dancing place. But both places were common, and they danced in both.⁷³

The spiral figure itself appears to come from the land's geology, or rather its hydrology. The only "instructions" to trace it given in the text are that its center should be a source or point of running water, that its right arm should be formed by the five *heyimas* buildings, and its left arm(s) should be formed by houses. The frame of reference for determining left and right does not appear to be specified, but with Kesh maps being oriented toward the flow of water rather than absolute North (although they do note cardinal directions), we might assume that the direction of the spirals is informed by the flow of running water in the hinge, or the flow of the watershed more generally. Looking at the maps provided in the book, which were drawn by



Some of the People and Places Known to the Kesh
 Ursula K. Le Guin, *Always Coming Home*, 155.

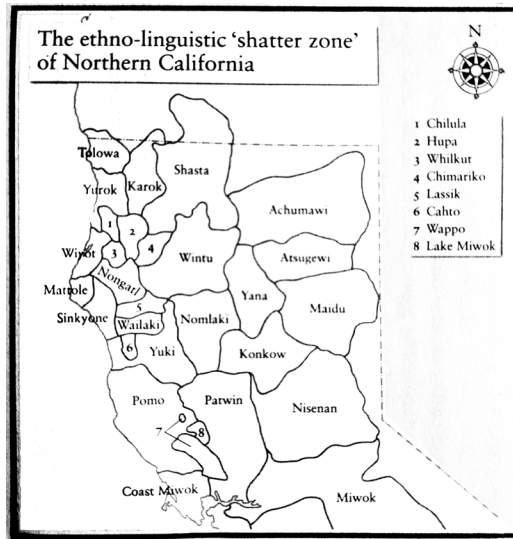
76
 Martin, *Utopia's Ghost*, 22.

77
 Le Guin, *Always Coming Home*, 472.

trality of a morally reforming authority; in Fourier it is the faith in a nascent industrial seriality that was to gradually take over the countryside to spread his socialist system; and in Le Corbusier it is the same faith in standardization, brought to its full modernist apotheosis to this time take over the city. In More's *Utopia*, this reveals “an irresolvable, internal tension between Utopian equality (and thus internal openness), as figured in the even, gridlike distribution of its fifty-four city states across the roughly circular island, and Utopian hierarchy (and thus power and inequity but also governmental authority), as figured in the added value attached to this central city, the capital city.”⁷⁶ Le Guin, in her project for creating a truly egalitarian utopia, makes this tension between equality and hierarchy a key theme. In *TD* it is exposed, but not solved, by the discomfort of Anarres’ residents at having to establish a larger capital city because of the environmental conditions on their planet. *ACH* comes much closer to a resolution.

First, while the *heyiya-if* regulates town planning, the greater territorial or inter-urban organization is let loose from utopian regularity, being instead based on the land and its hydrology. If towns vary in size or density, it is not for a concentration of power but out of purely environmental factors, or preference of the residents. The town of Wakwaha, for example, is larger than most, its hinge being the source of the whole Na River; but this makes its importance more spiritual than political, with its inhabitants being mostly visiting pilgrims or scholars, and instead of palatial houses “its Left Arm included five long, single-storey hostels.”⁷⁷

Second, the geometry of the *heyiya-if* is only meant to be followed loosely. For example, Tachas Touchas is seen as unconventional by the other inhabitants of the valley because



The [historical] ethno-linguistic 'shatter zone' of Northern California

Alfred Kroeber, *Handbook of the Indians of California*, 73.

78

Le Guin, 473.

79

Ibid.

[F, 14]

80

Le Guin, 149.

81

Le Guin, 276.

its houses “stood so close that they shared rain-gutters, in a tight curve, all facing inward”⁷⁸ (incidentally, the inturned quality of this tight curve, looking dangerously near to a closed circle and not an open spiral, is subject to disapproval outside the town). On the other hand, as we have seen, Kastóha-na and Telína-na have several left arms because their inhabitants preferred to avoid the higher density of Tachas Touchas, or because the site did not permit a long enough single curve. If even more distance between neighbors is preferred, the pattern can be stretched indefinitely, as Patience of Forty-Five Deer House notes in an oral history recorded by Pandora:

A lot of Chumo people don't live inside the town. It's a long-armed town, as they say. They have their houses out a long way from the common place, some of them, down along Chumo Creek and clear over to Rattlesnake Creek, near where the old town was before the fire.⁷⁹

Patience also recounts the order in which the town was built: “So they made the dancing place and danced on it, and dug and built the heyimas, and crossed the hinge at Chumo Creek, and made their town there.”⁸⁰ The *heyiya-if* encompasses flexibility in its very symbolism, with its central hinge representing change and transition. This makes it a diagram not only for building, but also for movement (noting again its parallel use in theater, as the form of the stage and also a choreographic and gestural element in dance). When Stone Telling leaves her town to go live with the Condor People, she departs by crossing the hinge; marriage processions cross the hinge; and people cross it every day to alternate between the domestic, dwelling half of the town and the communal, ritual half of the *heyimas*. The double spiral pattern separates towns into these two functions, but it also interlocks and joins them, recalling Pandora's comment that “a hinge connects and it holds apart.”⁸¹



Talismanic map of the Nine Towns on the River
Ursula K. Le Guin, *Always Coming Home*, 416.

82

Le Guin, 472.

83

Garlick and King, 'A Geography beyond the
Anthropocene', 10.

84

Garlick and King, 9.

Finally, unlike More's King Utopos, who dug a trench to separate Utopia from the mainland and make it a literal island, employing the *heyiya-if* implies less an act than a reaction. Or, to borrow Pandora's terminology, it implies a 'Hinge act.' The narrative being led by Pandora the anthropologist, rather than Utopos the philosopher-king, frames the diagram less as a prescription than as ingrained cultural knowledge of the Kesh, consciously followed by them but only gaining its orderliness when observed after the fact. We have seen in the passage above that if buildings followed a pattern, it "was not neat or orderly;" the most important was that "a house was oriented to the local terrain and lightfall—hillslopes, other houses, trees, creeks, shade and sun."⁸² The *heyiya-if* informs where a building should go; but the Kesh mode of existence as "constituent rather than master"⁸³ of their ecology, with their attachment, care and knowledge of the landscape and its inhabitants, is what determines where the building does go, and how. The pattern both guides this precise response to the landscape and emerges from it, making apparent the meaning of '*heyiya*' as 'connection.' The use of such a pattern for town planning, with its multiple layers of meaning in, out of, and through the story, aligns it with the "complex, multi-layered ways of thinking about place" that characterise indigenous mappings.⁸⁴

Utopia is Coming Home

85

Garlick and King, 7.

The authors make sure to nuance the kind of topophilia they are talking about as a kind of “*progressive* place-love,” in order to avoid the trap of a “problematic conflating of ‘landscape,’ ‘dwelling’ and notions of ‘homeland.’” Nationalist coopting is a risk that looms over any project of making utopia out of a particular land or place, but they argue convincingly that Le Guin’s open-ended (and self-reflective) approach is an unlikely target.

86

Clifford, *Returns*, 176.

87

Kroeber, *Handbook*, 12.

[F, 13]

88

Kroeber, 13.

89

Le Guin, *Always Coming Home*, 469.

ACH practices topophilia for survival, traces a ‘geography of love’ amidst its fictionalised future for northern California. It showcases the kind of literary innovation called upon to meet the onto-epistemological challenge of the Anthropocene. Given the difficult task of representing the scope of planetary ecological crisis and our means of response, *ACH* draws on encounters with place to muse on its future potential, and potential future.⁸⁵

What Ben Garlick and Liesl King call ‘topophilia,’ and anthropologist James Clifford a “transformed and rerooted indigeneity,”⁸⁶ are the central theme of *ACH*. while Garlick and King map out the different forms of attachment to the landscape that *ACH* mobilizes across its inter-species geography as a whole, we can now focus on the specific ecological niche that is the *house*.

The utopia of *Always Coming Home* is, as its title suggests, domestic. The simplest and clearest manifestation of rootedness in relation to architecture might appear in the Kesh custom of naming houses. This cultural element is one that Le Guin appears to have borrowed almost wholesale from the ‘original’ indigenous inhabitants of California, as Alfred Kroeber notes in 1925: “The habit of naming house sites appears to have been restricted to northwestern California. It is but one instance of many of the intensive localization of life in this region, of its deep rooting in the soil.”⁸⁷ Of course the names themselves and their toponymic formation is entirely fictional, as is the significance of this custom. Compare for example some of the Yurok house names listed by Kroeber: “Erkigeri (where they prepared for dancing);” “Ple’l (‘large,’ in which the Jumping dance was begun);” “Hokome’r (‘end’);” “Ma’a-wono (‘up-hill from Ma’a’);” or “Sepora (‘open place, flat’),”⁸⁸ with those listed by Pandora, such as “Rain Falling Straight Down House,” “Here With Its Back to the Vineyards House,” or “Danced the Sun a Hundred Times House.”⁸⁹ These names in both cases describe houses in rela-

tion to local natural features, or to more 'urban' features such as dancing places. In *ACH*, some names also commemorate events, such as "Rising Up from Where the Quarrel Ended."⁹⁰ Pandora also carefully observes that in small societies, language changes quickly, which makes many older names of places lose their meaning, becoming untranslated words that Kesh people have no interest in translating (although their archive system would make a translation relatively easy). This kind of toponymy makes names both a manifestation of "places and landscapes as containers of stories" and, with enough time, landscape features in themselves, as natural as "a rock, a piece of wood."⁹¹

Note, also, how these names are used by characters: Stone Telling says "my House," or "my household," to refer to her social relations, but never "my house" to refer to her dwelling-house as a place. It is always "High Porch House." In *ACH*, belonging does not relate to property, it relates to attachment. High Porch House is where her family lives, the Blue Clay *heyimas* where she meets her spiritual family, and she belongs to both of them, but neither are hers. The similarity with *TD*'s literally dispossessed language is clear, but the Tolkienesque invention of a language that Le Guin included in *ACH* adds many layers of nuance, and relationships of material owning and belonging are much more complex in the later work.

Time itself, for the Kesh, is domestic. Pandora's quest for a Kesh origin story leads her to Gather, the only "historically minded" person she meets. He is, in fact, an architectural historian. His obsession for style and quest for constant proportions in buildings recorded by the City of Mind's memory might color him as a somewhat old-fashioned architectural historian to our eyes, of the 19th century transcendentalist sort (betraying Le Guin's attachment to the Arts & Crafts movement of a markedly

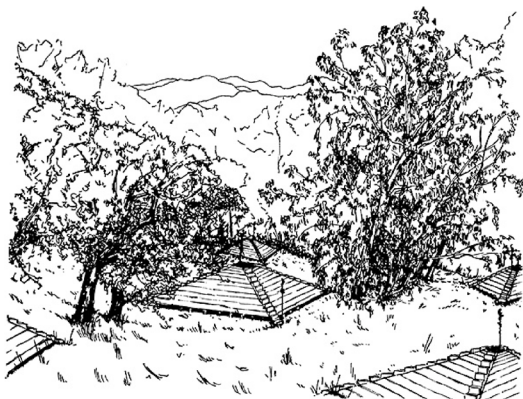
American inclination). But the Kesh, who live in a utopia at "the end of history"⁹² as we conceive it, have a very different conception of history, and 'old-fashioned' may not mean much to them.

"Well, ways always change. They never stay the same, even when they're very good ways, very beautiful, like that house, you know. They stopped building like that, but then maybe somebody else does it, in another time, another place..."

It's hopeless. He doesn't perceive time as a direction, let alone a progress, but as a landscape in which one may go any number of directions, or nowhere. He spatialises time; it is not an arrow, nor a river, but a house, the house he lives in. One may go from room to room, and come back; to go outside, all you have to do is open the door.⁹³ [H, 15]

As Clifford notes, "Le Guin's utopia is not smooth, perfect, or finished. The phrase 'always coming home' names an endless process of indigenization: a way of slowing down and going back, in order to move ahead, or sideways." Incidentally, this is how someone circulates in a house. Such a utopia reveals all its importance at a time when in "the real valley of Na, industrial vineyards continue their march across the hillsides, uprooting oak communities and disrupting animal habitats."⁹⁴

In an interview I had with Margaret Chodos-Irvine, she spoke of the process of making the illustrations for *Always Coming Home*. It was an intensely local process, spending several weeks at Le Guin's summer house in the Napa valley, "a humble ordinary farmhouse of the 1870s [that] was built of redwood – painted and papered as if it were mere pine or fir,"⁹⁵ with her and her family. Chodos-Irvine was already familiar with the flora and fauna of northern California from camping trips with her family, but this sojourn made her pay close attention to the place, in the manner of Kroeber and Le Guin.



The Heyimas of Sinshan
Illustration by Margaret Chodos-Irvine
Ursula K. Le Guin, *Always Coming Home*, 416.

96

Margaret Chodos-Irvine, *Illustrating Always Coming Home*, interview by Alexis Blais, videoconference, 7 December 2023.

97

Le Guin, 'Living in a Work of Art', 61.

98

Le Guin, *Always Coming Home*, 469.

[F, 12]

99

Le Guin, 'Living in a Work of Art', 62.

The list of illustrations that Le Guin required for the book was given to the illustrator by literally pointing out plants, hills and buildings in the landscape, for her to sketch on the spot. Other illustrations, such as those for *heyimas* and houses that did not exist yet, posed a challenge for her. Informed by her previous studies in anthropology, but admitting at being more proficient at thinking graphically in layers rather than in perspective, she let her imagination be guided by the *heyiya-if* pattern (originally drawn by Le Guin, and part of the process since the start) and by nature, with some of the few architectural illustrations showing only parts of a roof peeking through dense foliage. Even the oak and madrone wood used for the woodcut prints of some illustrations were sourced from the Valley, these endemic tree species recurring frequently in the names and stories of the Kesh.⁹⁶

Though it was not in the Valley, Le Guin was profoundly attached to her childhood home, designed by Bernard Maybeck, an Arts & Crafts architect who was influential in the movement's proliferation in California. While "the Great Man syndrome tells us that the Master's work is sacrosanct,"⁹⁷ she mischievously recounts how the house grew and changed along with her family, much like the Kesh houses that "burgeon and bulge and exfoliate like an old oak tree vastly gnarled and spacious."⁹⁸

I realise I may be causing real pain in describing the desecration of a unique Maybeck chalet and McLaren garden by an uncouth anthropologist, a Welsh carpenter, and a swarm of brats. I am sorry if this is so. It seems to me that we used both the house and the garden the best way we could. We used every inch of the house. We adapted ourselves to it and it to ourselves. We lived in it intensely and completely. We adored it and abused it as children do their mother. It was our house and we were its family. I think this is exactly what Maybeck had in mind when he built it. I hope so.⁹⁹

[H, 17]

[H, 18]

This kind of attachment is reflected everywhere in *ACH*, from Stone Telling's story of return to the numerous poems dedicated to houses, and to coming home. The oral history "Old Women Hating" is a cautionary tale where two households living on different floors of the same house are in conflict, which makes them neglect maintaining the house. The conflict is benign at first, but as the condition of the house worsens, and holes in the floor appear through which the hateful old women spy on each other, so does the animosity between the two families, until they start poisoning each other and eventually burn down the house. The somewhat happy resolution is with the two families separating, moving to different houses with the help of their neighbors and *heyimas* communities. High Porch House was built on the burnt house's foundations; well cared for and maintained by its occupants, it becomes a place of recurring reunion for Stone Telling and her kin.

Perhaps the new shape of utopia is a house, if it is cared for, and caring in return.

But Northern California, whether pre- or post-apocalyptic, is a seductive place to live in, with its lush greenery, constant sea breeze, and sparkling rivers. Is it fair to claim that utopia is home, if one already lives in utopia? The answer might come from outside *ACH*. In a lecture quoted by Le Guin in "A Non-Euclidean View," a similar question is asked and answered:

The importance of this question was forced upon me several years ago in a freshman comp course at the University of Texas at Arlington. I asked the class to write a paper in response to a hypothetical situation: if you had unlimited financial resources and total local, state, and national support, how would you transform Arlington, Texas into utopia? A few minutes after the class had begun to write, one of the students — a mature and intelligent woman

100

Le Guin, 'A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be', 9.

101

Le Guin, 19.

[H, 16]

in her late thirties — approached my desk. She seemed embarrassed, even upset. She asked, "What if I believe that Arlington, Texas, is utopia?"¹⁰⁰

Utopia, for Le Guin, has no center. It is only a direction. Her utopia points toward the Napa Valley, toward home; just as student in Texas might point toward Arlington.

Copernicus told us that the earth was not the center. Darwin told us that man is not the center. If we listened to the anthropologists we might hear them telling us, with appropriate indirectness, that the White West is not the center. The center of the world is a bluff on the Klamath River, a rock in Mecca, a hole in the ground in Greece, nowhere, its circumference everywhere.

Perhaps the utopist should heed this unsettling news at last. Perhaps the utopist would do well to lose the plan, throw away the map, get off the motorcycle, put on a very strange-looking hat, bark sharply three times, and trot off looking thin, yellow, and dingy across the desert and up into the digger pines.¹⁰¹

Perhaps the new shape of utopia is a house. Not because it is home, but because one may go from room to room, and come back. Like a house, the new shape of utopia has walls; but it must also have a door.

Conclusion

102

Clifford, *Returns*, 187.

The defining feature of utopia is to show and test new ways of organizing the world, but its importance is in imagining new ways of existing with the world, as it is. The methods of living and caring with each other and with the landscape that *ACH* mobilizes are, in a way, far from new. This is evident from Le Guin's reliance on Native American stories and traditions. As sensitive and well-informed as Le Guin's approach is, it is no substitute for the actual stories and traditions that Indigenous Californians have to share themselves. These people, despite severe repression from Western colonialism, still exist and persist, and they still have voices. For most of them, as Clifford reminds us, the world is far from utopian.¹⁰² But Le Guin, like Pandora, may act as a bridge, or indeed a door, between these voices which are still being muted, and the optimism embodied in the Western utopian tradition.

We have seen how Le Guin's cautious, sideways looking to the future does make it roots in a Western genealogy of utopia, from the truly optimistic socialism of the 'classic' utopians to the already less linear account of William Morris.

Many of her assumptions about labor and collectivity are legacies of this genealogy. More precisely, as we have seen by comparing her utopias to Kropotkin's predictions about future trends, they are the products of an early anarchist body of theory. Even *ACH*, far removed from a Western vision of society, is not free from these assumptions; yet this cross-contamination only makes stronger her critique of capitalist globalization.

We have seen, also, that this 'Western optimism' has, until recently at least, disappeared from architecture with a capital A. After the grand project of modernism showed that utopia, even once realized, fails to substantially alter patterns of capitalist development at the urban scale, there was a collective shift

away grand utopian narratives and toward postmodern fragmentary stories, collected from the bottom-up by an unheroic 'arrière-garde.'

Keeping to this unheroic position, as well as to the fragmentary stories of postmodernism, Le Guin's project has not been an attempt to recover a grand narrative, nor has it been a complete renouncing of the possibility of utopia. Rather, she has carefully gathered many such fragmentary stories to place them in a carrier bag, in "a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us."¹⁰³

Some of the things collected in her bag are architecture, or at least descriptions of architecture. Her *heyimas* invention is a fascinating new typology. Although literally rooted in the earth, it constitutes a network of social relations that transgresses geographic and urban boundaries. The method of town planning she imagines for the Kesh is equally fascinating; as a multi-layered symbol, the *heyiya-if* hinged spiral is at once an abstract planning diagram, a point of connection to the landscape, and a hinge between story and reader. Finally, domesticity permeates the narrative of *Always Coming Home*, as the recurring spatial analogy of the house, but also as an ongoing practice of care and return.

Building her utopia like a house, Le Guin opens the door and invites us in. We are free to roam from room to room, to admire their handmade wooden furnishings. We can peek outside from the tall windows, and see how badly the garden is burning. The rooms are comfortable, the smell of redwood emanating from the floors and walls is inviting. But we cannot stay. We are only visitors. Outside, there's a fire to put out.

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