‘Other ways to be’: Home, space and (un)belonging in the poetry of Ursula K. Le Guin

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ABSTRACT

Ursula K Le Guin’s writing, in poetry, fiction and expository prose, displays a carefully nuanced response to space and place. In many of her narratives, the protagonist journeys to a distant realm and then returns home via a complicated route, thus following a conventional quest structure. The theme of home – the place where one is welcome and at ease – is recomplicated, I suggest, in her later writings. In *Always coming home*, the “home” posited by the title is located, not in any definable place or time, but within a holistic appreciation for the interconnection of natural phenomena. In her later works, *Blue moon over Thurman Street* and *Out here: poems and images from Steens Mountain Country*, Le Guin and her collaborator, photographer Roger Dorband, take the interrogation of “home” still further until the volumes become intensive investigations of mutability and duration as well as familiarity and dislocation. Through Le Guin’s characteristic propensity for balance and equipoise, these volumes lead the reader to new understandings of self, place and (un)belonging.

Keywords: familiarity; unfamiliarity; polarities; Le Guin; poetry; space; feminist geography; ecocriticism.

Introduction

Ursula K Le Guin has written frequently, in the course of a career spanning many decades, about home and homecoming. The second page of *The dispossessed* summarises the theory of General Temporality as follows: ‘You can go home again, the General Temporal Theory asserts, so long as you understand that home is a place where you have never been’ (Le Guin 1974:1-2). In fact, the narrative trajectory

of *The dispossessed* takes the main protagonist "home" in two contradictory directions: Shevek's trip to Urras is a return to humanity's planet of origin, but, paradoxically, he leaves it to return "home", to Anarres, the planet of exile, with a sense of relief. Home, thus, possesses a double inflection: one stemming from the Odonians' exile from Urras, and the second from Shevek's personal journey to Urras and return to Anarres. On both counts, Shevek finds that his expectations are subverted by the unfamiliar elements that he encounters in each society.

Taking Shevek's experience in *The dispossessed* as my starting point, in this article I explore the dynamic balance between mutability and duration, familiarity and unfamiliarity in Le Guin's representation of home. Le Guin is known for her propensity to use the codes of representation in a 'widdershins' fashion (Suvin 1975). The *Merriam-Webster online dictionary* defines 'widdershins' as 'in a left-handed, wrong, or contrary direction' (Widdershins 2014). In terms of Le Guin's depiction of home, writing 'widdershins' means that she focuses on what is unfamiliar, even uncanny, in houses and homes instead of the expected focus on the familiar and comforting.

Despite the fact that the theme of home appears frequently in Le Guin's writing, it has not been widely explored in critical responses to her work. This article aims to fill this gap by focusing on three of Le Guin's multimedia texts: *Always coming home* (1986), *Blue moon over Thurman Street* (1993b) and *Out here: poems and images from Steens Mountain Country* (Le Guin & Dorband 2010). All three of these works are multi-generic and multimodal. *Always coming home* contains drawings, calligraphy, poetry, drama and a musical recording, while *Blue moon over Thurman Street* and *Out here* are collaborations involving poems and photography. Texts of this multi-generic nature demand to be read in a multimodal manner, in which, as Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2001) define it, 'common semiotic principles operate in and across different modes, and in which it is therefore quite possible for music to encode action, or images to encode emotion'. My use of multimodal reading in this article acknowledges that the textual components of evocations of home in Le Guin and Dorband coexist with the visual images, but that the "meaning" of these texts exceeds what can be understood from either one of these components alone. By exploring the way text and visual imagery combine in Le Guin's poetic treatment of home, my article will gauge how the dialectical synthesis between familiarity and unfamiliarity poses a challenge to conventional notions of situatedness, home, and origin.

The interrogation begins: *Always coming home*

Always coming home is eponymously, but multivalently, concerned with home and homecomings. After declaring in 'A First Note' that 'The people in this book might be going to have lived a long, long time from now in Northern California' (Le Guin 1986:xi), the text contains a tantalising foreword, entitled 'Towards an Archaeology of the Future', in which Pandora, the author-figure, proclaims that:

> The only way I can think to find [the Kesh people], the only archaeology that might be practical, is as follows: You take your child or grandchild in your arms, 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 (Le Guin 1986:4-5).

The privilege of the Foreword, together with these lines' resonance with the text's title, demands that they be given weight and attention as announcing the direction of the text's gaze and address. Home is not coterminous with the speaker, but located in an Other space and time. Pandora's spatio-temporal location is not-home, *unheimlich*, testifying to the sense of dislocation and alienation that has marked Western experience throughout the late twentieth century. Significantly, the only way to reach the utopian home towards which the novel directs its imaginative energy is through an act of imagination. Pandora longs for home, but it is a space and time that she has never experienced. In other words, her nostalgia is future-orientated instead of being directed towards the past. The same sentiments are expressed by Odysseus, the prototypical nostalgia patient, when he complains: 'all my days are consumed in longing – to travel home and see the day of my arrival dawn' (Homer 1992:75). Homer's *Odyssey* is a story of travel motivated by desire – Odysseus's desire for what he lacks in the narrative present (his homeland and his wife). Similarly, in *Always coming home*, Le Guin is spurred to imagine a socio-environmental 'home' in the future precisely because it is absent in the present. The home she invents is characterised by a dynamic balance of forces between humans and animals, culture and nature, technology, and living beings.

In order to understand the kinds of nostalgia expressed by Pandora and Odysseus, it is useful to turn to the Russian cultural theorist, Svetlana Boym. In her work, *The future of nostalgia* (2002), Boym recognises, in a way that resonates with Pandora's longing for an imaginary home, that nostalgia is an emotion without what TS Eliot would call an 'objective correlative … a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion' (in Cuddon 2000:605): it has

no object in the real world, for it is a 'longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed' (Boym 2002:13). She goes on to warn against the chimera-like dangers of nostalgia: 'The danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home with the imaginary one' (Boym 2002:16). Nevertheless, she distinguishes between two kinds of nostalgia based on the root words *nostos* and *algia*:

> … the restorative and the reflective. Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives in *algia*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming – wistfully, ironically, desperately (Boym 2002:xviii).

For Boym, restorative nostalgia allows the subject to progress towards the longed-for conditions. In this way, it serves the goals of utopia, which evokes a world where 'socio-political and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author's community' (Suvin 1975:49). Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, is less helpful because it delays change, keeping the sufferer stuck in the moment of longing and lack. She adds: 'This typology of nostalgia allows us to distinguish between national memory that is based on a single plot of national identity, and social memory, which consists of collective frameworks that mark but do not define the individual memory' (Boym 2002:17). *Always coming home* draws on the collective frameworks of anarchism, communitarian ethics and ecofeminism,[1] but still retains Le Guin's fondness for individuality, as has been argued elsewhere (see Sawyer 2006). It is, then, an instance of restorative nostalgia, with a widdershins spin on its creative attempt to recreate an imagined future home.

The primary narrative (amongst several) in *Always coming home* is Stone Telling's autobiography, which records a life journey conforming to Le Guin's (1993a:142-143) description of 'the Quest Theme' in her own writing:

> Most of my stories are excuses for a journey. (We shall henceforth respectfully refer to this as the Quest Theme.) I never did care much about plots, all I want is to go from A to B — or, more often, from A to A — by the most difficult and circuitous route.

In Le Guin's fiction, heroes such as Shevek, Genly Ai, Ged and Stone Telling go on quests, like Odysseus in *The Odyssey*, but find that the more important part of the journey is the return.[2] The return brings the experiencing self back to the point of origin; but the ambiguous recursivity of such returns is repeatedly emphasised in narratives within the text (such as 'Dangerous People', featuring the absent Whette, who moves in spirals without ever arriving). The impulse towards Boym's restorative nostalgia may attempt to return to the historical past, but will always run up against

1. Ecofeminism has been defined in a number of ways by critics, but all agree that it explores the intersecting oppression of women and nonhuman nature. See, for example, Gaard and Murphy (1998:2).

2. These characters feature prominently in Le Guin's fictions. Shevek is the protagonist of *The dispossessed* (1974); Genly Ai is the narrator-protagonist of *The left hand of darkness* (1969); and Ged is the primary male protagonist in *The Earthsea quartet* (1993c).

deferral, *différance*, and must eventually concede that return is impossible. Writing the history of a future that has not yet happened, as Le Guin does in *Always coming home*, only serves to emphasise the fragility of that future and its contingency upon present choices.

The home that is desired in *Always coming home* is an ontological orientation towards the world, rather than a geo-spatial location. It is characterised by a vision of wholeness:

> It was the network, field, and lines of the energies of all the beings, stars and galaxies of stars, worlds, animals, minds, nerves, dust, the lace and foam of vibration that is being itself, all interconnected, every part part of another part and the whole part of each part, and so comprehensible to itself only as a whole, boundless and unclosed (Le Guin 1986:290-91).

This image of an interconnected network of forces recalls David Harvey's (2004) relational notion of space-time, in which

> An event or a thing at a point in space cannot be understood by appeal to what exists only at that point. It depends upon everything else going on around it (although in practice usually within only a certain range of influence). A wide variety of disparate influences swirling over space in the past, present and future concentrate and congeal at a certain point to define the nature of that point.

In Kesh cosmology, similar to Harvey's relational space-time, each part has its place within the whole, and is connected meaningfully with the other parts and with the larger whole. This powerfully evokes the central tenets of ecocriticism, summarised by Dana Phillips as: 'everything is connected to everything else' (cited in Terblanche 2012:30; original emphasis). In emphasising space as connection, Le Guin also demonstrates affinities with feminist geography, which explores, among other themes, the social networks of spatial behaviour (see, for example, Johnson 2012:346-47).[3]

Intimations of mutability: *Blue Moon over Thurman Street*

The theme of home is also featured in Le Guin's first collaboration with photographer Roger Dorband. The volume, titled *Blue moon over Thurman Street*, is a visual and poetic tribute to Thurman Street in Portland, Oregon, where Le Guin lives. The street begins in the industrial district of Portland, travels up a gradual slope through suburban areas, and ends in Forest Park on the side of a mountain. The multimodal text follows the same trajectory, offering a documentary on the urban scenes to

3. Feminist geography is defined in a variety of heterogeneous ways. Karen Dias and Jennifer Blecha (2007) offer an overview of some of the more influential conceptions of the discipline. In this article, I am working with a notion of feminist geography as 'perspectives that draw on feminist politics and theories to explore how gender relations and geographies are mutually structured and transformed' (Pratt in Dias & Blecha 2007:2).

which it bears witness. Dorband has used black and white photography, foregrounding the text's distance from reality by frustrating any expectations of direct representation. The choice not to use colour emphasises what Ariella Azoulay calls the 'civil contract of photography': what is included (or foregrounded) and what is excluded (or de-emphasised) is more conspicuous in this medium. In syncronicity with Azoulay's insights, Le Guin and Dorband focus on the excluded or 'abandoned' (Azoulay 2008:65), which, like her, they identify as women and womanhood. Their reinsertion of women into the urban space is most vivid in the visual and verbal texts that focus on the suburban section of Thurman Street. These include several meditations on houses and the way 'house' overlaps with "home" but is not synonymous with it. Le Guin's poetic treatment of houses portrays them, first, as spaces of imaginative portent. In this way, it resonates with a number of theoretical perspectives. For Gaston Bachelard (1969:6), houses hold pride of place as intimate spaces in the poetic imagination. They are the original and privileged repositories of memories of childhood: 'the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind [*sic*]'. Although Bachelard's usage is resolutely androcentric ('mankind'), the image of the house is a common metaphor for women's psyche, as Alicia Ostriker notes (1986:53). Irma du Plessis (2010) emphasises the intersection of race, class and gender in her feminist analysis of the political space of the family: 'Die ruimte van die huishouding en die gesin is 'n etiese ruimte, en daarom 'n diep politiese ruimte' ('The space of the household and the family is an ethical space, and thus a deeply political space').[4] In a similar vein, Le Guin (1993b: 82) uses the metaphor of international relations to evoke the political dimensions of home: 'A house … rearranges organs / is repartitioned / as often as Poland'. In 'Housewife', Le Guin (1993b:92) explicitly associates womanhood with domesticity in a way that plays into stereotypical gendered assumptions of the house as women's domain:

> Doorway I call you
> Door of the mystery
> Woman I call you
>
> Stronghold
> Householder
> Lifehold
> Womanhouse
> Housewoman
> Housewife

4. My own translation.

Blue moon over Thurman Street contains several references to doorways, thresholds and liminality.[5] The penultimate poem in the volume opens: 'Ever more mysterious / grow the doorways' (Le Guin 1993b:110), while the poem 'Doorway between' ends with a quotation from the *Bhagavad-Gita*: 'All being is seen between / two unseens' (Le Guin 1993b:50), which is repeated later in the volume (Le Guin 1993b:92). These collocations between different texts in the same volume indicate that doorways are important, calling our attention to the liminal zones between being and non-being. So when the housewife is called 'Doorway', the word is used as an honorific, bearing witness to women's role as the custodians of threshold zones, passages, and transformations from one state to another. In this way, while acknowledging that many of the women who live in houses on Thurman Street may be housewives and domestic hosts, Le Guin avoids the pejorative connotations of this description, bestowing dignity and integrity on it instead. The poem revisions patriarchal stereotypes of a woman as confined to the domestic realm, by ascribing power to the housewife and stature to the space she inhabits. To this extent, Le Guin's treatment of space exhibits affinities with radical geography's understanding of the 'spanning tussen enersyds die landskap as natuur, of fisiese ruimte, wat onafhanklik van die subjek bestaan, en andersyds hoe die subjek daardie ruimtelikheid beleef' ('tension between, on the one hand, landscape as nature, or physical space, which exists independently of the subject, and, on the other, the way the subject experiences that spatiality') (Bezuidenhout 2013:14).[6] In addition, she exhibits a feminist geographer's response to emplacement, recognising that 'physical and social spaces and places have been socially constructed to reflect and reinforce unequal gendered social relations' (Dias & Blecha 2007:2). These meanings are reinforced by the photograph accompanying 'Housewife', dominated by a magnificent spreading tree in the foreground and a view of an imposing balcony ringed with white railings on an evidently large, well-established house.

By foregrounding spreading lines, such as those of the branches and the railings around the balcony, the photograph implies that the woman, like the house and tree, is substantial, secure and well-founded.

By contrast with the solidity of the woman's presence in 'Housewife', the untitled poem 'A house stands …' (Le Guin 1993b) offers an extended meditation on mutability in houses, while suggesting that home does not change as much as houses do. The final stanza of the poem is accompanied by a photograph which, like the photograph accompanying 'Housewife', includes a tree.

5. Doorways are frequently mentioned in the volume, most especially in the poems on pages 50, 67, 92 and 110. The penultimate poem in the volume opens: 'Ever more mysterious / grow the doorways' (Le Guin 1993b:110).

6. My own translation.

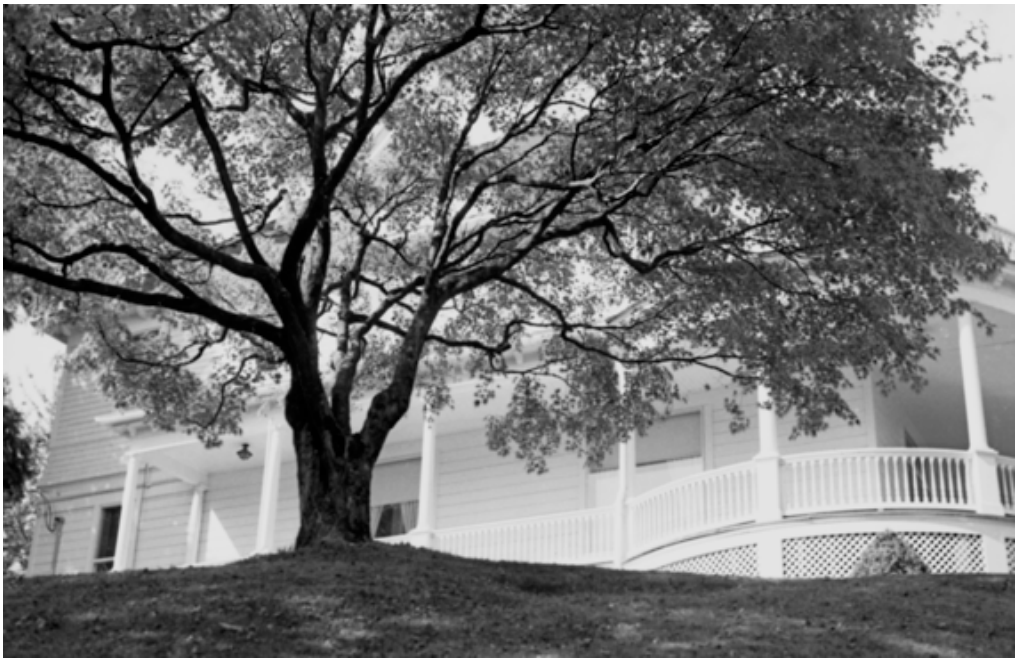

FIGURE **Nº 1**

Page 95 of *Blue Moon over Thurman Street* (Le Guin 1993b:95). Reproduced with kind permission from Roger Dorband.

FIGURE **Nº 2**

Page 95 of *Blue Moon over Thurman Street* (Le Guin 1993b:87). Reproduced with kind permission from Roger Dorband.

This photograph, like several others in the volume, foregrounds the contrast between the natural and the built environments. The contrast is evident in various other distinctions: between the dark, vertical tree trunks and the white walls of the house; between the organic, slightly oblique lines of the trees, and the geometric rectangles of the built environment, represented by the windows. At the same time, the house is recognisably built of wood, echoing the living wood of the trees.[7] The viewer looks through the tree trunks, as through a portal, and through the windows into the traces of human life within the house. The interior of the house is depicted as a space of confinement, at a distinct remove from the natural world, as represented by the trees. The accompanying poem reads:

> What does a house
> hold?
> Sometimes a fullness
> of shadows.
> Light lies outside
> on patterns of glass
> and wood more fragile
> yet. And there are
> forgettings. The held,
> The kept, the lost,
> The leafshadows (Le Guin 1993b:82-86).

While the building in the photograph is designed for durability, the poem focuses on mutability and ephemerality. Ultimately, the poem resonates with Bachelard's (1969:6) insight that houses embrace different temporal epochs: 'Past, present and future give the house different dynamisms, which often interfere, at times opposing, at others, stimulating one another'. Le Guin (1993b:86) concludes that the house's meaning resides within its inhabitants' relationship to objects and time: 'The held, / The kept, the lost, / The leafshadows'. 'Held,' 'kept' and 'lost' refer, Bachelard-like, to people, objects and memories, but these, Le Guin suggests, are even more ephemeral and susceptible to change than leaves and the shadows they cast. There is a resolute refusal of nostalgia in these lines, which exemplify what Le Guin refers to as the *Bhagavad-Gita*'s 'austere tenderness': the poem takes note of the way phenomena shift modes and pass away, but does not offer comfort for their inevitable loss. In Boym's terms, both 'restorative nostalgia' and 'reflective nostalgia' are revealed as longing for what was always already slipping away.

7. Le Guin has called herself 'the most arboreal science fiction writer' (Freedman 2008:13).

Blue moon over Thurman Street addresses the theme of home indirectly, through its poetic and visual investigation of the trope of the house. The signifiers 'house' and 'home' are related in a similar way to Yi-fu Tuan's 'space' and 'place: Tuan (1977:6) explains: 'What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value'. In other words, while space is characterised by physical markers, place is identified by its meaning to the experiencing subject. In an analogous way, a house is a building, but home is known by the experiences of its inhabitants. Le Guin and Dorband do not offer comforting images of firesides, hearths or family scenes for the reader. Instead, there are incongruous images of armchairs on lawns (Le Guin 1993b:82) and images of outer façades of houses with only the faintest traces of human life within. The final impression left on the reader is that there is no abiding or comforting sense of familiarity to return to: instead, all is change, even on a street that is imbued with familiarity for both photographer and author.

Outer and inner space: *Out here*

The title of *Out here*, Le Guin and Dorband's multimodal eulogy to the Steens Mountain Country in Southeast Oregon, juxtaposes distance and proximity, implying that the solidly rooted presence of "here" is also "way out", distant and unfamiliar. Le Guin acknowledges this productive tension, which is at the heart of the volume, in her Foreword (Le Guin 2010:10): 'once you get here, it's as here as a place can be: a landscape that is immensely and intensely vivid, present. But still, it's *out* here. Distance is inherent in its presence'. Like *Always coming home* and *Blue moon over Thurman Street*, *Out here* is an irreducibly composite work, comprising three different genres: poetry, photographs, and sketches. All of these modes combine in praise of an unfamiliar, unhomely environment. Implicitly, Le Guin and Dorband ask, throughout *Out here*, 'How can a barren, inhumanly strange landscape be "homed" and made part of ordinary human existence?' Part of the reason may lie in Dorband's affinity with the work of the environmentalist and photographer Eliot Porter, himself a devotee of Walter Thoreau's nature writing. Porter was a founder member of the Sierra Club, which campaigned, at times radically, for the preservation of unspoilt wild spaces (Solnit 2002). Porter used photography as 'a propaganda device, and a weapon for the defense of the environment … and therefore for the fostering of a healthy human race' (Solnit 2002:32). Part of the intention in compiling *Out here* is to encourage a full, multimodal appreciation of wild, sparsely inhabited spaces as a means to enlarging human imagination. Like Porter, in the midst of a vast desert, Dorband combines an appreciation of space

with attention to detail. The emptiness of the landscape is captured in several panoramic photographs, but it is evoked through sharp focus on small details, which, in photographs of brush and reeds, accumulate to provide a broad spatial sweep. In these works, Dorband's judicious use of focus and colour brings the reader to appreciate the paradoxical richness and ordinariness of the life-forms that inhabit Steens Mountain Country.

The first poem in the volume, 'High desert' (Le Guin 2010), announces the central paradoxes of the volume by pointing to movement and stillness, slowness and speed, apparent emptiness and small signs of life. The poem asserts firmly that 'Out here, there is another way to be' (Le Guin 2010:15; the line is repeated three times, with minor variations). This line places the human observer, the implied subject of 'be', into the landscape, demanding that they embrace the unfamiliar elements of silence and slowness as constituents of 'here'. 'Here' includes rocks, trees, quail, owls, and a hawk, which are defamiliarised as different from the built environment that makes up familiar, urban existence. 'High desert' invokes different existential modes in the same way as Le Guin's (1989) utopian essay, 'A non-Euclidean view of California as a cold place to be', which is also structured around dynamic opposition. Yin and yang are the pivotal polarities of the essay and Le Guin (1989:90) mentions that '[o]ur civilization is now so intensely yang that any imagination of bettering its injustices or eluding its self-destructiveness must involve a reversal'. 'Yang' energy is '[b]right, dry, clear, strong, firm, active, aggressive, lineal, progressive, creative, expanding, advancing, and hot' (Le Guin 1989:90). Le Guin (1989:90) proposes that the opposite, 'yin' energies, which are 'dark, wet, obscure, weak, yielding, passive, participatory, circular, cyclical, peaceful, nurturant, retreating, contracting, and cold', may provide an antidote to the race for success, progress and dominance that structures the West. The poem 'High desert', with its interest in the small, the slow and the silent, articulates the same creative impulse away from sensationalism and impact as 'A non-Euclidean View of California' in that both texts express dissatisfaction with the dominant modes of action and interaction, and both propose alternatives. The tree, rocks, owl, and quail in the poem do not aspire to win or achieve anything. Their goal is the simplicity of being, and in continuing, they provide a model for 'another way to be' — the 'cold' form of existence posited in the earlier essay. With its subtle echoes of phrases, lines and words, and rhymes that are not quite complete, the poem emphasises how the dialectical tension between familiarity and strangeness, movement and stillness, can bring about 'another way to be' which is more salutary than the customary human modes of existence.

Later in the volume, the long poem evocatively entitled 'Malheur Cave' (Unhappiness Cave) (Le Guin 2010) provides the volume's most vivid enactment of spatial disorientation. The following lines exemplify Le Guin's (2010:47) poetic method:

> But this is still only the anteroom
> I look back there's the unlidded eye
> the arc of dazzle already far away
> but what is far what is away
> under the rock inside the dirt
> where here is only here
> The lid is over me
> because I'm going on to learn
> the pupil of this dark eye

As the speaker moves deeper into the cave, her disorientation increases (Le Guin 2010:48):

> I don't know what it is that I don't see
> This silent stale dirty darkness is
> a place. A place to be. A place I am.
> A hearsay arch of red and gold
> designs of blinded fire overhead
>
> When I was there my little light
> only showed how dark ate light
> and now I'm here I have no light
> but mind's eyes in the cave of skull

With only a remembered guidebook to direct her, the speaker finds that the experience within is profoundly different from a tourist attraction. Progressive visual deprivation is signalled by the poem's repeated references to eyes, lids, and pupils. Even the cave entrance resembles an eye in its capacity to allow light in. The line 'the pupil of this dark eye' also represents the speaker as a learner, learning what selfhood can mean in the absence of visual orientation. This leads her to reflect on the necessity of light for vision; and of both light and vision for spatial and existential situatedness. Without light, the speaker is claustrophobically confined to her own thoughts: 'mind's eyes in the cave of skull'. The skull is smaller, but no less oppressive than the cave. She is thrown back onto unconventional methods of locating herself:

first, she recognises that the cave is ‘a place’ among other places, rather than a non-place as it might seem to be in the absence of light. Then she notes that living things can ‘be’ in it, and finally she asserts that she is firmly in this subterranean place, which offers the opposite experience of nearly all other places.

The poem refers repeatedly to light, its absence, and to the capacity of darkness to create a disorientating environment. These references attest, in a similar way to the speaker’s obsession with the lack of water in TS Eliot’s ‘What the thunder said’ (Eliot 2014, lines 10-16), to the centrality of light for humans, who are dependent on visual cues. The visual deprivation the speaker experiences in the cave is structurally likened to the visually overwhelming empty spaces of the desert of Steens Mountain Country. Light also forms the focus of one of the volume’s few photographs of interiors.

This photograph, although depicting a recognisable human structure, defamiliarises it in a number of ways. The barn’s emptiness echoes the emptiness of the vast desert spaces depicted in Dorband’s photographs of the panoramic vistas of Steens Mountain Country: but an empty human habitation is more unpredictable, more likely to surprise the viewer into a second look, than an empty desert. The uniformity of the wooden walls, floor, and roof provide another source of estrangement, while the spots of light throughout the structure, which may be caused by holes in the barn, remind the viewer that light is the only way humans can see inside the barn, around the desert, or see anything at all. The defamiliarising effect of the photograph is mitigated, nevertheless, by the terminus of the back wall. Like many other phenomena in Steens Mountain Country, the barn offers ‘another way to be’, even for buildings.

The visual trope of sight continues in two photographic references to eyes: the photograph that accompanies ‘Malheur Cave’ and a visual echo in the photograph of the lake.

The photograph of the entrance to Malheur Cave is the only photograph in in the volume to appear, monochrome, emphasising the dramatic contrast between light and dark, or between knowing where one is and complete disorientation. The dark, slightly textured floor of the cave leads the viewer’s eye towards the brightly lit aperture, accentuating the appeal of light to one who has been lost in the dark, but the light that floods into the photograph through the opening is blinding, suggesting that the cave visitor may be as disorientated by an excess of light as she has been by its absence.

The photograph of the lake also suggests an eye, particularly in its oval shape, startling deep blue shades and the line of cliffs that edge it on the top right. The

FIGURE **Nº 3**

Page 89 of *Out here: poems and images from Steens Mountain Country* (Le Guin & Dorband 2010:89). Reproduced with kind permission from Roger Dorband.

viewer's gaze is led towards the lake by the diagonal lines of the bushes and by the flat line of the horizon, above which lies a much paler blue sky, a less intense version of the lake's azure. The lake dwarfs the cliffs, making them appear no higher than a small ridge in the ground, and it is only on looking closer that their height is seen. The effect of the photograph is to surprise and impress the viewer with the intense colours and dramatic shapes within an apparently empty landscape. Dorband forces the viewer to look more than once at the scene in order to appreciate its intensity, grandeur, and scale. The 'eyes' in the cave photograph, and the lake photograph, are both inhuman, and they both metaphorically reinforce the way looking carefully at natural phenomena can deepen perception.

'Malheur Cave' records a process during which the speaker moves from knowing where she is to being utterly lost and having to rely on unfamiliar and unusual

FIGURE **Nº 4**

Page 53 of *Out here: poems and images from Steens Mountain Country* (Le Guin & Dorband 2010:52). Reproduced with kind permission from Roger Dorband.

methods of finding her way. This leads to an expanded understanding of self through the mechanisms of self-orientation and location. In the same way, Rebecca Solnit asserts that getting lost is an inspirational moment. She explains in *A field guide to getting lost*: 'Leave the door open for the unknown, the door into the dark. That's where the most important things come from, where you yourself came from, and where you will go' (Solnit 2006:6). The experience of disorientation, for Solnit, allows the individual to understand ultimate matters such as origins and destinations. But even 'origin' and 'destination' are spatial metaphors, pointing to life as a journey in the same way as the recurrent quest motif in Le Guin's fiction. Finding oneself, for Solnit, involves accepting that 'the dark' or non-being is both the origin and the destination of human life. Or, as le Guin (1993b:50, 92) quotes in *Blue moon over Thurman Street*, 'all being is seen between two unseens'. While light and vision lend definition and a sense of solid location, darkness and the unknown, Le Guin and Solnit suggest, are finally larger and more important for (self-)discovery and creativity.

FIGURE **Nº 5**

Page 42 of *Out here: poems and images from Steens Mountain Country* (Le Guin & Dorband 2010:43). Reproduced with kind permission from Roger Dorband.

Conclusion

For Le Guin, as for many feminist theorists, "home" is a profoundly gendered space. She pays attention to the patriarchal propensity to confine women in houses and then forget about them in a number of poems, but, specifically in 'Read at the award dinner' (Le Guin 1999), she warns that this is a dangerous strategy that may bring about wildness instead of the desired domesticity:

> For the housewife will fill the house with lions
> and in with the grandmother
> come bears, wild horses, great horned owls, coyotes.
> (Le Guin 1999:11).

The home that houses a surprisingly lion-loving housewife, I argue, links the houses depicted in *Blue moon over Thurman Street*, with the great expanse of Steens Mountain Country, depicted in *Out here*. Both spaces harness and hold in tension what is familiar and unchanging together with *unheimlich* aspects of threatening strangeness. As there can be nothing known without evoking the unknown, Le Guin's and Dorband's multimodal understanding of space must be understood by exploring balanced oppositions in their work, such as yin and yang, culture and nature, self and other, human and animal, but most particularly the dialectical tension between the known and the unknown. As 'Malheur Cave' demonstrates, when the self is deprived of its familiar strategies of self-recognition and self-knowledge, it can, nevertheless, assert firmly that here is 'a place I am', which means that the self is home.

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