

Rising Continents: An Ecocritical Reading of Ursula K. Le Guin's

"The New Atlantis"

J. R. Burgmann

The trouble is, we've all let ourselves become part of the killer story, and so we may get finished along with it. Hence it is with a certain feeling of urgency that I seek the nature, subject, words of the other story, the untold one, the life story.¹

Ursula K. Le Guin

"The New Atlantis" is an interesting artefact in the oeuvre of Ursula K. Le Guin. To start with, it constitutes one of her few forays into the novella form; along with *Always Coming Home* (1985), the narrative takes place not only on Earth, but in her hometown of Portland, Oregon. "The New Atlantis" has received little scholarly interest since its publication in 1975, which is rather perplexing given that it so saliently envisages contemporary eco-social issues, including anthropogenic climate change (potentially making it a very

early example of cli-fi). It thus seems reasonable to approach the text from an ecocritical angle. Within ecocriticism there are various positions germane to “The New Atlantis,” namely: deep ecology, ecofeminism, and social ecology. Specifically, I intend to evaluate Le Guin’s text through the rubrics of ecocriticism—Wilderness; Animals; Dwelling; Apocalypse; Pastoral; Future of the Earth, as defined by Gred Garrard in *Ecocriticism*.

Le Guin’s prose—like that of Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing, David Mitchell, and Kim Stanley Robinson—departs from certain conventions of science fiction. Where the genre had gone through multiple paradigms—Wells versus Verne; the pulp fanzine start-ups of the 1920s and 30s headed by Hugo Gernsback and John Wood Campbell, Jr; the subsequent Hard SF/Soft SF dichotomy—the aforementioned authors, instead, prioritise literary *form* over a scientific *novum*. Though experimentalism and formal innovation are the defining features of New Wave science fiction, Le Guin identifies such circumventions as a response, not only to previous conventions of science fiction, but also to the traditionally male dominion of storytelling:

“Technology,” or “modern science” . . . is a heroic undertaking . . . conceived of as a triumph, hence ultimately as tragedy. The fiction embodying this myth will be, and has been, triumphant (man conquers earth, space, aliens, death, the future, etc.) and tragic (apocalypse, holocaust, then or now). If, however, one avoids the linear, progressive, Time’s-(killing)-arrow mode of the Techno-Heroic, and redefines technology and science as primarily cultural . . . science fiction can be seen as a far less rigid, narrow field . . . and in fact less a mythological genre than realistic one.²

“The New Atlantis” is a clear case in point: time is neither linear nor progressive, since, as Elizabeth Cummins observes, Le Guin espouses a harmonious structure of “alternating sections; six sections are from the journal of Belle . . . and six told [in italics] by the collective voice of the ocean people.”³ Set in the near future, it tells the story of Belle, who, riding the bus home from a *government* holiday, hears of a continent rising from the ocean due to tectonic forces (meanwhile global warming and melting of polar ice caps melt has flooded Manhattan). When she eventually arrives home the city is amidst a blackout. She lights a candle and spots what she believes to be a stranger in her bed; but it is her husband, Simon, returned from a period in a government education camp. They lie in bed and imagine a better future. Thus, he and a likeminded group of friends, hidden in their apartment, endeavour to develop a technology (solar power) that could free society from the totalitarian government’s control and energy ra-

tioning. This, which they achieve, puts the group in great peril. By the dénouement, when Belle (in a time when love is prohibited by the State) sets out to save her re-imprisoned black-market-married husband, the italicised, metaphysical sequences have come to illuminate the view of the sunken peoples of a Utopian Atlantis, who peer up through the ceiling of the ocean at a dystopia. Though Le Guin declared in 1982 that *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971) and “The New Atlantis” were “among the saddest things I’ve written, the nearest to not being hopeful, and they’re set right here [Portland],”⁴ there is a hopeful symmetry within. One reading—which adheres to the ecocritical vision of pastoral harmony, “of nature as a stable, enduring counterpoint to the disruptive energy and change of human societies”⁵—is that while the dystopian western coastline of America is sinking, a potential Utopia is rising from the ocean floor. It is in these ascending, italicised passages that the deep ecological might reside.

Wilderness, Animals, and Dwelling

In the first sentence of “The New Atlantis” Belle, the protagonist, is returning to the city from Wilderness Week,⁶ thus dialectically returning to an *anti*-wilderness. However, so denatured is this future State that Belle reflects: “there were actually a lot more green picnic tables and cement Men’s and Women’s than there were trees.”⁷ Where Le Guin has previously used wilderness to invert normative social values—such as in the matriarchal short story “Solitude,” wherein “girls come of age they form part of an auntring, but boys must go off to join adolescent packs and scratch a living in the wilderness”⁸—“The New Atlantis” more so confounds gender roles. Absent are the male spaces, old world wilderness of the frontier,⁹ and the peculiarly male *sublime*. Instead, (post)humans suffer in common; women acquiesce to “Watch Those Surplus Calories! Day”¹⁰ and cultish vacations to commune and partake in organised sports; equally, men like Simon, suffer the cruelties of torture, “nasty rumors about deaths from illness in the Rehabilitation Camps and the federal Medical Association Hospitals.”¹¹

When Le Guin envisioned the world of ‘O’ from *A Fisherman of The Inland Sea* (1994), she developed complex sexual-relations charts: “I like thinking about complex social relationships which produce and frustrate highly charged emotional relationships.”¹² Such a two-tiered nuance is palpable in “The New Atlantis,” since governance appears to have retained a patriarchal superstructure, while within the monitored (the FBI is always spying) “privacy” of homes, interrelations between men and women are sterile, unaffected by notions of the gendered subject. Note the de-sexualised, albeit loving, gaze of Belle when attending to the traumatised

Simon:

He had lost about 20 pounds. As he only weighed 140 to start with, this left little to go on with. His knees and wrist bones stuck out like rocks under the skin. His feet were all swollen and chewed-looking from the Camp boots; he hadn't dared take the boots off, the last three days of walking, because he was afraid he wouldn't be able to get them back on. When he had to move or sit up so I would wash him, he shut his eyes.¹³

Simply, Le Guin's prose strives to neuter language, discarding eco- or bio-semiotic binaries: the masculine as wild, rough, rugged, broad, and hard; the feminine as soft, bare, gentle, and beautiful. Not once does she revert to such a chain of signification in rendering her characters. Thus, when Belle arrives home to *that* unexpected stranger on her bed, the initial gaze is personal (or facial), yet tellingly asexual: "but I knew his eyebrows, then the breadth of his closed eyelids, then I saw my husband."¹⁴ Le Guin discernibly allies Atwood, who, Christina Ljungberg observes, "radicalizes the boundary between nature and culture by juxtaposing it to the one between the Self and the Other, in terms of both cultural and personal identity formation."¹⁵ However, Le Guin insists on further altering roles, for ultimately it is Belle who ventures frontier-wards, as it were, in search of her reincarcerated husband. Vera L. Norwood explains that antiquated, "[m]asculine culture in America characteristically sees wilderness as a place for defining virility, for playing out aggressive, adventure-seeking, sometimes violent impulses," which "feeds the achievement-oriented male psyche, enabling men to return to civilization and improve culture."¹⁶ Certainly, Belle's arc dismantles this eco-social model of masculinity, particularly in relation to wilderness and settler culture. Furthermore, Cummins similarly asserts: "Belle is presented, not as the female principle, but as a unique woman. Le Guin sees in her the courage, vision, and artistry of a great voyager."¹⁷ So, it is here in the polluted biosphere of an eco-dystopian that gender distinctions are de-privileged by a declining nature-culture nexus, and transposed to the urban where, to quote Le Guin, phallic stories of "the sticks and spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things"¹⁸ can no longer be told.

Le Guin explains in "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" that she is the adherent of "a new story."¹⁹ Well, what might these "new" stories entail? Simply put, they oppose the monomythical cycle hypothesised by Joseph Campbell, since "instead of heroes they have people in them."²⁰ Naturally, the animal kingdom is ontologically parred with humanity, the distinction withdrawn; logically, if Le Guin's work is post-animal, then it is necessarily

posthuman. For Belle, a week in the forest surrounded by an electrified fence offers no sightings, where “[t]he forest ranger talked about mountain jays . . . but I didn’t see any.”²¹ As Jacques Derrida’s challenge to the *sign* “The Animal” implies—through which humans have “given to themselves . . . at the same time according themselves, reserving for them . . . the right to the word . . . to a language of words, in short to the very thing that the others in question would be deprived of”²²—such anthropocentrism suggests that all purported bonds between humans and animals are, at their very essence, anthropomorphic. One need only recall the notable examples in American letters of Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851) or Hemingway’s bulls in *Death in the Afternoon* (1932) to witness this; here, the animal *referents* hold *signification* only insofar as they reflect the human. On the contrary, Le Guin promulgates a system of ideas not dissimilar to that of the deep ecology branch of ecocriticism, which calls for a recognition of intrinsic value in nature.²³ In this spirit, the italicised passages in “The New Atlantis” attempt to reconstruct a connate line between *all* creatures and objects in a complex network of relations:

Delicately and easily the long curving tentacle followed the curves of the carved figure, the eight petal-limbs, the round eyes. Did it recognize its image?

*The living one swung suddenly, gathered its curves in a loose knot, and darted away down the street, swift and sinuous. Behind it a faint cloud of darker blue hung for a minute and dispersed, revealing again the carved figure above the door: the sea-flower, the cuttlefish sign, carved on a thousand walls, worked into the design of cornices, pavements, handles, lids of jewel boxes, canopies, tapestries, tabletops, gateways.*²⁴

Although this paragraph is hermeneutically “loose,” Le Guin is clearly placing objects and living things in a broad, flattened ecosystem. She casts human-made objects alongside the *natural* in a synthetic web, where *referents* approximate an inherent value.

Of course, such a notion is an aporia if only humans construct meaning through *semiosis*. Moreover, and as Garrard notes, “[o]ne major, recurrent objection to deep ecology is that eco-centrism is misanthropic”²⁵ and Neo-Malthusian—similar programs to that regime under which the people of future Portland happen to live. However, she circumnavigates the harder edges of deep ecology by always returning to the dystopian core narrative where human and social dilemmas are played out, and therefore the eco-social and ecofeminist. Nevertheless, there are marked examples of when *the animal* is manipulated into a human *signified*:

She [black-market doctor] gathered very soon that Simon and I were married, and it was funny to see her look at us and smile like a cat. Some people love illegality for its own sake. Men, more often than women. It's men who make laws, and enforce them, and break them, and think the whole performance is wonderful. Most women would rather just ignore them. You could see that this woman, like a man, actually enjoyed breaking them.²⁶

Against the tenets of deep ecology, the cat—with its anthropomorphic shrewdness—is separated from its inherent object-value. In view of the fact that when utilised, natural objects facilitate a socio-political commentary that deconstructs normative gender and class power-relations, Le Guin displays more a penchant for ecofeminist or eco-Marxist ideology. In the cited case, Belle is in non-verbal collusion with a female counterpart—a partner in a subversive gender-schema. Such anarchism is far more subtle in “The New Atlantis” than in, for example, *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (1974), in which the physicist, Shevek, “praises women as natural anarchists.”²⁷ Cummins further observes in Belle:

The poignancy of her sections, like that of women’s diaries and letters, lies in her struggle to maintain integrity, self-respect, and creativity while surrounded by reminders of a government which enslaves its citizens by the services it provides, thus fulfilling the patriarchal model on which it is based.²⁸

In lieu of overt environmentalist anarchy—a motif through which John Moore identifies Le Guin as an inheritor of the anarcho-primitivist movement²⁹—“The New Atlantis” adopts a more nuanced approach to human interactions (or lack thereof) with nature. Belle’s subjectivity reifies through the trajectory of her arc, whereas male characters are designing solar panels and discussing the political ramifications of such advents, “Belle tries to cope with the knowledge of disaster coming—her homeland will be inundated.”³⁰ Such an early consideration of climate change and rising sea-levels as a worthy source for narrative treatment—altogether different to that of the mythological dimensions of Atlantis or Lemuria—represents an early, albeit inchoate, genre experiment in what Daniel Bloom has controversially dubbed “Cli-Fi” in recent years.³¹ Indeed, “The New Atlantis” precedes exordiums such as Arthur Herzog’s “Heat” (1977) and George Turner’s “The Sea and Summer” (1987). Interestingly, she too predicts the recent trend in cli-fi toward the geologic consideration of time and matter as a vast, bending immensity, witnessed in *Cloud Atlas* (2004) and *The Bone*

Clocks (2014) by David Mitchell, *The Swan Book* (2013) by Alexis Wright, or even Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014), to borrow a cinematic example. Like the cat—creatures that Le Guin believes “know exactly where they begin and end”³²—Belle comes to appreciate such a circular ontology of deep time, akin to Margaret P. Esmonde's reading of *The Farthest Shore* (1972): “each living thing is beautiful and unique . . . the great pattern of being that is more than life or death.”³³ As such, Belle initially senses “[s]omething wider and darker, more like knowledge” and ends with the contents of her life, packed into a bottle “lifted up little by little by the water, and rocking, and going out to the dark sea.”³⁴ It is this very ecocritical interaction that might usher a Utopia: as her notebook-in-a-bottle hits the sea it enters into dialogue with the collective-consciousness of the re-emerging city: “Where are you? We are here. Where have you gone?”³⁵

The superstructures (family/clan and cultivated land) required to maintain the historical practices associated with dwelling have been disavowed by the “crats” and State monopoly capital. Le Guin considers the transformative power of technology—its dual potential for destruction and restoration of a more “human” mode of dwelling—when Max exclaims: “We could completely decentralize industry and agriculture. Technology could serve life instead of serving capital. We could each run our own life,”³⁶ resounding into the benthos of Atlantis: “This is my nest, this is my tree, this is my egg, this is my day, this is my life, here I am, here I am, hurray for me! I'm here! – No, it wasn't like that at all, this dawn. I was completely silent, and it was blue.”³⁷ Interestingly, the imprints of memory and ancestry are hindered by a division of the subject from place, in addition to a Neo-Malthusian government that arrests citizens for “unreported pregnancy with intent to form a nuclear family.”³⁸ Simon alone bridges the ever-widening gap between family/ancestry and memory for Belle:

His breath was like the sound of soft waves far away, and I went out to the dark sea on the sound of them. I used to go out to the dark sea, often, as a child, falling asleep. I had almost forgotten it with my waking mind. As a child all I had to do was stretch out and think, “the dark sea . . . the dark sea . . .” and soon enough I'd be there, in the great depths, rocking. But after I grew up it only happened rarely, as a great gift. To know the abyss of the darkness and not to fear it, to entrust oneself to it and whatever may arise from it—what greater gift?³⁹

Evidently, members of society are suffering the malaise of a posthuman or postmodern condition, since they have been stripped of tools with which to cognitively map their environment.

One criticism of ecocentric notions of dwelling is that they promote a return to agrarian practices that predate modernity, and are therefore idealistic and unproductive. Garrard identifies modern conceptions of dwelling, which often revert to animism and fetishisation of the Other: “Ecofeminist critics, in particular, have correlated Native animism with both ecology and feminism, drawing in part upon matrifocal and matriarchal traditions in some Indian tribes.”⁴⁰ Despite this, Le Guin’s characters, distanced from their livelihood and mode of production, compose a desire for the quotidian, rather than the eclectic Other. Belle yearns accordingly for an alternate dwelling from her urban home:

I liked the idea of inhabiting Antarctica and daydreamed about it for a while. I thought of it as very empty, very quiet, all white and blue, with a faint golden glow northward from the unrising sun behind the long peak of mount Erebus. There were few people there; they were very quiet too . . . Southward the white land went up in a long silence toward the pole.⁴¹

Ultimately, as the world is falling into apocalypse, she evades (at least briefly) the authority the State exerts over her body and mind, setting out on foot with a supply of “dry lima beans and raisins [and] a tiny camp stove powered with a solar cell.”⁴² Presumably, she will take part in this diurnal, sustentative ritual of life and death until she has achieved what she ventured to do—find Simon. Common to the apocalyptic narrative is this very struggle for survival and familial love (or protection of the clan), a task Belle is most adequately equipped to undertake.

Apocalypse and Pastoral

In a sense, Le Guin treats *apocalypse* literally, that is, according to Damian Thompson: “from the Greek *Apo-calyptein*, meaning ‘to un-veil’. Apocalyptic literature takes the form of a revelation to the end of history.”⁴³ The dichotomy of *destruction* and *revelation*, surfaces in both religious and secular eschatological narratives; “The New Atlantis” subscribes to the latter; as an eco-dystopia veers toward apocalypse so too does a lost Utopian continent rise. Not only is the central ecological concept of *balance* maintained here, but *hope*, an innately humanist trope arrives also. Cummins sees in Belle’s sections “a voice to express both the demise of a West Coast civilization and the dream of a better world. In the ocean sections Le Guin is searching for and experimenting with a voice with which to create a utopia.”⁴⁴ This metaphysical interaction is vital, since it grants utmost primacy to a concinnity of energy, matter, and ideas. The medium through which

this eco-dynamic most palpably occurs is Belle's music; she plays the viola, which not only moves her male comrades to tears, but physically prompts the upward movement of Atlantis:

The melody created itself out of air and energy, it raised up the valleys, and the mountains, and hills were made low, and the crooked straight, and the rough places plain. And the music went out to the dark sea and sand in the darkness, over the abyss.⁴⁵

The ancient city responds to this "*huge, calling, yearning music from far away in the darkness.*"⁴⁶ Cummins concludes that "Belle's music is active; it is a factor in the ascent of the city from the ocean"⁴⁷ and hence a key compositional element of the Utopian impulse.

Literary depictions of apocalypses often foreground the value of art in worlds torn from their cultural origins—the man who relays bygone didactic tales (of "carrying the fire") to his son in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). In a similar vein, Belle's music is didactic, instilled with the "power to transform the world. The ocean people hear it and are renewed . . . It expresses the dream of a better world."⁴⁸ Though *The Road* attempts to imbibe the dregs of a vanished human tradition, Le Guin amalgamates two seemingly opposed movements: ecocentrism and Humanism, where the individual and the collective have agency only insofar as global ecosystems are given parity. Hence the horror of "The New Atlantis," a dystopia that seems less distant from reality now than it perhaps did at its time of publication, where solutions to anthropogenic climate change are to "halt tidal waves in Florida by dropping nuclear bombs where Miami was. Then they will reattach Florida to the mainland with landfill."⁴⁹ Although science fiction operates on a basic principle of extrapolation of potentialities (often in the form of alterity or futurity) that are contained in a *novum*, Le Guin's primary focus is not cast solely to technological cataclysms, but rather social reformations. The very same year "The New Atlantis" was published, Le Guin wrote a seminal essay "American SF and the Other," in which she condemned the genre's "permanent hierarchy of superiors and inferiors, with rich, ambitious, aggressive males at the top, then a great gap, and then at the bottom the poor, the uneducated, the faceless masses, and all the women."⁵⁰ Certainly, the ideological overlap from this essay to "The New Atlantis" is clear. The future Portland, Oregon confounds certain ideological demarcations, since it simulates the extreme-dialectic of the Big Brother Communism of the Federal Union, which implements sex-depressant drugs ("fed-meds"), government-enforced abortions, and "behaviour mod" distributed by the insidious "Bureau of Health, Education and Welfare," combined with capitalist "forces of freedom," "All-American Olympic Games," and

“Universities [that] don’t teach much but Business Administration and Advertising and Media Skills any more.”⁵¹ Indeed, it is startling to witness the extent to which Le Guin’s fiction predicts certain trends in Western society over the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Such a cornucopia of politically polarised systems of oppression emphasises the de-humanising touch society can inflict upon the individual—the corollary being an extrication from “nature,” human or otherwise. Without adopting a position on the conventional political spectrum of modernity, Le Guin insists on a new spectrum (encapsulated in a fictional, nascent continent), in light of the fact that not even a world (em)powered by the solar cell can escape apocalypse. It is therefore difficult to isolate wholly eco-Marxist, even ecofeminist, principles in her work; she is a proto eco-Utopian, who evidently inspired a generation of (science fiction) writers to produce mutually ecological and humanist value systems. Le Guin’s oeuvre displays what ecocritic Ursula K. Heise describes as “a kind of postmodern interrogation of such concepts as nature, wildness, and wilderness that seeks a transformation of consciousness (and, by extension, of patterns of human action) by cultivating less-naturalised thinking about the world and the role of human beings in it.”⁵² In the context of the apocalypse, “The New Atlantis” urges readers to cast their minds to that rising continent of ideas, a revelation at the end of history that a communitarian ethos *can* be found and founded.

Fredric Jameson’s reading of *The Dispossessed* classifies Le Guin “as the prototype of a Utopian commitment to the countryside and the village, to agriculture and small face-to-face groups, as opposed to . . . urban celebrations.”⁵³ Yet, it is not as simple as Jameson assumes. Pastoral is not a singular idea, but a slippery one, which Garrard clarifies: “No other trope is so deeply entrenched in Western culture, or so deeply problematic for environmentalism . . . pastoral has shown itself to be infinitely malleable for differing political ends.”⁵⁴ Terry Gifford demarcates three forms of Pastoral: a classical form of literary tradition conveying a retreat from city to countryside; a general form of “any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban”⁵⁵; a negative form whereby an “idealisation of rural life . . . obscures the realities of labour and hardship.”⁵⁶ Jameson denies Le Guin’s membership to the negative:

the moment of truth of Le Guin’s pastoral vision, of her Utopian advocacy of the countryside and the village, has nothing to do with the attractiveness of these ideological illusions, except insofar as it is that very attractiveness which gives her moment of truth its critical power and sharpens its cutting edge.⁵⁷

The complexity then of “The New Atlantis” is that—unlike the majority of

her works, which praise natural places and spaces—is that it transpires on an earth immensely denatured and deracinated. Belle considers the wilderness anathema to urban density or Antarctic emptiness, which are “the opposite . . . of the Mount Hood Wilderness Area . . . a tiresome vacation.”⁵⁸ Clearly, Le Guin’s use of pastoral is akin to her treatment of wilderness, that is, it exists through absence—the very *referents* lacking are what render the text dystopian to the reader.

Furthermore, there is a transatlantic division in ecocriticism over Pastoral hermeneutics; the British stems from the poetics of William Wordsworth, the American, from the anarchic treatises of Henry David Thoreau. Le Guin, as a beneficiary of anarcho-primitivism, regards the conservative semblances of pastoral as incompatible with Utopia. Such pejorative connotations are pronounced in the American context for “its identification with masculine colonial aggression directed against women, indigenes and the land, as well as its deployment in the literature of the slave-owning South.”⁵⁹ Importantly, maintaining the pastoral pattern, that is, the urban/country binary, insists on a hierarchical structure where one dominates another. Jesper Hoffmeyer, an ecosemiologist, maintains that from the viewpoint of culture “it is hard to see how ecology can be our guide and mentor in managing nature when it keeps splitting the world up into two distinct sectors – the natural and the cultural – thereby upholding all the emotional superstructure, all the illusions, that alienate us from nature.”⁶⁰ Le Guin aims to breakdown such divisions, preferring a world predicated upon communion between nature and people. So, Jameson is correct in identifying Le Guin’s use of this ecocritical trope in works other than “The New Atlantis” (*The Farthest Shore*, *The Dispossessed*, and *The Word for World is Forest* [1971]) as a technique of extracting historical preconceptions of pastoral and nature, and transposing them to a future, Utopian truth.

Nevertheless, Le Guin’s future Portlanders seem incapable of such acts of transcendence, inasmuch as the State precludes their humanity. Despite their brilliance, scientists Simon, Max, and Clara are inert, evinced by Belle’s thoughts: “I don’t think it had occurred to either Max or Simon to build one [a solar cell]. Once they knew it could be done they were satisfied and wanted to get on with something else.”⁶¹ Cummins underscores this socially-imbued lack of vision, their subaltern condition: “Simon and his friends with their working solar cell have no political power by which to revolutionize the availability of production and distribution of energy.”⁶² The Atlanteans, on the other hand, are capable of such altruism to both people and the earth alike:

No answer.

Only the whispering thunder from below.

*But we knew now, though we could not answer, we knew because
we heard, because we felt, because we wept, we knew that we
were;*

*and we remembered other voices.*⁶³

Importantly, Le Guin's Utopianism is not misanthropic, rather she expatiates a diachronic kind of humanism, one that acknowledges history alongside a progressive utopianism, lending further significance to aforementioned *sign* of "[t]he cuttlefish pointing to its own ancient carved image is an appropriate image," through which Le Guin ensnares the old and the new, past and present failures, and future hope. This vision is arguably communitarian, devoid of a "corporative State [that] has a monopoly on power sources,"⁶⁴ which Max encapsulates all too briefly: "Power corrupts . . . But if power is free? If everybody is equally mighty? Then everybody's got to find a better way."⁶⁵ The eco-Utopia hinted herein leaves little room for pastoral designs, whose roots are historically embedded in the European industrial revolution, and which require an urban versus agrarian framework that Le Guin markedly rejects.

Future of The Earth

The texts Le Guin has set on earth—*The Lathe of Heaven*, "The New Atlantis," and *Always Coming Home*—bleakly depict humanity's future. The last is not such a condemnation, since it offers the most "open-ended utopia"⁶⁶; still, the first two are outwardly dire, both on an intra- and extra-textual level: within the text, the narrative is dystopian, while concurrently reaffirming the potentially mirrored state of the reader's reality. Therefore, "The New Atlantis" is what Tom Moylan theorises as a *Critical Dystopia*, a text that works "inside the ambient zone of anti-utopian pessimism with new textual tricks," which realises the "horror of the present moment."⁶⁷ Cummins underscores the way in which these works have been punctuated by a series of ever-intensifying "tricks": "Each time she reshapes the coast by natural or human disasters: pollution, wars, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions."⁶⁸ This piquant evaluation lends itself further to Moylan's notion that *Critical Dystopias* generally express "a deeply negative portrayal of late-twentieth-century capitalism."⁶⁹ Yet through hope, Le Guin subverts the conventions of the genre, a form that Raffaella Baccolini characterises as "a bleak, depressing genre with no space for hope in the story, only outside the story: only by considering dystopia as a warning can we as readers

hope to escape such a dark future.”⁷⁰ Baccolini locates the trend towards hope in “novels such as Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Le Guin’s *The Telling*,” which “by resisting closure, allow readers and protagonists to hope: the ambiguous, open endings maintain the Utopian impulse within the work. In fact, by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel, the critical dystopia opens a space of contestation and opposition for those groups.”⁷¹ Admittedly, “The New Atlantis” is of this ilk, for the world—as viewed from above by the reader—is in the hands of Belle; with the final image of her supply of food, her solar cell stove, and quest for her beloved husband, Le Guin foregrounds the protagonist as a bastion of resistance against what is to (and has) come in our world. “The New Atlantis” occupies a temporality “when human enterprise has subsumed what was once the privileged category of Nature itself into the province of the artificial,” denoting what Jameson makes of the post-modern condition: “[a] historical moment of a radical eclipse of Nature itself.”⁷² Baccolini too warns that “the presence of Utopian hope does not necessarily mean a happy ending.”⁷³ Nonetheless, even if Belle does fail to kindle a Utopian hope out of a dystopia, another continent is rising elsewhere.

Monash University
James.Burgmann@monash.edu

NOTES

¹ Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1996 [1995]), 152.

² *Ibid.*, 153-54.

³ Elizabeth Cummins, *Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), 167.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵ Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism: Second Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 63.

- ⁶ Ursula K. Le Guin, "The New Atlantis," in *The New Atlantis and Other Novellas of Science Fiction*, ed. Robert Silverberg (New York: Hawthorn, 1975), 59.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.
- ⁸ Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds: Sf and the Human Imagination* (London: Virago, 2012 [2011]), 125.
- ⁹ Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 67.
- ¹⁰ Le Guin, "The New Atlantis," 60.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 62.
- ¹² Ursula K. Le Guin, quoted by Margaret Atwood in *In Other Worlds*, 125.
- ¹³ Le Guin, "The New Atlantis," 65.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.
- ¹⁵ Christina Ljungberg, "Wilderness from an Ecosemiotic Perspective," *Sign Systems Studies* 1 (2001): 176.
- ¹⁶ Vera L. Norwood, "Heroines of Nature," in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, 323.
- ¹⁷ Cummins, *Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin*, 172.
- ¹⁸ Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," 151.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 151.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 153.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 60.
- ²² Jacques Derrida, *The Animals That Therefore I Am* (New York: Fordham University, 2008), 32.
- ²³ Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 24.
- ²⁴ Le Guin, "The New Atlantis," 83.
- ²⁵ Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 25.
- ²⁶ Le Guin, "The New Atlantis," 68.
- ²⁷ Cummins, *Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin*, 171.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 172-73.
- ²⁹ John Moore, "An Archaeology of the Future: Ursula Le Guin and Anarcho-Primitivism," *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction* 63 (1995).
- ³⁰ Cummins, *Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin*, 17-18.
- ³¹ Brian Merchant, "Behold the Rise of Dystopian 'Cli-Fi,'" *Vice: Motherboard*, June 1, 2013, <http://motherboard.vice.com/blog/behold-the-rise-of-cli-fi>.
- ³² Ursula K. Le Guin, "Dogs, Cats, and Dancers: Thoughts about Beauty," in *The Wave in The Mind: Talks and Essays on the Writer, Reader, and the Imagination*

(Boston: Shambhala, 2004), 163.

- ³³ Margaret P. Esmonde, "The Master Pattern," in *Ursula K. Le Guin*, eds. Joseph D. Olander and Martin Harry Greenberg (Edinburgh: Paul Harris Publishing, 1979), 33.
- ³⁴ Le Guin, "The New Atlantis," 85.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.
- ⁴⁰ Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 142.
- ⁴¹ Le Guin, "The New Atlantis," 60.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 85.
- ⁴³ Damian Thompson, *The End of Time: Faith and Fear in the Shadow of the Millennium* (London: Minerva, 1997), 13-14.
- ⁴⁴ Cummins, *Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin*, 174.
- ⁴⁵ Le Guin, "The New Atlantis," 81.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.
- ⁴⁷ Cummins, *Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin*, 168.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.
- ⁴⁹ Le Guin, "The New Atlantis," 85.
- ⁵⁰ Ursula K. Le Guin, "American SF and the Other," *Science Fiction Studies* 2, no. 3 (1975): 210.
- ⁵¹ Le Guin, "The New Atlantis," 67, 66, 84, 71, 75, 68.
- ⁵² Ursula K. Heise, "Forum on Literatures of the Environment," by Jean Arnold, Lawrence Buell, Michael P. Cohen, Elizabeth Dodd, Simon C. Estok, Ursula K. Heise, Jonathan Levin, Patrick D. Murphy, Andrea Parra, William Slaymaker, Scott Slovic, Timothy Sweet and Louise Westling, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 114, no. 5 (1999): 1098.
- ⁵³ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fiction* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 159.
- ⁵⁴ Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 37.
- ⁵⁵ Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London: Routledge, 1999), 2.
- ⁵⁶ Interpretation by Greg Garrard, in *Ecocriticism*, 37-38.
- ⁵⁷ Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 175-76.

- ⁵⁸ Le Guin, "The New Atlantis," 60.
- ⁵⁹ Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 54.
- ⁶⁰ Jesper Hoffmeyer, *Signs of Meaning in the Universe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 143.
- ⁶¹ Le Guin, "The New Atlantis," 79.
- ⁶² Cummins, *Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin*, 173.
- ⁶³ Le Guin, "The New Atlantis," 75.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁶ Cummins, *Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin*, 154.
- ⁶⁷ Tom Moylan, *Scraps of Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2000), 196.
- ⁶⁸ Cummins, *Understanding Ursula K. Le Guin*, 154.
- ⁶⁹ Moylan, *Scraps of Untainted Sky*, 197.
- ⁷⁰ Raffaella Baccolini, "The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 119.3 (2004): 520.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 520.
- ⁷² Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (1984): 71-72.
- ⁷³ Baccolini, "The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction," 521.