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On Living in the World

Revisiting Ursula Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*

John Clark

2021, Fall

Recently, the Anarchist Political Ecology Group (the APE Group) read and discussed Ursula Le Guin's book *Always Coming Home*. Though it's a work I often go back to, this was the first time I had read it cover to cover in about thirty-five years.

I first discovered Le Guin's work when I read *The Dispossessed* in the mid-1970s. The book had a huge effect on the members of the anarchist group I was in at the time, the Black Pearl Mutual Aid and Pleasure Club in New Orleans.

Inspired in part by this work, some of us formed a small affinity group within the larger group. We considered ourselves Odonians, followers of the cooperative, anti-propertarian philosophy of Laia Odo, the great social anarchist philosopher of Le Guin's anarchist planet Anarres.

When *Always Coming Home* appeared a decade later, the Black Pearl group no longer existed, and aspiring to create and live in an Odonian subculture had begun to seem a bit like a youthful dream. But Le Guin's new work inspired me even more than her previous classic did. It helped restore my faith in the free community and give me a renewed sense of direction.

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In the mid-90s I wrote about the book for a collection in which the contributors each described several books that had touched them most profoundly. I said of *Always Coming Home* that “in an entirely incomparable way it creates a world—a distant world that becomes intimately present to us, as it stirs the deepest longings of our being.”

I praised Le Guin for what she reveals through the book’s central character, “Stone Telling,” later called “Woman Coming Home.” (“Stone Telling”—What a cosmically dialectical name, reminiscent of Hegel’s famous pronouncement, “The stones cry out and lift themselves up to Spirit”!)

Stone Telling’s uniqueness (her universal singularity) arises from her experience of living in, and comprehending deeply, two radically different cultures. Through this experience, she “gains the ability to reveal the true nature of each.”

These two fictional cultures stand for the two worlds we ourselves can inhabit and come to understand, the manipulative world of domination we actually find ourselves in, and the cooperative world of freedom we are capable of creating. What seemed most striking was Le Guin’s depiction of the latter world of the cooperative, anarchistic Kesh and their culture of “home,” the oikos.

Le Guin’s great achievement, I concluded, was that she “gives us a moving and inspired account of a beautiful, loving, creative, and joyful community.”

As I look back, I’m more than ever convinced of all of this. However, I think that at the time I far underestimated the depth and complexity of Le Guin’s accomplishment. Later, I went on to develop a (still evolving) theory of social transformation stressing the necessary preconditions for revolutionary change.

I located these conditions in the social institutional sphere, the social ideological sphere, the social imaginary sphere, the social ethotic sphere, and the dialectical interaction between all of these. In *Always Coming Home*, Le Guin explores all these spheres in great depth. In fact, I know of no book that tells you more about how all

these spheres interact and thus create a social world—or, potentially, destroy one.

Every detail in the work reveals the workings of such modes of determination. This includes brilliantly conceived stories, rituals, ceremonies, myths, legends, dramatic works, poetry, and other literary genres, architecture, landscapes, gardens, communal spaces, clothing, kinship relations, lodges, societies, arts, crafts, tools, maps, cuisine, medicine, music, musical instruments, dances, forms of play, character structures, sensibilities, psychological traits, and perhaps above all, language.

And this leaves out a lot. All of these, in Le Guin's mythopoeic hands, reveal the nature of modes of determination, either as modes of domination and separation, or as modes of liberation and solidarity.

The nature of all of these determinants, and of the larger interacting spheres of determination they constitute, shapes the kind of world we live in. Or, in Le Guin's terms, it determines whether we live in the World or not. And, in fact, we do not. The dominant world of *arché* ("ruling," in the sense of domination) is in reality a mode of escape from and denial of the World. It is a non-World and an anti-world of necrophilia and nihilism.

At the deepest level, *Always Coming Home* is a critique of "living outside the World." And it is a critique aimed at us. To the extent that we live in the dominant culture (and let's not fool ourselves about the degree to which we do) we are no longer at home in the World. The results of living outside the World have become excruciatingly obvious since the book was written.

What might easily have been skimmed over thirty-five years ago, but which now screams out at us from its pages, is the fact that it is addressed to us, those of the tragic past who *lived outside the World* and who *devastated the World*.

Le Guin's *Stone Telling* has a prophetic voice because she has lived in both worlds and experienced both profoundly. She becomes *Woman Coming Home* because her voyage to another

world ultimately takes her home, to the oikos, to the World, which she then appreciates in a deeper way. Hers is a mythic journey, a paradigmatic voyage for the sake of all of us. To follow her example, we must begin to experience home as deeply as we experience the absence of home. This means we have to begin living here and now as if we are in the World.

Many years ago, I suggested that Le Guin's book "stirs the deepest longings of our being." However, I failed to grasp adequately the necessity of reading it in a way that allows our being to be "stirred" in the most practically crucial way, the most Worldly way, a way that releases our spirit of engaged social creativity.

If we read it in such a spirit of social creation, of communal poesis (radical creativity), we will not merely think about, or even celebrate, liberatory social forms, but also go on to create them—through affinity groups, base communities, ecovillages, and beyond.

Only such communal creativity is capable of holding together what is left of the World, and of finally bringing back the World in its fullness, or, to invoke the Kesh imaginary, of dancing back the World. We must enter into a temporality and spatiality, a realized time and place, in which we no longer exist outside the World, but rather live in and with the World.

Perhaps we can have faith that the great communitarian anarchist Gustav Landauer was right when he predicted that if we create communities in which life is truly good, and in which all truly flourish, this will create a kind of "positive envy" in those who observe it. We can call such an effect "inspiration," the spreading throughout the world of what Landauer called Geist or Spirit. According to his friend Martin Buber, this Spirit is something found at all the decentered centers of free community.

We are now in the Necrocene, the new era of death on Earth. It is more than time for us to enter what we might call the Poeticene, the new era of birth, rebirth, and creativity for the Earth. Such a transition will depend on the reemergence of the charis-

matic community, a movement of the Free Spirit. It is too late for prefiguration. It is time for transfiguration.

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His latest book is *Between Earth and Empire: From the Necrocene to the Beloved Community* from PM Press.