

Ursula K. Le Guin

Remarks by James Clifford at a public discussion with Ursula K. Le Guin and Donna Haraway.

Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet. Conference, UCSC Santa Cruz, May 8, 2014

I've been reading your work for a long time, and it has seeped into my thinking in ways I've only begun to really understand. Most recently it was in the context of a long essay on "Ishi" where the whole thing was sort of hijacked by your great novella *The Word for World is Forest* and by the amazing *Always Coming Home*.

Always Coming Home, a kind of throw-in-the-kitchen-sink ethnography that imagines a utopian, non-industrial non-Capitalist, future for Californians living in a place very much like the Napa Valley--but with a population, as you've said, worthy of the place.

I hope we can talk a bit about *Always Coming Home*, such a rich work of the ethnographic imagination. And especially because it brings us into intimate contact with where we actually are; the land, flora, fauna, geologic and historical time of Northern California.

What kind of a utopia is this? Or: how is it possible to conceive of..."the future?" *Can* we really think about the future, concretely? This is a big question for our conference!

I'd like to read a favorite passage of mine from your 1982 essay (It's as close as you ever get to "theorizing"): "A Non Euclidian View of California as a Cold Place to Be."

It's an essay where you imagine a "yin" way of thinking about utopias—different from a more linear, masculine, Western, way of imaging ourselves in time's arrow. The "utopist" narrating, driving (on a motorcycle!) a path forward.

A "cold place to be"—evokes Lévi Strauss's famous (well it was then) distinction between "hot" and "cold" societies. Hot referring to the industrial West, cold to tribal, aboriginal, indigenous, cultures. In a hot perspective we are in constant turmoil, zooming ahead into the future, for better and worse, progress or apocalypse. Cold is slower, not inert or unchanging, but more

rooted in place.

Slower and darker: Abandoning “the radiant sandcastle” of progress (you write) to let our eyes adjust to a dimmer light, and see what’s already there, in the shadows...

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. (1989: 98)

The unsettling news that Copernicus, Darwin, *and the anthropologists* bring! The metamorphosis of the utopist into a critter very much like coyote! Of course, we’re in the myth world of Native California here...

And in the poem you just read we got a glimpse of the Canada Lynx walking softly out of sight, out of *our* sight.

For me your work presumes the decentering of the West that 20th century anthropology was a part of. This profound decentering brings the possibility of perceiving alternative paths in the present, oblique and looping destinies. It brings a sense of historical times, plural, of specific temporal scales and embodied experiences of the real... ontologies. I’d like to open up this area for discussion, as we think about our survival, together and apart, in damaged, transforming worlds.

Notes for discussion:

An “immigrant” in the land here. You’ve used the same term.

Becoming indigenous... (Not becoming California Indians!)

For me, discovering the place--this landscape that’s not New England.

Coming to know the quail in the driveway, when they let me see them...

For you, a Berkeley kid, it was summers in Napa. The family place. Indians and anthropologists...Could you describe it a bit? What you learned there? How it grounded you?

Now you’re an Oregonian...Have you gone back?

How to link this place, these places, with *Always Coming Home*.

“Houses” ... semi-subterranean, open windows, doors, “soft” houses

Confusions of “historical” time. Discontinuity. What happened to make the Kesh possible?

“The Archivist” and “The Exchange” What is saved? *The Telling* and “salvage”? Mao and Taoism. CA Indians and the salvage collections of your father, AL Kroeber and Co.

Stones and time. (“Stone Telling!”) Pre-communication? Darkness. Immobility. Bones? Stones and stars. That scale. Vs other “historical” scales? And? Geologic history. (Pleistocene, Anthropocene?) Volcanoes (Mt St Helens), glaciers...The times of animals, of trees (outliving us!), of human “civilization?”

You often evoke Stones and Stars—Astronomical time.

Equanimity of that ending for our Anthropocene conference?

“The Earth goes on in her changing, circling way...”