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The Practical Geography of Always Coming Home

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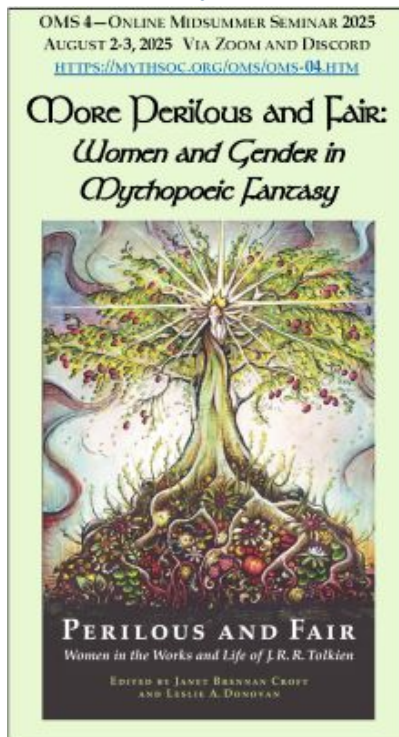
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The Practical Geography of Always Coming Home

Abstract

Ursula K. Le Guin is a fantasy writer focused on the detailed description of the locales of her stories, in particular Always Coming Home. In this she may be usefully compared and contrasted with Tolkien and other authors of fantasy of place. This article is particularly concerned with the geography of the Valley of the Na in Always Coming Home as a fictionalization of the Napa Valley. It describes in detail the maps in the book and their relationship with the primary world geography. It recounts, from fieldwork, what is to be found at the Kesh townsites in our primary-world geography, and where exactly they are located. Lastly, it notes that the maps only acquire importance and interest from their relationship with the story's text.

Additional Keywords

geography; locale; fantasy of place; Napa Valley; California

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SPECIAL ISSUE NOTES

THE PRACTICAL GEOGRAPHY OF *ALWAYS COMING HOME*

DAVID BRATMAN

URSULA K. LE GUIN IS PRIMARILY A FANTASIST OF PLACE. If, in J.R.R. Tolkien's terms from "On Fairy-stories," a fantasist's job is to sub-create an imagined world that commands secondary belief (138-40), Le Guin chooses to employ the last and most intensive level of detail in depicting the locales where her stories take place. "Obviously," she says, "setting, landscape, place, are very important in my books, they are essential to the story" (*Always* 751).

This can be seen in contrast with Tolkien himself, who in the same sense is a fantasist of time as much as he also is a fantasist of words and language. While Tolkien is not in any way uninterested in place—his enormous maps and his detailed and careful depiction of landscapes and weather are of legendary vividness—he gives the last and fullest measure of attention in the shaping of his created world to time. His legendarium is full of annals and chronologies, marked by dates and the passage of precisely-marked Ages, extending far beyond the "Tale of Years" in the appendix to *The Lord of the Rings*. In his quests, each day and even the phases of the moon are carefully delineated. If a character such as Elrond or Treebeard alludes to the vast deeps of time, it's possible to consult the annals and see how many thousands of years are being referred to.

Le Guin, by contrast, usually leaves time sketchy and undefined. The people of Earthsea have their sacred poem of the creation of the world by Segoy ("Description" 290-92), but there is no specification of how long ago this took place, or a dated chronology to tie the events of the stories to. Even the age of Ged, whose life spans the greater part of the events of the Earthsea stories, is not carefully specified the way Tolkien would do it. Only in "A Description of Earthsea" do any dates appear at all, and they are rare and seem out of place there. The Hainish worlds of Le Guin's science fiction, full of time-dilation in interstellar travel, are a casual mess of chronological sequence, with no importance laid on placing the stories in chronological order, and indeed little certainty as to what that order is. In *Always Coming Home*, Le Guin devotes a section, "Time in the Valley" (195-207), to explaining that, though with the help

of the computer system they call the City of Mind, the Kesh can determine dates and the length of time over which events pass, they are uninterested in doing so to an extent which seems strange and alien to the reader from our distant-past civilization, which they consider a remote and discontinuous era far from their interest or knowledge (183-88). Ask the Kesh about dates and they will shrug; this is unimportant to them.

Le Guin's sense of place, however, has the kind of glinting hard-edged specificity she chooses not to devote to time. The first three Earthsea books form a conscious travelogue. Almost every island labeled on the Earthsea map is mentioned by name in *A Wizard of Earthsea*. Ged's travels in that book take him across the archipelago, and *The Tombs of Atuan* and *The Farthest Shore* fill in the gaps by concentrating on just those parts of Earthsea least covered in the first book (Bratman, "Geography of Earthsea"). Wherever the characters travel, even if it is to an islet without a specified name, Le Guin writes her narrative to ensure that the reader always knows exactly where the characters are geographically. Even the spirit journey into death, first described in a vividly memorable scene in chapter 5 of *Wizard* and then deconstructed in *The Other Wind*, is depicted as a physical passage across an eerie dark landscape.

As with the islands of Earthsea, so too with the Hainish planets. Each one is defined; each one is specified. Readers not only know where the stories are taking place, but get a sense of the individual quiddity of each world depicted. The contrast between the twin planets of Annares and Urras within *The Dispossessed* may be taken as a clear example of the distinctions Le Guin draws between different worlds. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is remembered for its experiment in sex roles and gender, but the wintry planet of Gethen as setting is constantly also at the forefront.

A sense of location is even more prominent in *The Beginning Place*. Its very title—and even more its British variant title, *Threshold*—marks its topic: the story focuses on the border between the primary and secondary realities and what that means for the people who cross over it.

In *Always Coming Home*, the place is even more vital and memorable than the characters are. This book is a mythologization of a primary-world place in a sense that has become common in fantasy literature. That is one reason why, though it is set in the far future, a setting more often associated with science fiction, and—insofar as she drew a distinction—the author considered it a science fiction story rather than a fantasy one, readers often think of it as fantasy.

Works by other authors from the same period as *Always Coming Home* show how widespread this tendency for mythologization of the primary world has been. *Our Lady of Darkness* by Fritz Leiber may be considered emblematic of the tendency. Set in San Francisco, it not only specifies its locales and depicts them vividly, it imposes a pattern of geomancy, a mystical and symbolic

geometrical geography, on the landmarks of the city, which forms the linchpin of the story's plot. A reader of *Our Lady of Darkness* who knows San Francisco can picture vividly the events of the story taking place in these specific locales. The story transforms these previously mundane geographic locations, imbuing them with an air of having been mythologized. It is practical, indeed, to walk around San Francisco identifying the sites of the story, and this has been done. Don Herron, author of *The Literary World of San Francisco* (a guidebook including Leiber sites, and which also mentions Le Guin for her Berkeley home; 186) and proprietor of a Dashiell Hammett walking tour of the city, has also given a Fritz Leiber tour along exactly these lines.

Other genre fantasy novels, and indeed some science fiction ones, of that period, though not as heavily concentrated on the mysticism of place as Leiber's, have employed the same technique of overlaying their fiction on real locales and landmarks in such a way as to place a sense of wonder around these geographies.¹ The Chronicles of Westria series by Diana L. Paxson (beginning with *Lady of Light* and *Lady of Darkness*, later reprinted together as *Mistress of the Jewels*) is of particular interest as a comparison, because while most books of this kind follow Leiber's example and concentrate on cityscapes, Paxson's is rural-based and defines Westria as covering the same region of a future Northern California that Le Guin uses as lands known to the Kesh. Where Le Guin's cultural inspiration is Native American culture, as described below, Paxson's cultural base comes from the Society for Creative Anachronism, a neo-medievalist living-history group which she co-founded. Paxson's style of describing the landscape and imbuing her work with a sense of place could be the subject of a useful literary comparison with Le Guin's.

Both authors have gone to some effort to erase the urban cityscape from their future Californias. In *Always Coming Home*, the disasters that wiped out our own civilization ("The City of Man" in Kesh terms) in the distant past are never specified, but seem to have consisted largely of accumulated chemical poisoning. They leave the urban Bay Area a region that the Kesh avoid. Most of the relics of urbanity, indeed, are drowned beneath the rising ocean in Le Guin's fictional landscape. She and her geomancer, George Hersh, took care to manipulate the fictional landscape to erase its urban scarring (*Always* 764-65).

In her "Legends for a New Land" essay (reprinted in *Always* 741-57), and virtually nowhere else, Le Guin explains the inspiration for *Always Coming Home*. She wanted to write a story about a peaceful people living in a valley, here on Earth, and only gradually realized it had to be her own valley, the Napa

¹ A selective list of these, over 50 items, was compiled by this author, from suggestions by multiple hands, for the program book of Mythcon XXVI (1995), whose conference theme was "Fantasy in the World Around Us."

Valley of Northern California, where she grew up during the summers and continued to visit throughout her life (*Always* 753-54). Her parents had bought a farmhouse, with accompanying ranch acreage, in what has remained an obscure corner of the valley, in the early 1930s.² It acquired the name Kishamish, from a myth invented by Le Guin's brother Karl (Phillips 165, Kroeber 140). Living during the school year in Berkeley, where Le Guin's father taught at the university during her childhood, the family used Kishamish to live in primarily during the summers. Its importance to Le Guin cannot be overestimated. It was here that, wandering alone during her teen years, she began to turn herself into a writer, or, in her own words, "started making my soul" (Phillips 167).

Always Coming Home provides four sets of two maps each that cover the landscape of the story. In each set, one map is purported to be the original Kesh map, or, in one case, is drawn in that style without captioning. The other is a redrawing, in two cases specifically attributed to "the Editor," containing English-language captioning and drawn in a style more familiar to our civilization.

Like George Hersh, I am "a map nut" (*Always* 764), and on reading the book I was immediately drawn to these. In 1988, three years after the book was published, I was chair of an *Always Coming Home*-inspired Mythopoeic Conference in Berkeley. Le Guin was Guest of Honor and delivered "Legends for a New Land" as her keynote speech. When I asked her, prior to the conference, for permission to lead a post-conference tour of the Valley for interested attendees, I got the impression that she was a little surprised, possibly even a bit dismayed, at finding that I had worked out from the maps in the book exactly where everything was on the real-world ground, but she may have underestimated the skills of a good map-reader. However, she gave permission, provided only that we did not venture onto private property.

The key to my ability to match these maps to those of the primary-world landscape lay in the rivers and streams. Our roadways have vanished in the time of the Kesh, the shorelines have changed, but the watercourses on land are identical. Match those up closely and readers may see where they are. This is not disrespectful or missing the point. In doing this, readers are no more than reverse-engineering the careful planning and extensive research Le Guin did in building her secondary world in the first place (*Always* 755; Streitfeld 81-82).

The maps may be considered in terms of increasing scale. Because they appear at different-sized reproductions in different editions of the book, I will

² Phillips (165) is wise to be cautious about specifying the exact date. It could have been 1930 (*Always* 793, Kroeber 139); it might have been 1932 (*Always* 742).

give here not the scale ratios but the geographic distance covered from one end of the map to the other.

The first set, with the smallest scale and covering the largest area, includes "The Rivers That Run into the Inland Sea" (151), a captionless depiction full of watercourses and topographic relief in the form of mountain and hill pictographs, described as a wall painting in a Kesh lodge, copied by the lodge's archivist; and "Some of the Peoples and Places Known to the Kesh" (169), which copies most of "The Rivers," cutting off only a small part at the south end, and making room for labels by eliminating the pictographs. It's a useful map for the reader of the "Stone Telling" and "The Trouble with the Cotton People" journeying narratives in the book, for captions indicate where both the Condor and the Cotton People dwell, and they also show some of the other landmarks in both stories, including the locations of the cities of the Condor.

This map is a Keshification of Northern California, running from the Oregon border to the Tehachapi Mountains north to south, and the Pacific Ocean to the Sierra Nevada and the Nevada border west to east. North (slightly northwest) is at the top of "Some of the Peoples," but the original "Rivers" wall painting is intended to be viewed from the side as printed, along the long axis, as a perspective view with east at the top, so that the majority of the rivers flow downwards (764-65). The "Some of the Peoples" version, which is more of a direct-above view as our civilization draws maps, extends about 550 miles north to south and over 200 miles west to east. A comparison with our time may be made easily with any good highway map or mapping service of California that displays river courses. The Bay Area has been reduced by drowning to a set of mountaintop islands, the largest of which, Kore Island, is the stub of the Santa Cruz Mountains. Much of the Central Valley is likewise drowned in an Inland Sea, and the coast south of the Bay Area has also been altered, but the northern coast is the same and so are the rivers. Clear Lake retains the name it bears in our time; the Na River is the Napa River and the Seseshi River is our Russian River; the land of the Osho is in our Sonoma County, partially drowned; the port of Sed is evidently near Mount Vaca, a spur thrusting into the Central Valley; the numerous rivers flowing into the Inland Sea from the east are a set that drain the Mother Lode mining country and the western slopes of the Sierras, the main part of which is here designated Mountains of the Range of Light. South City of the Condor, on the Dark River (our Pit River), is roughly on the site of our town of Alturas, while the main City of the Condor is planted in Lava Beds National Monument.

The second set of maps has been the most useful to me in planning trips to the Valley. These are both designated "The Nine Towns on the River." The first of these (426) is described as "a talismanic map," showing watercourses, terrain relief with hatchmarks, and the locations of the nine towns

of the Kesh with *heyiya-if* symbols. It is entirely unlabeled. The second map (441) is described as “redrawn by the Editor,” and cuts back on the hatching to allow room for labels: many names of even minor creeks and landforms are given, plus the names of the nine towns with their locations converted to dots. This map, in either form, covers the entire upper watershed of the Napa River, with the headwaters at the north (actually northwest) end at the top, extending down to just below the site of the city of Napa, where the Kesh geography, abutting on the drowned inner Bay Area, begins to differ from ours. The city of Napa is where the map labels “Saltgrass pastures,” and nothing of the small part of the map south of that matches up with our geography. Covering from there to the headwaters is a distance of about 34 miles, not allowing for the Kesh map slightly straightening the general course of the river. The west-east distance varies, but is approximately 12 miles.

The third set of maps covers the watershed of what the Kesh call Sinshan Creek: Bale Slough on our maps. The first map, “Some of the Paths around Sinshan Creek” (525), is depicted as a Kesh map, with some Kesh writing on it, paths marked with dotted lines, and numerous *heyiya-if* symbols indicating towns, the springs at the heads of creeks, and other sites. A map titled “The Watershed of Sinshan Creek” (526) “is based upon and elaborates” this. It covers almost exactly the same area, eliminates many of the paths, and applies name labels both to the creeks and to other landmarks and Kesh human geography, the towns and summer house areas. These maps have west at the top, so that the creeks flow downwards on the map. Each covers an area approximately 4.5 miles west to east and 3.5 miles north to south. The area includes two Kesh towns, Madidinou and Sinshan, and in our geography covers the village of Rutherford in the southeast quadrant. The path marked on “Watershed” as “The Old Straight Road” follows roughly, but not exactly, the route of California state highway 29, the principal access route for the length of the valley.

The last set of maps has a less exact geographic relationship between the two. Perhaps because of their extremely large scale, rendering them unnecessary for native Kesh villagers’ use, neither of these is depicted as made by the Kesh. Both are labeled “Drawn by the Editor with the help of Thorn of Sinshan.” However, the first, “The Town of Sinshan” (214), resembles the Kesh maps in lacking labels and containing much detail of topography and, in this case, vegetation. The other map, “The Names of the Houses of Sinshan,” is a diagrammatic map covering only the central area of the other map, and depicting little more than houses, creeks, a few fences, and their names. Despite its differing size and scale, with enlargement and reduction it can be made to fit exactly on the relevant part of the other map. On my overlaid photocopy, the coverage area of “The Town of Sinshan” is 9.7 inches top to bottom, and that of

“The Names of the Houses” is 6.5 inches in the same direction. These maps have southwest at the top (with, uniquely among these maps, a compass rose saying so on “The Town of Sinshan”). The exact coverage size of so large-scale a map is hard to determine, but it runs approximately 0.75 mile in each direction.

To convert the maps of the Valley into their locations in our own topography I relied primarily on a Murray’s road map of the Wine Country. Covering essentially the entirety of Napa County, plus Vallejo and much of Sonoma County, at a scale of approximately 3.3 miles per inch, the map has enough room to show what its cover claims is all the smaller rural roads in the county, as well as the all-important watercourses. Inset maps at a larger scale provide street coverage of the towns in the county. To supplement this, I acquired U.S. Geological Survey 7.5-inch topographic maps, in the paper form as they were then issued, for the Yountville, Rutherford, Saint Helena, Calistoga, and Detert Reservoir quadrangles, and cut them up into convenient pieces for study. I did this work soon after *Always Coming Home* was published in 1985, and I made a comprehensive survey of the sites on the ground soon after that. This was the basis on which I gave the above-mentioned tour of selected sites after the Berkeley Mythcon in 1988. I made one return visit to a few of the sites in 2010.³ The following descriptions are based primarily on notes I took after the first and most detailed visit. On all three occasions, I—and my companions on the second visit—remained strictly on public roads and public property, and noted only what we could see from there.

Listing the maps in order of increasing scale brings to attention their increasing concentration on the Kesh town of Sinshan. Depicted as far from the largest or most important town of the Kesh people, Sinshan is important to *Always Coming Home* for two reasons. Within the story, it is the village where Le Guin’s persona—whether depicted as Pandora or as “the Editor”—is based and does most of her fieldwork. An anthropologist may well choose a smaller settlement as the focus of attention for various cultural reasons. In our world, Sinshan is even more important to Le Guin, for it is the site of her own family’s home. I will simply say here that Kishamish is located within the townsite of Sinshan, without being more specific.

³ While this article was already in press, the Glass Fire of September-October 2020 devastated the northern end of the Napa Valley. After the fires were out, in November, I made a quick reconnaissance to see what effect, if any, the fires had had on Le Guin’s valley. Some of the woods around the Kesh townsites of Wakwaha, Chukulmas, and Chumo have been scorched, but not entirely so, and most of the trees will survive, as usually happens after forest fires. None of the other Kesh sites or the present-day buildings associated with them appear to have been harmed.

To visit the townsite of Sinshan, the visitor turns off Highway 29 at Whitehall Lane, located about 1.5 miles north of the village of Rutherford, though the postal address is Saint Helena, the next town north. This is one of many small side roads in the area that extend westward from the highway towards and sometimes into the surrounding hills. Many of them contain popular wineries, but Whitehall Lane, pretty much unspoiled and unchanged in Le Guin's perception (753), has only a few obscurer ones. (A Whitehall Lane Winery is actually on the highway at the intersection.) The road, though paved, is extremely narrow, having no function other than providing access to the scattered country houses in the area. On my visits, I parked down at the base of the road, where there is room to leave a vehicle, and either walked or bicycled up, to be as undisruptive as possible.

The road travels along the valley floor and eventually the hills begin to close in. The road passes around the hill labeled as Adobe Hill on the map of "The Names of the Houses," and a small meadowed vale nestled between the hills opens up. This vale—Le Guin describes it as "all wild oats and chicory and foxtail and voles and jackrabbits and quail" (Streitfeld xxi)—is the location of the Common Place and the Dancing Place of Sinshan. The road goes over what is labeled as Sinshan Bridge on the map, and crosses the meadow along what the map labels as Hard Canyon Creek. It then heads up what the map labels as First Hill, and goes as far as the top of the map before a sign indicates that it becomes a private road.

The whole vale is easily visible from the lane, but due to fences and the consequent indication of private property, absolutely no off-road travel is possible here. Visitors, if they approach quietly and respectfully by foot, will gain a sense of the peacefulness of a quiet and obscure corner of the Valley.

Two of the Kesh towns, by contrast, are positively urban, by small-town standards. It is quickly evident from a comparative map study that the important Kesh towns of Telina and Kastoha coincide with our towns of Saint Helena and Calistoga, respectively, and it's also evident that the Kesh names are somehow derived from ours. These today are tourist towns with wine tastings, olive oil tastings, and small spa resorts, the only Kesh townsites that are at all heavily developed in our time. They are larger than the tiny villages of Rutherford or Oakville but not as large or developed as the city of Napa. How much their present-day bustle may resemble what might be seen in the days of the Kesh will have to be imagined. Kastoha is notable for its hot springs, and since Calistoga's are mostly capped, the ideal place to visit may be the only unurbanized hot-water site, the geyser on Tubbs Lane a mile north of town. This is marked on the "Nine Towns on the River" map.

The geyser played a dramatic role in the 1988 post-Mythcon tour. One of the events at the conference itself was a stage production of “The Plumed Water,” a Kesh play from the book celebrating the geyser (264-70). Naturally, the tour had to visit the source. Visitors familiar only with the Old Faithful geyser at Yellowstone National Park may be surprised at the informality here. Visitors are required to keep far back from Old Faithful, but it is possible to walk right up to the Calistoga geyser and be misted by its spray. Normally, the Calistoga geyser, like Old Faithful, keeps regular hours. On the occasion of this visit, the geyser went off soon after our arrival, and most unusually kept on spouting. We hastily fetched copies of *Always Coming Home* from our van, and Leigh Ann Hussey, who had directed and starred in the Mythcon production of “The Plumed Water,” organized another reading of the play underneath the geyser as it spouted. It kindly did not stop until after we were finished.

The spiritual center of Kesh culture is at the town of Wakwaha, up in the mountains north of Kastoha. Wakwaha appears from the map to be located at the head of Kimball Canyon, on private land and not visible from nearby Highway 29. However, there are turnouts at the head of the neighboring canyon, just past the entrance sign to Robert Louis Stevenson Memorial State Park, and another downhill turnout down the Calistoga Grade permits a view of the lower portion of Kimball Canyon. The land here is covered with tall-bore evergreen trees, but occasional glimpses down the steep mountain slopes permit a sense of the views that would be available from the porches and balconies of Wakwaha.



Patrick Wynne. Mythlore #56, 1988

The drive up Highway 29 to the site of Wakwaha was responsible for the most lasting memento of the 1988 tour. The van stopped at an uphill overlook on the first curve of the Calistoga Grade, 0.5 mile uphill from the corner of Tubbs Lane, looking down on the upper valley around Calistoga. A photo taken there with tour member David Lenander looking over the valley was transformed by artist Patrick Wynne into a pen-and-ink drawing of "The Valley of the Na, looking south near Kastóha-na," with a Kesh woman as the human figure. This drawing was used as the headpiece for the original publication of Le Guin's "Legends for a New Land" Guest of Honor speech (*Mythlore*, vol. 15, no. 2 (#56), Winter 1988, p. 4) and is reprinted as the endpapers for the Library of America edition of *Always Coming Home*.

The Kesh town of Chumo is likewise inaccessible from public roads. Its townsite is at a small open-meadow valley along the upper Conn Creek on the privately-owned Glendale Ranch in the hills above Saint Helena. It would be best viewed from outside from along the upper stretches of Howell Mountain Road, but that portion of the road is, or was in the late 1980s, closed to automobile traffic, and I did not have the time to explore the closed road on foot.

The town of Chukulmas, by contrast, is easily publicly accessible, albeit on foot. This townsite is located in the deep woods of Bothe Napa Valley State Park, which is along Highway 29 between Calistoga and Saint Helena. A one-mile walk along marked state park trails up Ritchie Creek (Redwood Creek to the Kesh) brings the visitor to the townsite area, which is not particularly open or flat.

Madidinou, the Kesh town closest to Sinshan, is, like Kastoha and Telina, on the floor of the Valley. This townsite is located east of the village of Rutherford, where state highway 128, Rutherford Road, crosses the Napa River. There is room to park along the road's shoulder, and the site is generally visible from the road, but thick underbrush covers the landscape.

The Kesh town of Ounmalin is likewise in the Valley and easily accessible. It is depicted as by the river, tucked next to a large hill marked on our maps as the Yountville Hills. Traveling north from the town of Yountville along Yount Mill Road will bring the visitor after about one mile to the townsite where the road curves to meet the river by a historical marker and the intersection with Cook Road. The landscape, including the hills, is open and easily visible.

The last Kesh town, Tachas Touchas, is accessible but remotely located. On the Kesh map it is located up the side valley of Shasash Creek. This translates on our maps to Dry Creek Road, along a creek of the same name, accessible from Napa along Redwood Road or from the north on the Oakville Grade. The area, a narrow creek valley with brush vegetation, is generally visible. Because of the lack of twists along the creekbed, an exact match of locations between maps is

hard to determine, but the closest parking appears to be at a small turnout at the 5.25 mile marker northbound.

It remains to ask, why go to the trouble of finding out where these places are located and then visiting them? Such behavior is not unique to Le Guin readers. A tour of Fritz Leiber's San Francisco has been mentioned above. Pilgrimages to A.A. Milne's Hundred Acre Wood and Richard Adams's *Watership Down* are so common that directional signs have been erected. Several guidebooks have been published to J.R.R. Tolkien's England, not to mention Peter Jackson's New Zealand, and those don't even cover the secondary world but only the primary-world places that supposedly inspired them, or that portrayed them in a movie.

It must be said, with full intensity, that the most captivating maps possible would still mean little without an enticing and meaningful text supporting them. The appeal of Le Guin's sub-creations, the Hainish worlds and Earthsea no less than the Valley of the Na, lies in the depth and breadth, the detail, intensity, and scope of the created world; in sum, in the genius of its author. Though much smaller in geographic scope than Tolkien's Arda, the Valley of the Na and its surrounding lands form the sub-creation that most closely matches Tolkien's in carrying a resonance and a fullness of sub-created reality from the author's skill at depicting the physicality of the places, the feel of being there, and the character of the stories and people that would be native to this place. This is why the Kesh so closely resemble the Native Americans; being also native to this place and inhabiting it deeply in a way we do not, they would develop similar perceptions and myths.⁴ The reader is drawn to this with what Le Guin once called the "hunger for something real" ("Elfland" 78-79).

It is within that context that visiting, and seeing for oneself, the locales that the author had in mind when creating the story, adds an additional richness and dimension of understanding to the act of reading the text. It has particular value for readers for whom, as with Le Guin, this is their native land (as it is for me, who grew up in another valley of similar landscape not far away), but *Always Coming Home* has succeeded in conveying a sense of a mythology of Northern California and this one valley in particular to readers of widespread geographic origins.

⁴ Le Guin, Margaret Chodos-Irvine (the illustrator), and Todd Barton (the composer) professed to be inspired by Native American cultures, but they tried not to use these as a direct influence. Le Guin explains, "it was something for me to fall back on, to *feed* on when I wrote this book, to get strength from" (*Always* 777).

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