Lexical Semantics: Mapping Gender and Cultural Geography in Ursula K. Le Guin's Speculative Fiction

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Abstract

This article attempts to contextualize how the idea of geography plays a significant role in speculative fiction. The resultant contention is that the gender dynamics of space and place, regarded in the setting of literary anthropology, can be studied through a close examination of lexical and semantic patterns. Stemming from this line of enquiry, the article revisits Ursula K. Le Guin's novelette "Buffalo Gals, Won't You Come Out Tonight" and discusses the striking co-relations that emerge when reading into the underlying intersections of gender geography and cultural geography.

Keywords: gender studies, geographical perspectives, Le Guin, lexical semantics, literary anthropology, speculative fiction, Ursula K. Le Guin

Introduction

There are those who tend to follow the beaten path and write in the language of what is known, and there are those who create their own trajectory: charting new lands, crafting new maps, exploring new worlds to usher readers into the nourishing terrain of what may yet be known. Ursula K. Le Guin is one such pioneering voice that resonates strongly within the American writing scene.

A poet, an essayist, short story writer, novelist, playwright, literary critic and the grand master of science fiction, Le Guin brought to literature a unique and lasting flavor which challenged the tonality of hard science-fiction and the space-fantasy genres that most readers were accustomed to. The former era had seen a surfeit of writerly clichés such as the overt emphasis on male hero figures and the habitual use of masculine archetypes, combined with a certain phallocentric bias. Amidst her male peers, Le Guin surfaced with a distinct style that drew upon her own embodied experiences. Eventually – be it her choice of feminist rhetoric which indicated the need for new word coinages, her treatment of narratives that worked by the principle of a cycle instead of a series, or her aesthetic vision which sought to capture the understated and the unsaid – Le Guin challenged existing notions of what a woman writer could accomplish in a male-dominated publishing system.

It can even be said that Le Guin liberated the confined subject of nut-and-bolt science fiction from its rusty bearings, and retitled it speculative literature, all the while retaining the recognisable acronym of SF. This genre title has, in recent years, come to mean a hybrid category of genre fiction that encompasses themes that border on intimate encounters with the fantastic, where one is presented with a utopian or dystopian ecosphere of alternate reality. Given that the art of challenging stereotypes built around philosophies of "othering" was always Le Guin's secret enterprise, it comes as no surprise that her writings repeatedly challenged preconceived notions on gender, class and race. On these lines, it is easy to see how her creative mind and her creative ambitions were always seeking to envelope subjects as diverse as folkloristics, ethnography and anthropology.

"Buffalo Gals, Won't You Come Out Tonight" published in the collection *The Unreal & The Real – Where on Earth* (2012) is a novelette which won Le Guin the prestigious Hugo and the World Fantasy awards. It was penned in a time when male writers dominated the market. The title is inspired by a song made popular by James Stewart in *It's a Wonderful Life*. The storyline revolves around two lead female characters, while the plot opens to a scene of events unfolding after an apparent plane crash, whose lone survivor is a little girl called Myra, travelling to Canyonville. In a tryst with destiny Myra is in due course forced to wake up to the bizarre vicissitudes of life in the high desert of Eastern Oregon, with a talking she-coyote for company who rescues her and helps restore her senses. Although, on the pretext of leading the girl to her people the harmless looking coyote is soon shown to don the role of a shape-shifting trickster figure, guiding a dizzy Myra into uncharted land and calling for a divide between the ways of the Old People and the New People. What follows is a queer ethnographic saga doused in intrigue. The story finally settles with Myra learning to trudge through a maze of mythical vagaries, as it were, across a hundred miles of sagebrush, away from the clutches of nefarious civilizing forces.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

This article is a qualitative study which utilises the conceptual framework of lexical semantics to analyze the novelette and so draws heavily on the work of M. A. K. Halliday and lexical field theory developed in the early 1950s, which offers the technique of componential analysis to study language structures (Lipka, 1992, pp. 118–45).

Lexis implies word usage. Semantics points to units of meaning. Put together, lexical semantics signposts the complexities involved in the process of meaning creation. In hindsight, a traditional componential analysis of lexical patterns, as proposed by Halliday, assumes that words do not have unitary meanings but are complexes of components. For example, the meaning of the word "woman" can be analyzed for its complex of components [female] [adult] [human]. Similarly, the meaning of the word "spinster" can be analyzed through a larger assembly of components [female] [adult] [human] [not married].

In literature, componential analysis calls for a close reading of a text as probing a narrative would necessitate a deeper understanding of choices in diction, as lexical units comprise of words, phrases, expressions and even dialogue at large.

This article argues for an anthropological attitude in the application of componential analysis, where the focus shifts to the cultural praxis or context of phraseology in fiction. Oftentimes, a creative writer is prone to choose a particular word or idiomatic expression over another (diction), or indulge in the creation and arrangement of neologisms in order to clarify an idea (new word coinages), or construct a nexus of intricate semantic relations through word-clusters that syndicate a discourse which is polemic in intent (word-set disambiguation). These choices deserve a closer look, especially in the context of an author like Le Guin whose fiction is profoundly influenced by complex ideas such as cultural relativism, social anthropology, ethnography and Native American history. Indeed, it is possible that Le Guin never believed in the idea of crafting a make-believe world unless it addressed important questions on matters of race, ethnicity, gender, class and the environment. Consequently, one way of viewing her writings is to see them as thought experiments in literary anthropology where the imaginative connects with the real.

Literary anthropology is "the study of people and their cultural manifestations through literature" (Erickson, 1988, pp. 95–126). Various approaches to literary anthropology suggest that literature holds the power to generate intimate encounters with social and cultural customs, beliefs and artefacts (Cohen, 2013, pp. 1–26). In the context of "writing social reality" N. J. Rapport (2012) suggests, literary anthropology is essentially split into two categories. The first category discusses why a certain literary genre is greeted for its concerted representation of historical imagery, ushering the exchange of "myth" across cultural provinces in thought. The second category brackets anthropology per se as a chastised discipline that has in due course come to regard "the subjectivity of experience" as episcopal to the inclusion of "different kinds of expression – visual, audible, sensory, or different kinds of literary genres – fictional or poetic or dialogic". Basically, literary anthropology encourages one to treat a story as a context for understanding cultures and phenomena in an imaginative grid, where the reader takes the position of an ethnographer or participant observer in a text's co-creation of meaning. By this logic, the reader does not merely make meaning out of a text by observing what characters have to say in a situation, rather the reader is encouraged to minutely observe what characters do in terms of their everyday actions. Likewise, as each character is located in a place and occupies

a certain space, it is important to acknowledge how geography plays a central role in speculative fiction.

Geography and literature share a deep connection. Modern-day approaches to geography make it an interdisciplinary area. In recent years there has been a renewed interest in reviewing the role of landscape in literature, particularly against the setting of the Anthropocene. Geography viewed as symbol, geography as determining point-of-view, geography as shaping characters and geography as defining plot structure are some of the areas that are being revisited by scholars and readers. In this fashion, geography can be contextualized on several scales of reasoning: physical geography, human geography and cultural geography. As per Anderson (2019) culture is moresoever a "mediated experience" if one were to consider how discourses, ideologies and narratives subtly blend with "geo-historical processes" that edify the value of embodied experiences (pp. 608–617). Therefore, in rudimentary terms, we may see how cultural geography correlates with the natural environment and with the human organization of space and place in an lived context (Johnston, 2019, pp. 369–371**)**. Cultural geography is best understood in a text by tapping into the semantic affiliation of its nestled counterparts: that is, feminist geography, gender geography and social geography. As per Lorimer (2005), one can examine three other discursive branches in cultural geography: traditional cultural geography, new cultural geography and more-than-representational geographies (pp. 83–94).

The idea of geography when yoked with literary anthropology allows us to hypothesize why literary texts are first and foremost the pivotal site of noteworthy social, cultural and historical engagements (Hemer, 2020, pp. 1–10). Working along these lines it is noteworthy to observe how geographical considerations are ever present at the heart of good speculative fiction, eliciting the requirement for a comprehensive understanding of world-building experiments. Often the worlds pictured in SF point to curious in-betweens and radical imaginings. It is from this vantage point that "Buffalo Gals" is explored here as a way to investigate the conceptualization of geography in the novelette, as determined through a close examination of lexical and semantic patterns.

Analysis of the Novelette – "Buffalo Gals"

The subject of geography in its most elemental description opens up to elaborate visualizations of the earth's surface, although a dynamic entry point is to see it as a study of phenomena. While physical geography discusses the anatomy of the earth (landscapes, territories and boundaries) and its changing contours, human geography is a branch explaining how human activity affects or is molded by geography.

"Buffalo Gals" (Le Guin, 2012) presents, on its exterior, a compelling series of semantic relations which establish the rapport between the gal and the coyote who represent two different physical geographies. The presence of the coyote in the text can be analyzed for its lexical complex of components being [female] [adult] [human] [animal] [wise] [trickster] [outsider] [not feminine] [reminiscent of the Old People] [of life amidst the hinterland sagebrush]. The entry of the gal can be analyzed for its own complex of components being [female] [child] [human] [animal] [naive] [outsider] [indicative of the New People] [of life in the town]. At this stage, the contrast and similarity in components display an assortment of apparent contradictions that stem from locational differences in positionality.

The child who hails from the urbane city finds it bizarre to walk on blistered feet in the high heat of the desert, just as the coyote finds the prospect of wearing shoes in her rural locale

absurd. Resisting the rough and rugged life in the land of rimrock cliffs is part of Myra's upbringing. Shunning the hostile city full of estranged people who live in suffocating holes is part of Coyote's instinct.

Cultural Geography and the Locational Positioning of Identity

The perspective of cultural geography when combined with literary anthropology presents a move from the world of external surfaces and appearances to an inner world of meaning and experience. Atwood (2013) in "Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature" illustrates how "literature is a map, a geography of the mind." Geography is not merely about what something "looks like" but is also inclusive of "how it feels." In this fashion, so called "real" places transform into "creative geographies of the mind" (pp. 19–40). For instance, provincial writers the world over are known for their creative emphasis on cultural geography: one can consider R. K. Lakshman's fictitious town Malgudi, or relate to Mark Twain's personalized depiction of the Mississippi river (*Life on the Mississippi*, 1883), or even study Robert Frost's visualization of New England (*Collected Poems*, 1930).

Writing a place into the literary landscape generates its own climate of characters that network in it. That said, no text is outside geography. The places constituted in fiction articulate the very nature and situation of the characters that people it. Determining the construction of places, Morgan (1996) maintains, a place "entails history … [and] is always framed by the point of view of other places" (pp. 1–30). Entrikin (1991) also reasons for the centrality of place in the construction of subjective experiences in society. He contends, "place presents itself to us as a condition of human experience," meaning we are always "in place" as much as we are always in culture. To this degree, one can say, "places make people" (pp. 10–26).

The Coyote and Myra in "Buffalo Gals" (Le Guin, 2012) are good examples for illustrating the influence of location in shaping the inner disposition of characters. Myra prioritizes vision as she belongs to the sophisticated world of the New People. Yet, the Coyote who abides by the rustic topography of the Old People fancies the truth that is revealed through her visceral senses, which is proof of her otherness. Coyote lives by the produce of her bioregion and is directed mostly by her tactile, gustatory and olfactory senses, so the craggy cliffs where a crow carcass may be scavenged, or the creeks which taste of salmon, or the juniper forest that smells of cat-pee. *"*This is my country," she exclaims. "Every goddam sagebrush" (p. 139).

It is useful to observe the child's memory of hospitality at Coyote's abode Bide-A-Wee. In Myra's understanding, the Coyote's personality is characterized by how she arranges her home through geographical actions. The ramshackle is "dark – cluttered" with no light. One has to "feel" the way inside and about. What "felt like a bed – felt more like a dirty-clothes pile". Often, when Myra is hungry, she has to smell out what is edible like Coyote would, so that "the dead fish hanging from the ceiling" is certified to mean "smoked dried salmon" and each meal is complete only when one licks the fingers clean as is customary. On a similar front, Myra's experience of quenching her thirst in Coyote's home is no less fascinating. She feels her way to a pot, smells it, then tastes it cautiously, and explains how the texture is like mud – "warm – stale". To make matters worse, the Coyote's home is infested with fleas, which adds a tactile dimension to the repeated visits. Myra notes, the peculiar feature in Coyote's household is that she "slept at night and waked in the day like humans instead of the other way round like coyotes" (p. 147).

In the child's assessment all the people in Coyote's cultural ecosphere are outlandish geographical entities who live and are shaped by what is available to their senses. Geography

defines their movements, behavior and their ways of experiencing reality. A common feature is to look like children even though they are adults, "mostly fat – broad-bodied – short – with bright eyes that shine." Their dwarf homes are filled with the scent of "wood-smoke", "salmon-mush" or sometimes what smells like "toasted sesame seeds". Inside Chipmunk's sleeping room it is always "stuffy – warm – half dark" during day and night; the inmates drink water from the bucket and dipper and doze most of the time. Near the rimrock, by the "slimy – reedy" shores, women bathe naked, showing their "round bellies and breasts – broad hips –buttocks – and walk barefoot." The sagebrush people wear "colorful shirts – print dresses – strings of beads – earrings." At times they gather in "uneven half-circles" and dance to the rhythm of the rattle, singing and humming healing melodies with a pipe stuck in the mouth. Likewise, each family in the vicinity adapts to the contours of the terrain. Doe walks elegantly with "small steps – like a woman in high heels – quick – precise – very light" for such is her dwelling. Young Owl is a "sleepy-looking" big man sitting amidst others who have shiny "eyes like jewels" that adjust to the opacity of night vision. Horse is a splendid person with "copper-red skin", "strong legs", a "deep chest", "dark eyes" and "black hair whipping his back" while he runs across the countryside. In stark contrast Myra observes, these regions are remote places where there are no "lawns – gardens" and just "paths – dirt" which is opposed to her cultural orientation (pp. 140-151). Overall, we see the locational positioning of identity as deserving a special mention in exploring the novelette.

Cultural Geography and its Nestled Counterparts

Cultural geography in the collective encompasses discourses in feminist geography, gender geography and social geography. While feminist geography weighs in a critique on the battle of the sexes, gender geography aligned with social geography theorizes how gendered social processes are linked with distinctions in place and space. By this frame of reasoning, it is particularly inviting to notice the symbiotic connection between geography and gender. It could be said that geography influences the cultural meaning of gender, and vice versa. So too it is possible to see a series of interlinked modalities that bulb into pressing questions. How does geography impact the construal of gender identity? How do places and spaces shape gender? How does gender shape places and spaces?

Arguably "place" is not a static image in literature. It is much beyond the idea of a mappable location. Fiction as such is inherently geographical in that it is made of settings, horizons and perspectives, which present intricate psychic patterns. In a wider context, fiction represents "a field of sometimes competing forms of geographical knowledge and experience, leading one from a sensuous awareness of places to the enlightened idea of a region or a nation" (Massey, 1994, p. 64). Moreover, studying geography in fiction presents a compelling paradox of semantic signage, such as the blend of the objective and the subjective, and the merger between the real and the imaginary. Might we not assume, a plurality of cultures suggests a multiplicity of landscapes?

The concept of "space" in literature is relatively more abstract, the inference being that people turn places into spaces. In feminist speculative fiction, for instance, space can indicate the emotive layout of a radical womb-shaped utopia. It is no surprise then that feminists tend to accentuate the difference between "male" versus "female" ways of viewing and experiencing geography.

The conceptualization of gender geography fetches a nuanced understanding of word choices in the narrative "Buffalo Gals" (Le Guin, 2012). To begin with, the lead female characters – Myra and the Coyote – are both hero figures. We see the Coyote guiding Myra home in the

first half of the narrative, and Myra takes the Coyote adjacent to her home in the latter half. Both the characters suffer the label "outsider". Myra is much younger going by her age and the cultural climate that she comes from, and is referred to lovingly as "child" by her foster "mother" the Coyote. The Coyote is her elder by all means: in size and in age, as much as in the acquired experience of being a compulsive drifter. A naïve Myra is likewise referred to by the matriarch Coyote as "pup" and "Buffalo Gal". These word choices bridge the gap between the human and the animal. The Coyote on a parallel scale gravitates in description between the realm of the animal and the human. For it is only through the child's cascading vision that the reader has access to the Coyote's shape-shifting skills.

On the map of civilization, Buffalo refers to a place. Yet, to the Coyote living cloistered from the modern world that is of late filled with people who have moved out of the folkloristic way of life, the expression "Buffalo Gals" must symbolize the animals she once knew to roam the wild alongside her, who/which are no longer to be found. In this semantic reading of the text, the Coyote calling Myra "gal" indicates as to how she must be perceived as a Buffalo Gal, i.e. a person belonging to an older totemic clan of cultural nomads. "Is that you?" asks Coyote: "A Buffalo Gal? What happened to the rest of you? ... All your people" (p. 139). Contrary to this appellation, in Myra's understanding of her own self, she is but entirely human: a child who will one day grow out of her active imagination and spontaneous engagement with nature, only to meekly accept the passive gait of adulthood with the dulling of intuitive senses. In due time she would be weaned out of the old ways, as the New People spurn erstwhile mythical collocations and choose to live in conflict with nature.

A little further on in the narrative it is Myra's turn to inquire of the coyote: "I don't understand why you all look like people." To this the coyote responds in a firm tone: "We are people." And later, "Resemblance is in the eye" (p. 147).

Myra tries hard to read the Coyote's actions past her words:

> But – like you wear clothes – and live in houses – with fires and stuff – You mean what I am seeing isn't true? Isn't real – like on TV, or something? No, Coyote said … So, to me you're basically greyish yellow and run on four legs. To that lot you hop around twitching your nose all the time. To Hawk, you're an egg, or maybe getting pinfeathers. See? It just depends on how you look at things. There are only two kinds of people … Humans and animals? [exclaims Myra] … No. The kind of people who say, there are two kinds of people, and the kind of people who don't … There's the first people, and then the others. That's the two kinds (2012, p. 147).

By every measure it appears that subtle tunings in cultural geography dictate Myra's validation of what is metaphoric truth and what is experiential reality. More than once she is made aware of the capacity to choose between the two worlds by will. Simply shifting from one eye to another, brings about a change from passive "viewing" to active "seeing". For Myra hails from the land of the New People and the coyote volleys about the dwellings of the Old People. Myra must eventually choose her orientation to fit in here or there, lean to accept this eye or that one. This diagonal view in interpretation raises several concerns. Could it not be that Myra's travails may be regarded from an ethnographic standpoint where she is a participant observer watching an ethnic community? Is her cultural conditioning the cause for her "viewing" the Old People as bizarre and outlandish instead of her "seeing" them for who they really are? Necessarily Myra's urbane sensibility shapes her fundamental understanding of "people" and of how they

should look and act. After all, Myra was on her way to the very human abode of Canyonville before she met a talking coyote in an abrupt turn of events.

On the lines of gender geography, we grasp, the Old People possibly practice a free life that Myra essentially is not comfortable with or even acquainted with, though she is prone to appreciate the enchanting environment and its magical people. The important question is which "people" would she want to be. Could she adjust to coyote's place? For there were a lot of things that were hard to digest about coyote as a mother. For instance, in Myra's presence the coyote and "her friend" would "get on the bed" and "start doing that": "the child had to lie up against the wall in the same bed and hear and feel them doing that right next to her … something like fighting and something like dancing, with a beat to it" (p. 148). On one occasion the coyote's friend even stroked Myra's stomach "in a creepy way" and the coyote bit him hard and kicked him out only to spend the night with him, her "son" again doing "that" annoying thing three or four times. In entirety, one observes, the coyote's kinship patterns of ritual and taboo are such that it is acceptable for her to mate with her litter, although she would want her sense of space preserved when she insists upon it. The coyote had a series of other habits which embarrassed Myra to the bone: she would pee anywhere and take her pants down in public, or she would do "number two" anywhere and turn around and talk to it. It appeared as if the turds would respond: "Mommy! Mommy! We're here". "Poor little shits" Coyote would say (p. 149). A lot about the coyote's gender build-up confuses Myra, even she still would like to be a part of Coyote's place and space and be called family. As much as she tries to fit in, Myra is not always admired by her new neighbors, the Old People. There are many who make it apparent that she does not belong. Hawk's furious stare burns through her. The Skunk children snicker at how she smells foul. Whitefoot and Chipmunk were kind only because they had big families and pitied her solitary status. Cottontail or Jackrabbit might have as well left her lost and blind in the desert, had it not been for the daring coyote who rescued her against odds. Only Buck and Doe were not afraid of her as they were used to danger like the New People. "The Rattler wasn't afraid because he was dangerous" (p. 150). The fearless little boy called Horned Toad Child alone remained a loyal friend apart from the crazy Coyote who refused to step away from testing the road to the New People's city.

Gender and Traditional Cultural Geography

Traditional cultural geography is where basic signs for intervention in the natural landscape are studied in a literary text. For example, the erection of fences, walls, buildings and dams, impelled by the muscle of technology can trigger a series of responses towards the Anthropocene. In "Buffalo Gals" (Le Guin, 2012), the divide between the ways of the Old People and the New People are reflected in the cultural practices and physical fortifications that separate them.

Geography dictates a certain way of seeing things. Consider, for instance, the feminine character Chickadee who Myra befriends in the Coyote's absence. Chickadee embodies the traditional gender role of a "trim black-capped woman" who does not take kindly to Myra sleeping "outside" as she believes it is necessary that children must rest in a "nest". Having a home and staying indoors is culturally important to her (p. 156).

Chickadee's culinary etiquette is of special mention. She cooks in "baskets" and uses "fire" which in her outmoded cultural setting are signs of refinement. Chickadee's earthy elegance of demonstrating culture in the language of sensory appeal makes perfect sense to Myra: the "wooden tongs", the "heated rocks", the "water-filled basket" with its "terrific hiss and steam

and loud bubblings" are a tactile and kinesthetic treat to the child as they sit and eat "on the newly-shaken-out rug" embracing the bounty of hearty country manners (p.156).

Chickadee's impression of the New People is colored by her ethnic background. In her opinion the New People live in "one of the holes – across the wall" pictured as "a straight jerky line drawn across the sagebrush plain." Here is where you find one of "those fast turtle things coming." Myra offers to clarify: "It's a ranch … That's a fence … There's a lot of Herefords" (p. 154).

In playing the naming game and fine-tuning to Chickadee's wavelength, Myra mulls over the strangeness of the New People: "the scattered whitefaces", "bluish' eyes", the "high barn" and the thing moving in the distance at a terrible speed, which resembles a "fiery burning chariot", smelling of acid, iron, and death (p. 155).

Gender and New Cultural Geography

New cultural geography involves the inspection of signs for non-material culture. Geography, by this measure, seeks expression in the patterning of indigenous and urban mind-scapes. Identity, ideology, belief-systems and philosophy are just some characteristics of non-material culture that finds overt or covert expression in a narrative. For instance, Myra's query about the cultural evolution of the Old People into the New People chronicles Chickadee's impression of ethnic history:

> I guess we do things the way they always were done. When your people and my people lived together, you know. And together with everything else here. The rocks, you know. The plants and everything… you people! Do you think you [the New People] invented the sun? (Le Guin, 2012, p. 156)

When we were together it was all one place, Chickadee explains in her soft home-voice. But now the others, the new people, they live apart. And their places are so heavy. They weigh down on our place, they press on it, draw it, suck it, eat it, eat holes in it, crowd it out… Maybe after a while longer there'll only be one place again, their place. And none of us here. I knew Bison, out over the mountains. I knew Antelope right here. I knew Grizzly and Grey-wolf, up west there. Gone. All gone. (Le Guin, 2012, p. 157)

The tribulations of the indigenous mindscape are recurrently substantiated in Coyote's enumeration of the rift between the Old People and the New People. When Myra poses her question: "The first people are –?" Coyote the woman swiftly retorts:

> Us, the animals … and things. All the old ones. You know. And you pups, kids, fledglings. All first people … Them. You know. The others. The new people. The ones who came … We were here. We were always here. We are always here. Where we are is here. But its their country now. They're running it … Illegal. (Le Guin, 2012, p. 148)

By this rant one notices, the sagebrush people suffer from an encroachment in space. What was always their rich cultural space is slowly turning into the New People's lofty place, as the latter do not flinch while they gun down traditional ideas and the nature-loving people.

Gender and More-than-Representational Geographies

More-than-representational geographies discuss signs which expand into the more-than-human category. Here, the psychological scape of cultures-in-transition are observed on the lines of

performance, so one may lean beyond the frame of surface meanings to make sense out of a situation. This direction, that emerged in the 1990s, came to mean many things such as adopting the phenomenological lens and observing how people "speak in action" through their everyday enactments of embodied experiences. This is why the subject of ethnic cultural "practices" is primary located in more-than-representational geographies, as they communicate the possibility of a language which is pre-cognitive and pre-logical in nature.

Considering the psychological treatment of geography in a narrative, expressive practices of the body are regarded as signs for the flow and disruption of everyday life. In this order of reasoning, the metatheatrical function of "performativity" is thought to play a central role (Thrift, 2008, pp. 171–197). For instance, an author might make his/her artistry transparent through the act of directly showing what the characters are doing in a story, without explaining what those actions mean. The reader would have to play the role of a participant observer to make meaning out of what one sees. Through this phenomenological lens, even the picturization of mundane acts such as a routine, a practice, a custom or the staging of a conversation through the language of gesture is considered relevant. Essentially, the characters talk in action.

Considering the enigmatic presence of the surreal grandmother spider in the novelette is a valuable exercise. Grandmother is eulogized as the symbol of history and ancestry: she is the great weaver of dreams, for all places and experiences known to people are laced into reality by her. One can infer, the means by which the animistic characters communicate her presence is unique. Lizard and Beetle communicate by singing regional growing songs or blessing songs that have been handed down by way of legacy. Blue-Jay communicates through his rattle-aided healing dances and shamanic pine-pitch cures. We see the Old People choose to live by their totemic and pan-psychic practices and display a penchant for mythical appositions evoked through their folkloric actions.

In perspective, within the margin of a narrative, in terms of studying body-politics alone, a paradigm shift is registered in the researcher rejecting the question "What is a body?" which is now replaced with the question "What does a body do?"

"Buffalo Gals" (Le Guin, 2012) in many ways is about the act of seeing difference through what characters do. The narrative opens with a startling encounter, the literal and metaphoric "plane crash" that has impaired Myra's sight in one eye. She realizes that "if she shut the hurting eye and looked with the other, everything was clear and flat" whereas "if she used them both, things were blurry and yellowish, but deep" (p. 145). Through her ordinary human eye, the coyote is envisaged to be a "slender grey-yellow animal" with a coat that is "silvery and thick" and a "dark tear-line" marking its "long yellow eye". It is found trotting through the rabbit-brush and cheat grass, sometimes "splashing like a dog" or "quiet like a cat", carrying its tail low. The she-coyote has "hard nipples" along the "whitish belly-fur" and is habitually found gnawing and licking her food, or pissing and shitting in the open (pp. 138–150). These physical descriptions act as a corollary to the geographical actions of the Coyote, and blur the gulf between gender assumptions surrounding the performance of masculine and feminine roles. Through the child's other "hurting eye" or "weeping eye" or "pine pitch eye", her vision alters to view the coyote as magically human:

She saw a tawny-skinned woman kneeling by a campfire, sprinkling something into a conical pot … The woman's hair was yellow and grey, bound back with a string. Her feet were bare. The upturned soles looked as dark and hard as shoe soles, but the arch of the foot was high,

and the toes made two neat curving rows. She wore blue jeans and an old white shirt. (Le Guin, 2012, p. 138)

It is right for the reader to speculate, ultimately the anatomy and psychological disposition of the coyote rests in the functionality of Myra's eyes, which are fast adjusting to the mythical constituencies of a folkloristic life. The gesture-based interactions between the duo guides this interpretation. Every now and then, the Coyote hums lyrics from the popular song Buffalo Gals, and asks Myra if she is indeed a Buffalo Gal. Myra remains baffled with the pedantic rhetoric and bizarre acts, as any child born in the 1960s would be, that is a product of the future reckoning the past with curiosity and bewilderment.

Connecting the dots in a story context, more-than-representational geographies refuses to surrender to a particular interpretation. Practices staged are open to multiple interpretations and defy the rule of a logical explanation. One can say practices contribute to geographical knowledge production based on which yardstick authors tend to focus on what is most prosaically understood as everyday actions in life, such as dancing, walking or simply breathing. For all that is known, these taken-for-granted practices brought to life by characters in a narrative are not background material to be ignored. The depiction of practices are shown to foreground the embodied experiences of characters in all seriousness. The everyday then is not profane; it is beyond ordinary. Furthermore, as there is no balcony seat for the omnipresent narrator, meanings are derived and not prescribed by the author. Viewing fiction as an anthropological excursion allows the reader to make one's own meaning out of a visual context. This implicates just how often we may come up with unpredictable outcomes in semantic inferences. Finally, more-than-representational geographies highlight the role of performance. Gender is a performance. To quote the theorist Butler (1988) gender is:

> an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts … the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style (p. 520).

By this description, we see how Butler's contribution to geographical studies (which is heavily influenced by John Searle's speech-act theory) presupposes the need for understanding informal practices that elicit specific "gendered", "sexed" and "radicalized" subjectivities. By her formulation, we are prompted to study speech acts that manifest what is "named" and how gender is an "act" which "constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority". More poignantly, Butler offers, gender has a historical and geographical base which exists beyond the actor (or character) who performs the scripted conventions. Ultimately, in life, what is "actualized" and "reproduced" is habitually decreed as reality. In this vein, Butler offers a powerful argument against gender's "constructed nature" (Butler, 1988, pp. 519–531).

On a footing with Butler, Deleuze's concept of "virtualities" adds another dimension to the functioning of more-than-representational geographies. Virtualities echo the certainty of diversity in time and space. They refer to parallel possibilities that are unexplored by characters facing a situation, in that we are speaking of actions that could yield a range of results, which are in every sense real but not always actualized (Glowczewski, 2020, pp. 81–130).

In Le Guin's novelette it is fascinating to "see" how each mentalized action of the hero figures corresponds to a virtual possibility that may or may not be actualized. The Coyote can return home to the Old People, or allow itself/oneself to get killed/murdered by surrendering to the

bullet-spitting enemy: the New People. The child too has a number of virtual choices at hand based on the new kinship linkages that are gathered in her journey: she can be schooled in what is appropriately human and remain Myra, or grow into the space of the more-than-human Buffalo Gal. She can traverse the physical geography of the country/town that is full of silly lines drawn by the patriarchal New People who dominate and suppress all that is beautiful, or she can be at home in the matriarchal utopia of the more-than-geographical Old People who accept her exactly as she is. Ultimately, given the political economy of the text riveted in emic-etic observations, we see the Coyote and Myra evoke in us a Lacanian experience of shifting meanings, leaving us to choose between the veracity of reality and truth.

Conclusion

Embracing various approaches to reading speculative fiction on the lines of geography and literary anthropology, can lead to a reflection upon Le Guin's radical word-building experiments. At its opulent best the novelette "Buffalo Gals" grants an imaginative interface for the reader and critic to observe and acknowledge how real-time negotiations on questions of gender and ethnicity are subtly achieved in feminist literature. Le Guin's gynocentric accent in diction and her revisionist portrayal of inventive geographies spells out the gender dynamics of space and place, in a manner that is unique to the genre of SF. We see, through the close examination of lexical and semantic patterns that one is invited to observe how cartographic references tend to steer the lead female characters into assuming gender roles that resonate with the positioning of geographical identities and the performance of geographical actions. Assuredly, the Coyote is no simple character if one were to address her educative role in the narrative. In all potentiality, Coyote's everyday fare of unusual enactments assist Myra – as much as the reader – in recognizing how received information is of no use in the ontological wilderness of the mind. We see, Coyote's mercurial presence urges us to ponder over the nature of truth and realisms prevalent in the world, of such magnitudes that may be accessed only through the standpoint of embodied and mediated experiences as revealed in the novelette.

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