

## **(Re)visualizing Spectralized Others and Spectralizing (Re)visualized Humans/Posthumans in “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”**

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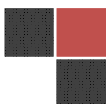
### **Abstract**

Traditional readings of fiction create and configure **otherness-esthat** involve ideology critiques which aim at unmasking differential processes involved in specific events of image-making, representation and interpretation. The current paper re-reads Ursula K Le Guin’s short story “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” through a cultural posthumanist approach with an attempt to examine the human/posthuman as a conceptual category by focussing on a neo-materialist approach that seeks to radicalize the re-composition of the dense materialities that go on to make and un-make the human/posthuman spatially. This helps to critically negotiate the terms of (re)visualizing spectralized others and spectralizing (re)visualized humans/posthumans. Thus, this paper reads Guin’s utopic parable as a thought experiment wrapped around a story—that is meant not only to teleologically re-configure and re-position the human as the posthuman and vice versa but also to countenance the cultural praxis of our gaze as perceiving-becoming subject-readers.

**Keywords:** posthumanist, humanist, deleuze, cartography, utopia.

The short story by Ursula K Le Guin introduces a Utopic place and moment in time, encoded as a festival that has come to the city—The Festival of Summer. The stage is set for an ‘ideal city’ in More’s sense of the word. However, it is far from a ‘nowhere’. In fact, it is the stuff of stories that human cultures usually tell themselves—stories mythical, legendary, aspirational and representational, all the same. What enables this story/event/place, however, is the imminent flow of life, along the lines of Jane Bennett’s idea of the “vibrant materiality” (Bennett 112) of the natural, human, sub/infra/supra-human, inhuman and the inorganic. In the description of the festival, the assemblages of the organic and inorganic world are mutually inter-constitutive, inter-penetrating and affective, intensifying the conscious mood of festivity and verve. They are introduced to us by the narrator, who undercuts the referentiality of this utopia by destabilizing his/her position as an omniscient narrator and by linking her/him-self with a shared sense of ‘we’ as different, though not entirely, from ‘them’—the citizens of Omelas: “*They were not less complex than us. The trouble is that we have a bad habit... We have almost lost hold...*” (emphasis added). The curtain drops and the narrator soon debunks the myth underlying this “city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away” by foregrounding her role as narrator and her inability to sufficiently keep up with the pace and tenor of the fictionality of her representation.

Guin’s brand of speculative science fiction is never about the future; in fact, it uses the future as a “metaphor, drawn from certain great dominants of our contemporary life—science, all the sciences, and technology, and the relativistic and the historical outlook, among them. (For Guin) Space travel is one of these metaphors; so is an alternative society, an alternative biology; the future is another” (Guin, *Language* 159). *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* (here on referred to as *Omelas*) is a kind of Speculative Fiction, a psychomyth<sup>1</sup>, that envisions an alternative, distorted and a non-realist world of the future that on closer examination is not quite about the future. In fact, it harkens the reader to our many presents and multiple current contexts. The story of Omelas begins with a celebration of and in the city. The narrator’s vivid descriptions of the city’s happy front and happy people are accompanied by the former’s inability to contextualize the city and its cultural notions of affect and intent. After what seems like a utopia of a perfectly planned civic, administrative and cultural arrangement, there is break in the narrative. This break involves an event: At a certain age, the children of Omelas are brought to a cellar where one child has been incarcerated. The peculiar child is disadvantaged, malnourished, demented and disabled. It does not know the reasons for or the wider implications of its own incarceration, though it remembers “sunlight and its mother’s voice” (Guin 4). Omelas is this child’s irredeemable dystopia. The child’s condition underlines the dogma that the people of Omelas continue to be trained into: the people of Omelas rationalize their utilitarian claim for this one child’s captivity in exchange for the guaranteed harmony of others in Omelas. However, occasionally, some amongst the child’s spectators are so moved by its plight, that they will choose to not go back home. Instead, they will walk away from Omelas. This is the narrator’s clarion call to the readers: Like those who chose to walk away from Omelas, are we willing to bring our own representative systems to crisis and walk away from our utopic human(ist) fictions that rest upon and yet imaginatively (and hence materially) efface the dystopias of racialized, sexualized, ethnicized, animalized others? Are we willing to walk away from the illusory and violent certitudes of human(ist) life?

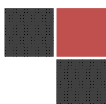


The current paper reads Guin's short story as a call for posthuman education, that will prompt a speculative (re)examination of our current condition so that we as readers could possibly stake a claim at taking the narrator's test in her urgent thought experiment about human(ist) subjectivity and potential to (re)cognize ourselves as human-posthuman via the gaze of spectralized non-human others. No alternative to Omelas is definitively configured by the narrator. What is important here, is the concrete and positive action of moving away from fictive utopias (dystopias) and the embracing of curiosity, ambiguity, finitude, empathy and speculation in our current posthuman predicament.

Guin's own position as narrator is speculative and represents a crisis-in-representation in (re)visualizing structures. The post-apocalyptic world has rendered her gaze speculative. For what else, but the condition of having exhausted her own possibilities, could have led her to speculate about her own moment of rupture—of self-doubt—while speaking about a posthuman world that survives her own. Her position is one of 'positive anteriority' as she seeks the reader's help to constructively re-member what has painfully been lost, not through a deluded nostalgia for the past or via an idealist's tale about "simple folk, not dulcet shepherds, noble savages, bland utopians ... (entities) not less complex than us"(Guin 2). Her position is also one of 'creative futurity' in the present, one that is non-dogmatically convinced about the ubiquitous embracing of posthuman potential at the plane of convergence of the post-human and the post-anthropos (Braidotti, "Theoretical Framework" 36). This would entail a creative and speculative (re)exploration of differential sites for the enhanced (re)visualization potential of posthuman entities. Such a position is keenly attentive to the Janus-faced tentative productivity of future Utopias, that can simultaneously and spontaneously revoke and(re)produce uncertainties in the dystopias of the past along with newer ones in the Derridean future justice "to come, (as) it presents itself as that which could come or come back" (Derrida 39).

Traditional readings of fiction create and configure otherness-es that involve ideology critiques which aim at unmasking differential processes involved in specific events of image-making, representation and interpretation. Le Guin's story, in this case, may be read as a parable of otherness and the violence that it entails. However, Guin's story is more than an ideology critique. In the particular telling of a posthumanist story, it introduces speculation and self-doubt by interrogatively reencountering the ontological and epistemological bases of categories like the human, the posthuman and the material. It also problematizes the fiction of utopia-dystopia correlative by bringing our own re-visualisation potential to crisis. Thus, a Spensarianutopian world of lyrical beauty, perfectly updated moral codes along with select technical know-how and perfectly programmed biosemiotics is a hoped-for corrective to potentially fatal social-psychic-moral-ethical excesses of a decadent human(ist) world. However, as it transpires, this utopia actually rests upon an underground dystopic assemblage of extreme occlusion and violent oppression.

At the heart of the fictional Omelas, are humans or their transhuman equivalents, with a strong sense of community. To start with, Omelas piques the reader's interest because culturally it is em-placed differentially. The reader is forced to acknowledge this difference in terms of absences. There is no reference to the specificities of gender, sex, race, ethnicity, disability, old age (there are only children and young/mature adults), caste, class, body image, pet or wild animals; semiology is replaced by a specific kind of



zoosemiotics where horses “flared their nostrils and pranced and boasted to one another... the horse being the only animal who has adopted our ceremonies as his own” (Guin1).

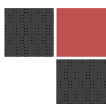
The current paper reads Guin’s short story through a cultural posthumanist approach that underscores “the collective task of constructing new subjects of knowledge, through immanent assemblages or transversal alliances between multiple actors”. The idea is to be able to examine the human/posthuman as a conceptual category by focussing on a neo-materialist approach that seeks to “capture the complexity of ongoing processes of subject-formation” (Braidotti, “Theoretical Framework” 36). Based on Latour’s Actor Network Theory, if a constructivist attempt is made to examine subjects as entities from the point of view of a “flat ontology”<sup>2</sup> (DeLanda 58), a number of problems emerge.

To begin with, the politicization of space in Omelas, rests on hierarchies that organize entities around essences. The cartography of this utopia-dystopia rests on a mechanistically and organically co-opting network of actants that constitute this assemblage. Drawing on the work of Rosi Braidotti, such an assemblage, as the current study illustrates, radicalizes the “re-composition” (NT 219) of the “dense materiality” (110) that goes on to make and un-make the human/posthuman spatially. This leads us to critically negotiate the terms of (re)visualizing spectralized others and spectralizing (re)visualized humans/posthumans. Thus, Guin’s utopic parable is in fact a thought experiment<sup>3</sup> wrapped around a story that is meant not only to teleologically re-configure and re-position the human as the posthuman and vice versa but also to countenance the cultural praxis of our gaze as perceiving-becoming subject-readers.

Omelas, as a utopia characterised by the illusion of presence, is a perfectly knowable and known world of progress and utilitarianism, which makes it ideally beautiful. In its ‘Blakean’ perfect symmetry, it may, easily be construed as a post-apocalyptic setting resonating with a transhumanist vision of arcadian pleasure that keeps “destructive” (Guin 3) technology out. Omelas is also marked by its potential for endless possibility. The narrator’s own self-doubt and her confession about the (im)possible task of representation of a post-apocalyptic culture—which she, along with the reader, may simultaneously fear and marvel—helps sustain the enigma around the posthuman. It has an elaborate institutional apparatus that structures, defines, mediates, safeguards, reinforces and transforms itself and its people with the supplementarity of lessons learnt from the world that it succeeds and inherits. A closer look at this utopia, however, reveals the dystopia that it must necessitate and justify. In his letter to the ‘human’ signed off by ‘Your possible future self’, Bostrom writes:

your best moment is but a beckoning scintilla at most ... Utopia is the hope that the scattered fragments of good that we come across from time to time in our lives can be put together, one day, to reveal the shape of a new kind of life. The kind of life that yours should have been (2-6).

In this sense, a utopia is the cartography<sup>4</sup> of a “transformative vision” (Braidotti, “Theoretical Framework” 34) through a selective re-constitution of hope as *potentia* that wishes to capitalize on the sheer presence of many a ‘beckoning scintilla(s)’ while being acutely aware of the threat of “entrapment (potestas)” (33) which it always already entails as dystopia. Re-organizing what is ‘Best’ and ‘good’ from other ‘scattered fragments’ which are their opposite involves a re-constitution of the gaze that is then



able to authorize this cartography of utopia. Thus, posthumanism becomes a metaphysical substrate for reviewing and revisiting the tentative potential and uncertainty associated with entangled dystopias and utopias, by a speculative (re)constitution of the gaze that critically (re)examines questions about ‘Utopia/Dystopia, for whom?’ and that radically perspectivizes the engagement with questions about uncertainty and vulnerability.

Jameson describes utopia as “an operation calculated to disclose the limits of our own imagination of the future”. Such a calculative approach fails to factor in the disconnections, exclusions and ‘intra-actions’<sup>7</sup> between various actants that (re)produce and re-engage with the incarcerated child. For Nick Bostrom, “What is Society in Utopia? A never-finished tapestry, its weavers equal to its threads; the unfolding patterns a mesh for life and adventure, an inexhaustible generator of beauty ... What is Guilt in Utopia? Guilt is our knowledge that we could have created Utopia sooner” (6).

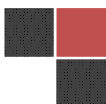
The society in Omelas is utopic on both these fronts, for it is celebratory about its own state and potential and their ~~guilt~~ has no reference to the other(s) on whose dystopia, their utopia may be founded. From a Deleuzean lens, Omelas is introduced to the reader in the snapshot of a utopic celebration—the Festival of Summer—that combines a Spensarianidyllic and lyrical flow of immanence organized around assemblages consisting of human, non-human, inhuman, animal, natural and technological entities which together weave a dystopic horror story of selective inclusion and exclusion.

This thought experiment is aleatory. It extends an invitation to the reader towards creating the ground for Utopia-Dystopia, while prompting the reader to locate his/her own position within the political ecology of Omelas. While the narrator perceives—and simultaneously describes, she also mobilizes the reader’s perception and in fact, the latter’s limits of their perception of the wider ramifications of utopia-dystopia. Thus, while the political ecology of her own position is constitutive of the assemblage that is Omelas, her invitation to the reader in contributing to its construction, makes Omelas a conceptual entity more than a specific place. So, Omelas becomes a thought experiment that does two things.

The first thing it does is that it draws the reader’s attention to atrans-humanist, post-apocalyptic utopia. In doing so, Guin’s Omelas appears as a test-case where the posthuman (ontologically speaking, the enhanced human and one interlinked with other species) attempts to re-iterate the human (ist) story; for humans make sense of the world around them—their relationships and events—through self-preserving discourses that justify the suffering of one for the happiness of everyone. However, Guin’s speculative story about Omelas, makes its utopia-dystopia both provisional and conditional. Thus, though produced through discourse, it is differentially alterable and negotiable.

Within the tightly-controlled structure of the utopian Omelas, Guin creates the (under)ground for stasis in the narrative, that is on the one hand braced by the ceremonial movement of a community procession as it celebrates itself. On the other hand, are those who, by choosing to walk away from Omelas, incognito and trace-less, are willing to engage speculatively, like the narrator, with fuzzy uncertainty about what lies beyond it.

The child in the cellar is a missing person, the symbolic human-in-crisis. Yet, it has been unable to draw an alert—symbolic of the parable about the violent extermination of de-humanised, racialised, feminized and sexualized entities, among



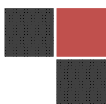
spectral others. It is also a missing link in history—symbolic of the various political strategies and shifting discourses of power that put under erasure the foundational tenets regarding who and what constitutes the human as a conceptual category. Being ‘human’, as many posthuman theorists tell us, is an imaginative category that has material effects for it points towards ‘who’ needs to be saved or ‘whose’ interests need to be safeguarded by the conferring of rights and privileges. The question of life in its flow of immanence also necessitates questions of ‘whose’ life and transcendence for ‘whom’. Moreover, the missing other/link or the human-in-crisis is in fact not so much a single entity as much as it is a predicament that involves a process of subject formation within and as a network of actants.

The narrative strategy of the cellar child’s incarceration at the heart of the story has an extended purpose. The procession, while it depicts the thrumming vitality of the city, is a panorama of hope, set off by the transhumanist potentiality of techno-scientific and moral evolution. The underground cellar’s appearance in the narrative, however, off sets it into a timeless inertia of cognitive dissonance that is so deluded by its own self-organizing potential that it thrums and occludes marginalized others. These others, illustrated by the child in the cellar, must be miniaturized, minoritized and museumized. Not exterminated, it is ‘made’ archaic and ontologically hybridized “not quite/ not white” (Bhabha 132) so that it may fulfil its function of simulating scientifically calibrated levels of empathy and sympathy, while carefully precluding guilt, in the highly evolved posthuman individual.

The second thing that Omelas as a thought experiment does is an extension of the first. Space in Omelas involves are-composition of the dense materialities that go on to make and un-make this human. The cellar is this child’s virtual museum where people see it in its de-sexualized, de-racialized, de-subjectivized unitary singularity. The child is an archaic animal—that was human once but has now been punished for its anthropomorphic destruction of the earth. As a last specimen of its kind, it now teeters on the critical brink of extinction. Interestingly, it is the structure of the cellar, which, in fact, both enables and enfeebles the (re)visualization of this child-specimen.

The location of the cellar is crucial. It is in the basement of one of the “beautiful public buildings” or a cellar in “one of its (Omelas’s) spacious private homes” (Guin 3). There is no hope of rescue or reprieve from this undisclosed location. This museumized incarceration of the (un)missing other carefully seals it within the tight and ornate architecture of the city’s bustling everyday life, which in a radical contrast to the former, is exquisitely celebratory in affect and structure. Psychoanalytically speaking, the child in the cellar/basement is symbolic of that part of the human/post-human subject that must remain underground in the recesses—buried/covered but alive in a subterranean space that signifies presence as punished and punishable. Publicly, it’s opposite—the marked, hyper-conscious<sup>5</sup>, posthuman—is situated above the ground and looks toward the future sky of possibility. The irony of this entangled Utopia-Dystopia, arises from the condition of (im)possibility, not only of the child’s release from its handlers but also of those—the people of Omelas—who are cognitively locked-in in dogmatically demanding their own existence through the existence of the incarcerated child.

The museumization of the child separates the people of Omelas from the child in space and time. This child then becomes the illusory plane of transcendence from which they can then produce knowledge about themselves. They know that the child is there and they feel “anger, outrage, impotence, despite all their explanations” (4) at the sight



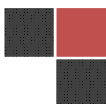
of the child. But they also know that the child's presence is justified and crucial for their own survival as full subjects—emotions and affect intact. Hence, the need for a collaborative cognitive recognition and (dis)avowal of the child's violent incarceration as justified paradigmatically with the other celebratory rituals that they need to live by as a community. This fact of uncertainty is what connects us (including Guin) with them. Wallowing in metaphysical uncertainty, as is our wont, foregrounds Guin's own speculative commitment as narrator. She never once explicitly mentions her secret/guilt regarding her consciousness of this uncertainty. But the story's title is also its subtext, though only in the form of a question: Are we, as readers, willing to walk away from Omelas, like the Ones, who do walk away? The ones who walk away from Omelas(in)to \_\_\_\_\_ [~~nowhere~~, implying another Ut(dyst)opia], set a precedent in posthuman education.

If Utopias and dystopias are always already entangled, are we willing to be attentive to this inescapable entanglement and are we willing to situate ourselves in the liberatory and dangerous world of metaphysical uncertainty? Guin becomes a speculative provocateur. In order to be attentive to the inherent uncertainty in our current Utopic-Dystopic predicament, her position within the narrative, provokes the reader into embracing the inescapable complicity and brinkmanship involved in the production of dystopias-utopias. Here, the posthuman gaze becomes a meta-gaze in that it indexes a more-than-human and more-than-anthropos gaze; yet it is also speculative and acutely conscious of its own epistemic and subject positional location. The posthuman gaze is not easy to be had. It has to be deliberately and consciously cultivated through posthuman education.

For Jane Bennett, "Materiality is a rubric that tends to horizontalize the relations between humans, biota, and abiota" and enables "a greater appreciation of the complex entanglements of humans and nonhumans" (112). Thus, the training of Omelas's young (and a few adults) toward the maturity of affect, involves a control of their gaze, which is culturally conditioned, ideologically modelled and cartographically authorized through the 'vibrant materiality'—borrowing from Bennett—of Omelas as an assemblage.

Separated in time and space, stripped of human recognizability, the child's spectacle simulates a crisis of existence. Life, in the post-apocalypse, must be lived at a cost. This cost is borne by the gaze which is becoming<sup>6</sup>-unitary through the illusion of transcendence of becoming-hyper subjects—both in their spectralized post-ness as the child's spectators as well as in their status as upgraded celebratory transhumans. The spectators keep coming and the child's presence is what enables their gaze. However, the spectators are taught to operate dogmatically, through selective gazing channels that can gather knowledge about the child as a necessary being-in-unfreedom because it guarantees their own freedom.

The simultaneous celebration of their own presence and the missing other(s)' absence is programmatically declarative of their transhumanist optimism that must come at a moral cost. In order to avert the existential risk borne by the moral cost of incarcerating undeclared missing others without a trial, the posthuman must undertake a selective cognitive dis-engagement with the terms of a transhuman social contract that rests on a supposedly nuanced and utopian repetition of the Enlightenment/humanist story in terms of the species capacity to self-organize and progress. "They know that if the wretched one were not there snivelling in the dark, the other one, the flute-player, could make no joyful music" (Guin 5).

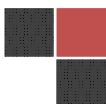


The flute-player's music is instrumental. It is non-representational. In this sense, it is threateningly similar to the non-representational sounds made by the incarcerated child. The child's enfeebled communication, which is expressed not semantically but only in the form of odd sounds, may also be perceived ironically as oracular—symbolic of an outmoded religiosity. It is only a collaborative cognitive dissonance that authorizes this cartography of a posthumanutopia, because it enables the 'transformative vision' of the spectrally proliferating post-race, post-gender, post-ethnicity, post-sex, post-age, post-human spectators into a unitary strategic gaze (that is admittedly not post-scarcity or post-guilt) directed towards the child as a museum specimen. The people of Omelas are not turning a blind eye to the child's own dystopia. Rather, they are training themselves to transcendently justify it for their own sake. Infact, they are endlessly becoming-in-the-reverse as their post-ness is rarefied into a unitary gaze. As the narrator says, "Theirs is no vapid, irresponsible happiness. They know, that they, like the child, are not free"(5). This is the ground for their utopian 'transformative vision'. This is where, Guin radically provokes the question of posthuman education and posthuman subjectivity through her creative futurity. Through her own brand of Science Fiction, she hopes to generate a different kind of speculative consciousness in an alternative world that is peopled with (post)humans who are engaged with the consciousness, agency and 'intra-action' in and of the material as well as non-human animal world.

For many posthumanism theorists, we as humans are already posthuman and have in a certain way, have always been so. Guin's thought experiment is a call to her reader to participate in what the (post)human gaze must be like. Evidently, the transhuman spectators' education is flawed because they are trained dogmatically such that their gaze is essentially unitary despite their differential positions/windows of seeing (for example, through race, gender, sex, ethnicity, etc.). Their training, therefore, replicates the humanist model of progress and utilitarianism by ultimately converging in terms of their 'collaborative cognitive dissonance' towards guilt and criminality, intervention and interference, utopia and dystopia. In Guin's *Omelas*, this knowledge converges into an aphorism that, "To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in Omelas for that single, small improvement: to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of the happiness of one: that would be to guilt within the walls indeed" (4).

Critical posthumanism radically unsettles voice and identity as something that essentially lies outside the human. It engages with the profound and complex issues of melancholy and vulnerability in the humanist conception of the world. In Guin's *Omelas*, just as the child's sights and sounds are attenuated, so is its entire repertoire of language and memory. Its de-subjectivization as a fully recognizable entity, is a result of this attenuation of cognitive, sensory and affective contact. There has been an epistemic violence on its *telos* and *logos*. The child had a language that sook reprieve. This language, once Blakean, in its sheer realism and prophetic tenor about the marriage of innocence and experience, has now been muffled and muddled.

The child's language has been enfeebled and rendered archaic, just like its speaker, so that now only the vestiges remain, of what once sounded like an amnesty plea, resonant with our own times, marked by differential rhetorics on global risk assessments and climate justice claims. "I will be good," it says. 'Please let me out. I will be good!'. They never answer. The child used to scream ... and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining, 'eh-haa, eh-haa,' and it speaks less and less often"





(Guin 4). Now, teetering on the brink of humanity and in-humanity, this child's emotive mercy petition has been transformed into not-entirely-animalized, non-representational sounds that lack any semblance of intentionality and subjectivity. To live in Omelas is to be co-opted into a trained dogmatic gaze that adjusts itself sans curiosity to the "terrible paradox" (5) of their own u(dys)topia. The people who remain in Omelas are convinced that the child "is too degraded and imbecile to know any real joy. It has been afraid too long ever to be free of fear. Its habits are too uncouth for it to respond to humane treatment". This involves a colonising gaze in visualizing the child based around the binaries of self/other, good/bad, human/animal and mind/body. Evidently, the "colonial gaze distributes knowledge and power to the subject who looks, while denying or minimizing access to power for its object, the one looked at" (Rieder 7). Thus, as a fantastic and museumized specimen, the incarcerated child is denied both consciousness and subjectivity.

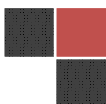
On the other hand, a posthuman materialist approach stresses the importance of "cartographies as a conceptual off-shoot of neo-materialism" (Braidotti, "Theoretical Framework" 32). For Braidotti, a focus on cartographies is methodologically important because it draws upon subjects of exchange that "compose a relational community, defined as a nomadic, transversal 'assemblage' that involves non-human actors and technological media" (32-33). Bruno Latour, in his Actor-Network Theory, states that material things and humans must cooperate within a network to achieve certain results such that both the former and the latter are seen as non-hierarchical actants, leaving behind any sociality-materiality divide. For Braidotti, "Subjectivity is not restricted to bound individuals ... in assemblages that flow across and displace the binaries" (33).

In this sense, Omelasis not only a highly politicized space but works as a network constituted by different actants that constitute Omelas as a structure. The structure of the cellar/basement is described in detail:

It has one locked door, and no window. A little light seeps in dustily between cracks in the boards, second hand from a cobwebbed window somewhere across the cellar ... a couple of mops, with stiff, clotted, foul-smelling heads, stand near a rusty bucket. The room ... a mere broom closet or disused tool room ... (The child) is afraid of the mops. It shuts its eyes, but it knows the mops are still standing there... The food bowl and the water jug are hastily filled, the door is locked, the eyes disappear. The people at the door never say anything, but the child, who has not always lived in the tool room, and can remember sunlight and his mother's voice, sometimes speaks. (3-4)

The above lines open up a gap between description of the child in terms of the omniscient narrator's first-person perspective of what the child looks like or feels and the immanent shaping, and materializing of it as an embodied and embedded subject-object. It appears that the child's incarceration is not just the result of a megalomaniacal posthuman gaze that installs its posthuman surveillance on an archaic-zed and (en)feeble(d) human specimen in a bid to organize its own textual and ideological critique around criminality—thus keeping "guilt" out from the neat edifices of the walled city. On a closer look, the sheer presence of the human-animal would not be enough to generate scrutiny about it.

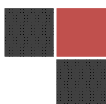
Stacy Alaimo reflects that "trans-corporeality" instantiates "embeddedness and dependence in the forging of an ethics based on 'interacting biological, climatic,



economic, and political forces” (Alaimo qtd in Rossini 155-56). A closer scrutiny of the structure of the cellar draws attention to the trans-corporeal assemblage in the room as an ongoing event. The room—itsself underground and undisclosed—is described in terms of a hellish alienation with anthropomorphic metaphors that invoke eerily monstrous images. The assemblage consists of a dirty floor; the lack of light which is attenuated through the various material filters of an absent window, a door which is almost always shut, a cobwebbed ‘spectral’ window and cracks in the boards; the “horrible” (Guin 4) mops that have eerily “stiff, clotted and foul-smelling heads” (3); the “half-bowl of cornmeal and grease a day” (4), “the door that rattles terribly and opens” only rarely to kick the child so that it stands up. The ‘vibrant materiality’ of this strategically attenuated and speculatively configured ‘zone of contact’ exists in the form of an intra-acting assemblage. This assemblage is constituted by the flow of immanence that trans-corporeally situates the human-child as one amongst the other inhuman “larval-subjects” (Deleuze, *DR* 79) that include personified-inhuman, non-binary, dynamically engaging and intra-acting units like the *shut* window, the *dirty* floor, the *cracked* boards, the *horrible* mops, the *scantily-filled* bowls and the *rattling* door as well as the inhuman-ized person—the *muzzled and muffled* child. Turning away from an ontological dualism which is the basis of the colonial gaze that produces and perpetuates binaries of domination and violence, the posthumanist, neo-materialist view of the assemblage opens up a conceptual ground for alternative, fluid, intransitive, encounters and intangible and new perceptual experiences.

For Žižek, ‘Materialism means that the reality I see is never “whole”—not because a large part of it eludes me, but because it contains a stain, a blind spot, which indicates my inclusion in it’. The posthuman turn allows for a “materialization” of these non-binary assemblages and “composes a new ontological framework of becoming-subjects” (Braidotti, “Theoretical Framework” 33). A posthuman gaze ontologically decenters the human and foregrounds human affinities with both inorganic matter and animalized others as they ambivalently intra-act to (re)produce u(dys)topias. Such a turn is also speculative, as it goes beyond textual and ideology critique, while acknowledging its debt to the latter to personalize, contextualize and (re)educate ourselves about our ability to nuance ourselves as the human today. This ability to stimulate not science-based enhancement, but imaginative/empathetic nuance-ment of the human ability to recognize itself in newer and hitherto hindered forms of ‘intra-actions’ is Guin’s philosophical ground for her fantasy/imaginative/science fiction, that can speculate about the unfamiliar, the unrealized and the unknown. The potential envisaged by the posthuman’s ability to speculate about and recognize its own a subjective condition of becoming is for Guin in *Omelas*, as for Žižek in theory, an ethical question that is based on engagement rather than on an objective and dis-engaged quest for scientific perfectibility.

While the telling of stories is a necessary and potent fiction, a Deleuzian de-contextualization from ‘a’ single narratorial gaze allows for a creative proliferation of our own desires and identities as becoming-imperceptible. The story (re)positions not only the spectator but also the narrator. From the political ecology of their privileged position as judging and seeing subjects, the humanist spectators’ gaze is positioned in a way that indexes visibility only to the child and not to the entire assemblage that constitutes it. In fact, the narrator, embedded in her own liminal space, acknowledges the problematic task of her own re-positioning as a seeing-becoming subject who is situated



in the liminal and marginal position of narrating speculatively and knowing, though never substantively—both the cultural codes (of morality and defence) that are operative in the gaze of the spectator as well as in the gaze of the specimen, who as a separate species, is yet not extinct. The narrator, thus, strikes a speculative kinship with the reader by underpinning their shared incredulity in a constructivist approach towards Omelas as a utopia:

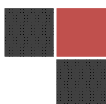
Now do you believe in them? Are they not more credible? But there is one more thing to tell, and this is quite incredible ... (some spectators) They leave Omelas... they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. (5)

As readers, our incredulity is enhanced, not negatively, but positively and affirmatively. We move from incredulity to curiosity. For we become part of the shared vulnerabilities—though as Braidotti writes (referring to Paul Gilroy) in “Posthuman Critical Theory”, “not in the same way nor to the same extent” (Braidotti 15)—of both the people of Omelas as well as the incarcerated child. Our politics of location becomes vital beyond the simple scheme of an aggressor-vanquished binary to include the event of our own gaze—which we learn from the enhanced precarity of this story as from life—can/must be generated and manipulated cartographically to choose one window (of race, caste, class, gender, among others) and exclude others as well as to recognize and reinforce one form of human(ist) inter-action and to reduce and prevent the recognition of other forms of prophetic and potentially transforming intra-actions.

In Rosi Braidotti’s words: “to see is the primary act of knowledge and the gaze the basis of all epistemic awareness” (Braidotti, 1994: 80). The questioning of the real and fantasy is the subject of posthuman epistemic awareness and involves an immersive act. The posthuman gaze facilitates the viewing of the child not in terms of a ‘flat ontology’, where it is expected to be a co-opted actor and effect of change alongside other agential forms of life and materiality. This child prompts an ongoing curiosity with a (re)newed potential for the (post)human gaze.

Posthuman, nomadic ethics facilitates a more empowering account of difference through a posthuman gaze. For Karen Murriss, “the bodymind map is a material discursive provocation to move from an ontology of identity to an ontology of difference (262)”. Murriss looks at the posthumanist understanding of the subject as a “sympoetic system” that involves “an entanglement of human and nonhuman materialities” (252). Those who watch the child, either get co-opted into the becoming-unitary framework of pedagogy espoused in Omelas as educational and public policy or they are evolving—becoming intra-active—in an “emergent praxis” (Rotas, qtd in Murriss 274) that (re)visualizes the ontology of difference in a spirit of ongoing curiosity and speculation. They are “effected by the past but not determined by it” and leaving Omelas becomes the first concrete step towards the recognition of such difference:

They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas. (Guin 5)



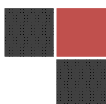
Those who walk away learn to be curious, even on pain of death. Their leaving, makes Omelas look like a brief and deluding ‘beckoning scintilla’ that will and can just as easily be made-archaic as the incarcerated human child. Those who walk away, embrace and engage dynamically, with a creative futurity that cannot be reduced in strictly narrative or realist terms. Omelas, as well as those who walk away from it, endorses an ongoing engagement with a fantasy structure. Through its potential for speculation and engagement, the fantastical Omelas makes us engage disruptively with the imaginative and material reality of our social normativity. After all, “Fantasy, unlike our sense of ‘reality’ is always incomplete; it breaks down and loses its consistency at its edges. Even though it screens the gaze, because of the constitutive incompleteness of fantasy, it also allows for an experience of the gaze that would otherwise be impossible to come by” (McGowan 40).

To conclude, Ursula K. Le Guin’s oeuvre, which includes works like her Hainish novels, have been listed under the genre of “New Wave SF”; the hallmarks of which are “posthuman cyborgs and other technologically augmented beings that could explore how the planned transformation of both brains and bodies might challenge our understandings of what it means to be human” (Yaszek and Ellis 71). Wood describes her work as “fictions (that) themselves are webs” (156). *Omelas*, includes an alternative world and beings, not so dissimilar from ours. Its posthuman underpinnings lie not in cyborgs or in digitally manipulated beings/structures, but sans that, in (post)humans who ethically (re)visit their own potential for (re)cognizing themselves as (post)human.

Thus, ambiguity and unpredictability become the signposts of a new and potent posthuman education that involves “reasoned, emotional and embodied engagement with the universal abstract concepts embedded in the stories” (Murriss “Little Beauty” 61), like the ones (the ostensibly a historical story of the incarcerated child) that are put on display for the people of Omelas. Each individual who chooses to walk away (re)programs and (re)defines ways to “‘fracture’ and ‘open up the past’ in order to ‘bring forth the new’” (through) an ‘affirmative approach that undoes binary logic by thinking and doing simultaneously” (Rotas qtd in Murriss 265). Being human is the recognition of a shared speculative category that is perceptive of shared vulnerabilities and uncertainties which are *not* shared in the same way nor to the same extent. Read through a posthumanist lens, the story prompts us to (re) position ourselves as non-substantive entities through our own potential for becoming-imperceptible. This (re)vitalizes our own nomadic positions, our potential to affirm differential affective responses and our specific politics of location within an assemblage of corporeal and trans-corporeal ‘larval-subjects’. Finally, the story calls forth a speculative and dynamic engagement with (re)new-ed forms of education and the initiation of shared cultural values for the ethics of empathy and individuation.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>“Term used by Ursula K. Le Guin to describe those of her stories that lack identifiable historical or science fictional referents, “more or less surrealistic tales, which share with fantasy the quality of taking place outside any history, outside of time, in that region of the living mind which - without invoking any consideration of immortality - seems to be without spatial or temporal limits at all”” (Wolfe 20).



<sup>2</sup>DeLanda speaks of flat ontologies in terms of “of interacting parts and emergent wholes leads to a flat ontology, one made exclusively of unique, singular individuals, differing in spatio-temporal scale but not in ontological status” (DeLanda 58).

<sup>3</sup>Farah Mendlesohn in “Introduction: reading science fiction”, writes “The thought experiment, the ‘what if?’ (which Darko Suvin calls the novum) is crucial to all sf (science fiction), and has led to the most popular alternative interpretation of ‘sf’: speculative fiction. It is here that sf most departs from contemporary literature, because in sf ‘the idea’ is the hero” (James and Mendlesohn 4).

<sup>4</sup>“A cartography is a theoretically-based and politically informed account of the present that aims at tracking the production of knowledge and subjectivity and to expose power both as entrapment (potestas) and as empowerment (potentia)” (Braidotti, “Theoretical Framework” 33).

<sup>5</sup>In Omelas, “Happiness is based on a just discrimination of what is necessary, what is neither necessary nor destructive, and what is destructive.” In that sense, its subjects are perfectly programmed to be culturally hyper-conscious of these three categories. Conclusively, as a people, not only do they appear post-apocalyptic, but also post-climate change activism and post-climate justice.

<sup>6</sup>Drawing from the philosophical works of John Duns Scotus, Baruch Spinoza, and Henri Bergson, Deleuze and Guattari express becoming as a continuous flux through which a positive difference is produced. “Becoming is involutory, involution is creative... Becoming is a rhizome, not a classificatory or genealogical tree” (Deleuze and Guattari 263)

<sup>7</sup>“Intra-action” is a Baradian term which she uses to replace the term “inter-action,” which is based on an apriori assumption of the primacy of interacting parts. Intra-action “signifies *the mutual constitution of entangled agencies*” (Barad 33). Barad argues that “distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action” and that “agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don’t exist as individual elements”. “We don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming” (Barad 185). Barad argues that separating epistemology from ontology is part of “a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse”.

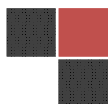
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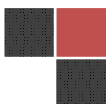
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