Airport Heterotopia: Le Guin’s Subversive Places

Ursula Le Guin's short story collection *Changing Planes* is tied together by the concept that people can change planes in airports. However, the planes that are changed are not actual airplanes but planes of reality. While the stories are recent and conceptualized in the spaces of postmodernity, the themes and concerns are the same as all of Le Guin’s fictions: belonging and community. While the metaphor of changing planes is a new one for Le Guin this is hardly her first foray into heterotopic spaces.

Heterotopic space was defined by Michel Foucault as “places that are outside places, though they are localizable” and thus in opposition to utopias, which are decidedly unreal places. Foucault’s broader argument comes from the realization that our understanding of place changes historically. He further argues that we have moved from localization to extension into our contemporary times’ understanding of place as a case of emplacement. Emplacement differs from earlier understandings of place in being a relational space; “proximity between points or elements” meaning that we need to pay attention to the relations as much as place itself.

Foucault goes on to point out that the spaces we inhabit are not homogeneous or empty, but may in fact be “haunted by fantasy”. Following that line of thought, Foucault delineates six principles which characterize heterotopias, of which I will just
briefly mention the three that are significant for this article: 1) heterotopias juxtapose several spaces, 2) heterotopias are paradoxically closed and open, subject to rituals and purifications to enter, and 3) heterotopias relate to the remaining space between two extreme poles: illusion or compensation. In the case of illusion, Foucault argues that it denounces real space and partitions off human life. Compensation, on the other hand, is perfectly organized and meticulous, as opposed to our real life. It is obvious, then, how the airport as a social space can be considered a heterotopia. This is also evident in much of the critical work on airport space.

But how does this relate to Ursula Le Guin’s literary works? First of all, Le Guin herself makes it quite clear that these stories were conceived and written while waiting in airports. Furthermore, all the stories are tied together by a common thread, known as ‘Sita Dulip’s Method’. This is a method for changing planes, but not in the physical sense of moving from one airplane to the next, but rather shifting from one plane of reality to another. The punning on the word ‘plane’ is continued by the description of how changing planes actually occurs: “The Interplanary Agency had long ago established that a specific combination of tense misery, indigestion, and boredom is the essential facilitator of interplanary travel.”

What prompts me to view Le Guin’s stories in the light of airport spatial understanding is not just the fact that she actively encourages such a view in the collection itself, but also because the way that the airport terminal is conceived in her collection is an interesting view of cultural space. I borrow concepts both from Homi
Bhabha and urban studies to elaborate on Le Guin’s conception of cultural space. Furthermore, reading Le Guin’s collection in the light of urban studies brings forth a number of quite interesting and significant points, as such a reading is much attuned to the complex construction of space, and the interplay between different spaces and social forces.

I argue that Le Guin’s stories are marked by a distinct haunting of the heterotopic space of the airport. By investigating the spatial complexity of the airport, we gain an increased understanding of Le Guin’s stories. The airport nonplace becomes a metaphor for Le Guin to investigate marginal cultures; most of the stories are ideas and articulations of difference and alterity rather than typical narratives. I see Le Guin’s collection as both symptomatic and representative of this conceptualization of space; her work employs the metaphors of space studies while critically investigating them at the same time.

Although Foucault himself does not mention the airport, it seems obvious to me that the airport is best conceived of as a heterotopia. Indeed, most critical work on airports deal with the peculiar placelessness of airports. As a nonplace, the airport exists as a liminal space, often defined by what it lacks or as nodes along a network. Such a network which, in complexity terms, is not fully distributed as some nodes (airports) are more connected than others.

At a basic level, then, airports can be viewed as nonplaces. These still serve as
connecting corridors and hence they articulate a sense of center vs margin: the more connected, the closer to the center and vice versa. This airport nonplace connects to Foucault’s heterotopia in the way that airports are manifestations of the relations between places. As such, these metaphors of the airport as a heterotopic space, become significant and useful metaphors to interpret and understand Le Guin’s stories, since the stories distinctly deal with community and how different cultures meet and engage. In other words, this cultural engagement is framed by the technological space of the airport.

The interplanary travel of Le Guin’s collection articulates a significant development in the way we understand cultural spaces - we move from a static understanding of space, to one that is governed by the network and mobility dispersed along that network. The airport becomes a symbol of this connection. Her view of space – especially as something where the in-between is significant – is very close to Homi Bhabha’s view in *The Location of Culture*. I feel that there is a very clear agreement between Le Guin’s fiction in general and Bhabha’s concepts of minority discourse and the third space. In the following, I will read the two against each other, portraying how Bhabha’s third space can be viewed as yet another manifestation of Foucault’s heterotopia.

Le Guin’s short stories in this collection are brief explorations into the nature of alterity. They present a new plane each time, introducing its differences and peculiarities which come from the different species inhabiting the plane, rather than
any particular material or physical difference from our world. These planes, then, are social and cultural alterities, and often serve as comments on contemporary times, which is a typical strategy of Le Guin’s fiction.

In fact, I would argue that the liminal space of her airport fiction investigates the liminal states of being that have always informed her narratives - most of her fictions are really explorations in anthropology, investigating different social constructions. Liminal space is here meant to be a subversive slant on heterotopia, a slant which emphasizes that relations between spaces are also power relations. Here, Le Guin shares a view expressed explicitly by Homi Bhabha:

The borderline engagements of cultural difference may as often be consensual as conflictual; they may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity; realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public, high and low; and challenge normative expectations of development and progress.\(^9\)

One of the stories portrays this quite well – “The Silence of the Asonu”, which is about a race of beings who stop speaking as they age. As a result, they are considered extremely wise and knowledgeable. As the narrator states:
Those who can’t talk, and those who can talk but don’t, have the great advantage over the rest of us in that they never say anything stupid. This may be why we are convinced that if they spoke they would have something wise to say.10

Some even believe that the Asonu hold a mysterious secret, which prompts one human to kidnap an Asonu child, trying to ensure that this Asonu child would not be forced to stop speaking when she grows up. The kidnapper’s belief is that the culture enforces silence to ensure that the great wisdom is never spoken. Keeping the child away from the Asonu culture would make sure that this did not happen. When the child still begins losing her language, the kidnapper becomes frustrated and begins to teach her English and torturing her for her stubbornness. In the end, the kidnapper never learned anything, and when the child was freed, the Asonu cut off all contact with other planes. The story ends with this laconic sentence: “We may well imagine that her people were resentful; but nothing was ever said.”11

The moral of the story is quite clear; that cultural difference is not easily bridged and that ignorance leads to cruelty. The force of the story comes from what is well-articulated by Bhabha: “This is the moment of aesthetic distance that provides the narrative with a double edge [...]” Le Guin’s aesthetic distance – her metaphor of planary travel - is what provides the narrative with a double edge. We understand that
the story condemns colonial impulses - consider the kidnapper’s attempt at teaching the girl English for her to impart her wisdom. Concrete and specific condemnations might very easily be seen as too moralizing, but the aesthetic distance bleeding into a fantastic discourse - a strategy also often employed by much postcolonial literature - navigates and negotiates the space of colonial discourse by presenting its own form of minority discourse. This is, in other words, a liminal tactic carving out a liminal space – heterotopia with a subversive slant.

Le Guin’s stories thus borrow from the airport a displacement of borders between cultural spaces. We are all unhomed by the airport, just as Le Guin’s stories are attempts at unhoming us. In the story “Porridge on Islac”, even the human condition is ‘unhomed’ by the genetic modifications that have taken place there. Humans have been merged and mixed with plants and animals. This results in a backlash, where everyone who is not considered up to the norm is destroyed, but as Ai Li A Le says: “We don’t have a norm any more, We don’t have a species any more. We’re a genetic porridge.”

The story not only warns of genetic modification, but more significantly warns of the introduction of standards and ‘norms’. As Ai Li A Le says, with regards to her daughter whom she had to set free in the ocean: “I had to let her swim away, let her go be what she is. But she is human too! She is, she is human too!”

Clearly, the story reproaches limited views of what it means to be human and although
It is done within the frame of the fantastic and so metaphorically articulates difference as the genetic blending of human and fish, it is also obvious that it is meant to comment on all views of human that are purist and racist. Le Guin’s stories, then, are explorations of these various liminal states which make up humanity, and it is in this convergence that I argue that the heterotopic space of the airport and interplanary travel becomes a useful metaphor for these liminal states, for as Justine Lloyd points out: “Liminal states take place in and are constitutive of liminal spaces, the space of an intermixed threshold between one clearly defined area and another.”

Le Guin’s heterotopic stories are fictional versions of these liminal spaces; they follow Foucault’s logic which I set out earlier. In imagining another world, but articulating concerns and problematics of our own, Le Guin’s stories juxtapose several spaces: fictional and real, of course, but I would say that it also articulates a third space as an interpellation of global similarity, following Homi Bhabha. Instead, *Changing Planes* focuses on the in-between, the different, the Other and attempts to articulate that the world is more diverse and different than globalism discourse would permit. Much as Homi Bhabha argues, these engagements of cultural difference— even if imagined— may challenge normative expectations.

These challenges can come about precisely because no one is at home in the airport— it is a nonplace, a no-place outside national culture— as we well know when we rush to the tax-free shops whenever we have a layover. Significantly, in order for us to travel between planes, one has to move outside the spaces of national cultures. In
other words, only travel – with its liminal state of space, a mobility along networks – can represent this attempt at getting ‘beyond’ that both Le Guin and Bhabha are so interested in.

Of course, we must keep in mind that airports and air travel remains privileged spaces in that they represent considerable cost. In this way, airports are both open and closed spaces in the way they require distinct rituals to enter – rituals that go beyond placing your shampoo in a clear plastic bag and removing your belt when going through security. It is also a matter of entering into a distinctive space-time where mobility is key. As Paul Virilio states: “We no longer populate stationariness (cities as great parking lots for populations), we populate the time spent changing place, travel time.”16

It is this travel time which is a new form of space in itself, and I believe that the point is that we, as privileged beings, need to consider the potentialities of these liminal ‘beyond’ spaces – that they open up for the possibility of a reinscription of cultural hierarchies, since we are moving through a nonplace which functions as a site of narrative suspension. As Justine Lloyd argues:

Precisely because it is betwixt and between places, the nonplace enables the reinscription of powerful meanings of home and travel, history and theory, work and play within its boundaries (Lloyd, in press). Any attempt
to transform nonplace into place will also reinscribe dominant narratives, perhaps to the exclusion of such eccentric subjects.¹⁷

This nonplace thus exists in a relation to the remaining space – what Bhabha would call social totality – as one of supplement I would argue, rather than Foucault’s two poles of illusion or compensation. This supplementary space – the third space – is what Le Guin imaginatively engages with her stories. What she has realized is that space-time is curved into new complex configurations, where distance is not measured in miles or even hours, but rather in degrees of connections.

Places are only far away if they are not properly connected to the global flow of airplanes. Travel is not measured in distance but in the number of nodes we have to pass along the network; the fewer nodes (airports) the shorter travel. Air travel flow is not a fully connected network, and places far from the center are just as marginal as before. Airports thus reproduce social totality in the way that dominant discourse is re-inscribed on the network, unless an effort is made to break this reinscription.

I take Le Guin’s use of discomfort being what propels interplanary travel not simply as a reaction against the physical unpleasantries of airports, but as a symbol of a deeper disgust with colonial and global discourse. The places people visit in Changing Planes are not always pleasant or ideal (they are certainly never utopian spaces), but they can teach us much about our own society. Le Guin tries – and succeeds, I believe
– in showing that we are connected along the global network, but that in this connection we must challenge the dominant cultural spaces as they exist now.

It is here that Le Guin’s heterotopia becomes utopian, for with this view of both fiction and airport as nonplaces challenging social totality, she inscribes a desire and an ideal into the third space. In Homi Bhaba’s view, the third space is already an intervention, a rupture and a challenge, and it is certainly also the way Le Guin’s stories work – opening up space for negotiating social totality.

We can allow ourselves to trace a movement in Le Guin’s argument – a movement which runs parallel to Bhabha’s, I believe – from a traditional place, inscribed with meaning by dominant narratives, moving into a nonplace – the nonplace of the airport and the planes visited – to transform and escape these same dominant narratives. The subversive nature, if you will, of Le Guin’s stories is the way these stories resist the dominance typically exerted by what John Urry calls “specialized time-spaces.”18 The social organization of space is shown to be constructed and Le Guin invites us to go beyond, to touch, as it were, the hinter side of global space.

In touching this hinter side of global space, Le Guin argues for the creation of a utopian place which takes on the traits of Bhabha’s third space – liminal and marginal, but as opposed to the nonplace of the airport, it will be home rather than a place of constant movement, of constant traveling. For Le Guin, the airport becomes a transitional place, precisely a place where nonplace can transform into place. Place
carries connotations of belonging and community, which makes it a utopian place in Le Guin’s fiction. It is a place we get to in the encounter with the Other, even the radical Other which is part of the different planes encountered.

In this way, Le Guin’s project can be seen as a nostalgic one – a return to a more settled type of place, where travel occurs but is not constant, nor filled with conflict. If nonplace, as Marc Auge argues, is “a turning back on the self, a simultaneous distancing from the spectator and the spectacle,” then Le Guin’s place is “organically social.”

Le Guin’s fear can be seen as one where transitional spaces create transitional relationships and where difference is reduced to exotic spectacle. Although Le Guin’s place is one of alterity, it is not one of fragmentation or one of permanent transition. In this way, although Le Guin’s place is subversive, it is nostalgically subversive, resisting the transformation of the world.

Steen Christiansen
Department of Language and Culture
Aalborg University
Kroghstræde 3
9220 Aalborg
Denmark
steen@hum.aau.dk


3 Foucault, “Different Spaces” 176.

4 Foucault, “Different Spaces” 177.

5 Foucault, “Different Spaces” 178-184.


10 Le Guin, *Changing Planes* 16-17.


12 Bhabha, *Location of Culture* 19.


15 Lloyd, “Airport Technology” 98.


17 Lloyd, “Airport Technology” 98.
