

FANTASTIKA JOURNAL

Legacies of Ursula K. Le Guin: Science, Fiction and Ethics for the Anthropocene
(June 18-21, 2019)

Conference Report by Heloise Thomas

Volume 4 Issue 1 - *After Fantastika*

Stable URL: <https://fantastikajournal.com/volume-4-issue-1>

ISSN: 2514-8915

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LEGACIES OF URSULA K. LE GUIN: SCIENCE, FICTION AND ETHICS FOR THE ANTHROPOCENE (JUNE 18-21, 2019)

Conference Report by Heloise Thomas

***The Legacies of Ursula K. Le Guin: Science, Fiction and Ethics for the Anthropocene.* Institut du Monde Anglophone, Paris, France, June 18-21, 2019.**

In her keynote address, Julie Phillips (Independent, Netherlands), Ursula K. Le Guin's official biographer, quoted an excerpt from Le Guin's journal: "what happens to me when I am writing: I am in love with the work, the subject, the characters, and while it goes on and a while after, the opus itself. – I function only by falling in love." Unabashedly predicating one's relationship to the world on love felt relevant and urgent at a time where power abuse seemed to dominate the news cycle. The *Legacies of Ursula K. Le Guin* conference that took place in the heart of Paris in June 2019 thus paid homage to Le Guin, notably by emphasising the care, love, and attention that characterised Le Guin's mode of seeing, thinking, and writing the world around her.

Before anything else, I must thank David Creuze and Katie Stone, whose respective recordings and livetweeting of the conference have been incredibly helpful as I was writing and fact checking this report.

The conference opened on Tuesday night with a screening of Arwen Curry's dazzling 2018 documentary, *Worlds of Ursula K. Le Guin*. Then, through nine panels and three keynotes from Wednesday to Friday, the conference materialised the intersections of Le Guin's philosophy and practice. The first panel, "Anthropocene," grappled with the relevance and limitations of this term. Through Le Guin's "She Unnames Them" (1985), Chessa Adsit-Morris (University of California Santa Cruz, USA) reflected on how we imagine post-Anthropocene futures in an effort to move toward multi-species, non-anthropocentric alliances. Taking his cue from Le Guin's keynote address at the *Art of Living on a Damaged Planet* conference, Brad Tabas (ENSTA Bretagne, France) highlighted the role of the light/darkness dichotomy in Le Guin's work, to show how the "dark" functions as a nourishing principle that materialises the messiness of human existence and human roots. Supriya Baijal (Deemed University, India) turned her attention to the eco-critical dimension of children's literature, with a focus on *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968): she analysed how this literature stages the impossibility of infinite human growth by engaging with power and balance through the prism of ecological concerns. Kim Hendricks (KU Leuven, Belgium) rounded off the discussion of how Le Guin's practice of Science Fiction relates to the future by "activating the present" – a mode of engagement with time that helps bypass simplistic predictive models of the future.

The “Worlds, Bonds, Beings” panel shifted the focus more explicitly to relationality. Focusing on *Always Coming Home* (1985), Eli Lee (*Minor Literature[s]*, UK) explored how Le Guin’s non-hierarchical communities are predicated on the dismantling of binaries, including the human/non-human one. Katie Stone (Birkbeck, University of London, UK) took the figure of the “geolinguist” in Le Guin’s works as one of her focal points and highlighted how the relationship between human and non-human ceaselessly comes back to the forefront: you cannot escape the grip of the non-human even by travelling through time. Drawing on Achille Mbembe and Gerry Canavan’s works, Francis Gene-Rowe (Royal Holloway, UK) considered the role of necropolitics in Le Guin’s works. He connected the growing meaninglessness of language in works like *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971) to our contemporary experience of ecological grief and argued that confronting necrofuturism means questioning what deliberate atrocities are passed off under the guise of historical inevitability.

We then moved toward a discussion of the entanglements between indigeneity and Le Guin’s writings and philosophy. As a daughter of anthropologists, she had access to thinking about indigeneity in other ways, but still retained privilege from her position as a white settler, something Arwen Spicer (Clark College, USA) clearly articulated. Analysing the Ekumen, Spicer highlighted how they operated within a model of consent rather than colonialism and put Le Guin’s writings in conversation with indigenous futurism. Miranda Iossifidis and Lisa Garforth (Newcastle University, UK) gave a joint paper discussing the creation of speculative sociology in Le Guin’s works: they connected the fragmentary, polyphonic nature of these writings to the genre of critical green utopias. Stefan Schustereder (Universität Tübingen, Germany) proposed that *The Word for World is Forest* (1972) troubles and complicates the canon of dystopian writing by refusing to flatten various modes of difference into simplistic binaries and by foregrounding postcolonial hybridity and fluidity.

The first keynote brought the day to a close. Julie Phillips spoke of Le Guin’s life in Paris, and what the city brought her in terms of opening up new horizons of the imagination. Le Guin went to France on a Fulbright scholarship, and this experience was formative on many levels: she was seeking a place and time when she made sense and preferred to think in terms of millennia rather than in years, which nourished her political understanding of human communities. Phillips spoke movingly of Ursula and Charles Le Guin’s first encounters in Paris and their unfurling relationship, connecting Le Guin’s curiosity and wide-ranging interests to her practice of writing Science Fiction, and concluded that Le Guin thought of it all in terms of relations of love.

The “New Epistemologies” panel on Thursday morning further addressed how the utopian core of Le Guin’s writings engenders new modes of knowledge. David Creuze (Université de Lille, France) examined the role of Taoism in Le Guin’s vision of the world, especially through the yin/yang binary, which Le Guin interrogates while simultaneously revalorising the “yin” aspect. Creuze parsed out the significance and implications of the yin utopia expounded in the 1989 essay “A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be.” Liesl King (York St John University, UK) read in Le Guin’s Science Fiction an exhortation to slow down and allow for truth to be “a matter of the imagination,” rather than a fixed thing. Only then, as King pointed out, can we access the kind of deep interior travel that Le Guin sought and explored through her fiction: while moving slowly

implies a massive recalibration of the ways we interact with and relate to the world around us, it may be our saving grace.

In the second keynote, Brian Attebery (Idaho State University, USA) pointed out how Le Guin's career is often divided into two distinct eras: the sixties and seventies versus the post-nineties. While some of her readers grumbled at the later era, which notably saw the expansion of feminist visions in Le Guin's writing, many others rejoiced in such a reframing and in the more experimental works. However, what interested Attebery first and foremost is what happened between these two eras: far from falling silent, Le Guin carried on creating category-defying works, hinging on her oft-overlooked masterpiece, *Always Coming Home*. The latter, Attebery argued, weaves a narrative that favours sustainability and collaboration on all levels: it is not the storytelling we have been used to, but the storytelling that we need, entreating us to listen, remain attentive, and off the beaten track.

The "Stages of Life" panel put in conversation two papers that looked at the construction of family and childhood in various Le Guin's works. Meghann Cassidy (Ecole Polytechnique, France) drew a parallel between the transformation of caterpillars and that of teenagers, which led her to discuss the metaphysics of Tenar's transformation in *The Tombs of Atuan* (1971), weaving a line through the metamorphosis of personhood and nominal identification from childhood to adulthood. Patrycja Kurjatto-Renard (Université de Tours, France) argued that various texts from the Hainish cycle gestured at a redefinition of the human family paradigm by questioning the self-evidence of heterosexuality and the nuclear family through the prism of the Gothic.

The next panel delved more profoundly into Le Guin's utopias, starting with Dennis Wilson Wise (University of Arizona, USA) who offered a reading of *The Dispossessed's* ambiguous utopias through Plato and Leo Strauss, discussing the similarities between the ideal republic imagined by Plato and Socrates and Le Guin's Anarres. Joshua Abraham Kopin (University of Texas Austin, USA) focused on the concept of fidelity in *The Dispossessed* (1974), expanding on how trust and loyalty, especially for Shevek, hinge on freedom and the ability to choose. Justin Cosner (University of Iowa, USA) analysed *The Lathe of Heaven* as a meta-science-fictional text that offers a nuanced critique of both the authoritarian antagonists and the liberal heroes.

The last day opened with a panel on "Translation / transmission." Stephanie Burt (Harvard University, USA) could not make it to the conference, but Julie Phillips read her paper, which drew parallels between Le Guin's stories and the X-Men superheroes in order to explore the complex layers of power and responsibility. Maria Skakuj-Puri (Independent, Poland) spoke about the translation of Le Guin's works by Stanisław Barańczak in communist Poland, which allowed her to expand the discussion to that of transnational transmission of Science Fiction and the various forms of censorship that accompanied it. Tracing an arc from "creating *the* future" to "creating potential futures," Emily York (James Madison University, USA) talked about using Le Guin's Science Fiction and essays in STEM classes, where she tries to get students to recognise there are assumptions even in science and to interrogate them. Finally, Diégo Antolinos-Basso and Damien A. Bright (Sciences Po, France / University of Chicago, USA) offered another joint paper, which took the form of a slightly

tongue-in-cheek, fabulated epistolary exchange. Noting the similarities between stories and letters, they explored the conversations about science, authority, and speculation that Le Guin weaves with her readers through her fiction and essays.

The French-language part – two panels and the last keynote – were grouped on Friday afternoon, and in many ways brought the conference full-circle. In the “Fiction-panier” (“Carrier bag theory of fiction”) panel, Noémie Moutel (Université de Caen, France) gave a close reading of the 1982 short story “Sur” to reflect on alternative stories that reject the dominant narrative arc of conquest and exploitation and that centre a form of humility in exploration. Thierry Drumm (Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium) recalled Audre Lorde’s warning: the master’s tools cannot dismantle the master’s house. He concluded that if the hero’s story supports the master’s house, then we need other stories that are about people and characters rather than heroes, something Le Guin actively practices throughout her work.

The following panel, “Hors la maison du maître” (Outside of the master’s house), prolonged this train of thought. Quentin Dubois (Université Toulouse-Jean Jaurès, France) discussed Le Guin’s rejection of abstraction and militarism and her decision to privilege technologies of reparation rather than domination. Éliane Beaufils (Université Paris 8, France) used the upcoming performance of “Faire Monde Commun” in December 2019 as an example of how theatre may explore the same concerns as Le Guin: the need to change how we construct our subjectivities and how we share and experience together the material world.

Isabelle Stengers (Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium) gave the last keynote of the conference. She reflected on what it means to think through a science-fictional mode, notably on an ethical level. Using “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” (1973) as a starting point, she drew parallels with William James’ reflections on how the foundation of philosophy necessarily excludes people: just like the philosopher is haunted by the latter, those who stay in Omelas are haunted by those who left. From there, Stengers interrogated our relationship to the institution of science and argued that it is the humanities’ job to explore the realm of possibilities of that institution. Through science-fictional narratives in particular, we are led to avoid serving progress in a mindless, irresponsible manner and to learn gratitude.

Stengers concluded with Donna Haraway’s reminder that we have a lot to learn together. This idea, paired with a quote from *Always Coming Home* that recurred throughout the conference – “One does not get on without hope” – seemed to be a major running thread, as every participant sought to highlight the ambiguous utopias that live within Le Guin’s speculative fiction and essays. This collective energy, dedicated to thinking otherwise under the guidance of Le Guin’s celebration of multiplicity, ensured the conference’s enduring success and the confirmation of Le Guin’s perennial heritage for science and ethics in an Anthropocenic world.

BIONOTE

Heloise Thomas is a PhD student at Bordeaux Montaigne University and an adjunct at Lyon 3 University, France. Their dissertation studies the representations of history and historiography in twenty-first-century US literature, from a feminist, queer, and decolonial perspective, notably exploring the interplay of archives, gender, queerness, race, and the apocalypse in contemporary literature. A former student of the ENS de Lyon, they have taught in French and US colleges and are invested in literary activism in parallel to their academic work.