



Conference Report:  
The Legacies of Ursula K. Le Guin

Science, Fiction, and Ethics for the Anthropocene  
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When Ursula K. Le Guin passed away last January, her absence left a hole in the hearts of many in the speculative-fiction community, as much for loss of her personal grace and wit as for her outsized contributions to the field. Understandably, many felt a deep desire to commemorate Le Guin in some way – and the result, at least on the European side of the pond, was a conference dedicated to her many great achievements. Set in Paris during a balmy three-day period, the City of Light’s summer life in full bloom, the *Héritages d’Ursula Le Guin: Science, fiction et éthique pour l’Anthropocène* offered fit testament to how Le Guin has become, not just a treasured national writer firmly ensconced in the American canon, which we already knew, but a figure of ever-widening international scope.

As one of the conference organisers, Christopher Robinson (École polytechnique), explained to me, when he first came to France some decades ago, some puzzlement by French academics had always met his scholarly interest in Le Guin. Now, no more. When the idea was first floated of hosting a Le Guin conference, there was (in one of those serendipities all too rare in academe) an enthusiastic well-spring of institutional support, and this did much to give *Héritages d’Ursula Le Guin* its amiable character. Three separate institutions – the Chaire Arts & Sciences, École Polytechnique, and Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – all provided official funding. Not only did their generosity eliminate conference fees, certainly a great relief for those of us traveling internationally, it opened attendance to anyone interested in attending. Most panels, in fact, had anywhere between 30 and 45 people in attendance, thus ensuring lively Q&As and many friendly post-presentation discussions. Additionally, this financial support also funded cocktails on Wednesday and a community-building Thursday-night dinner for all presenters. It even enabled us to attend the Paris premier of *Worlds of Ursula K. Le Guin*, director Arwen Curry’s skillfully done 2018

documentary, which, coming on the evening prior to the conference's first day, kicked off events with style.

Overall, 26 presenters from universities across six countries, including as distant as Dayalbagh Educational Institute in India, offered papers on a wide range of topics: the Anthropocene and Le Guin, obviously, as the conference title suggests, but also the idea of indigeneity, new epistemologies, childhood and family, utopia, plus the translation and transmission of texts. A majority of the presentations were in English, although two panels and a keynote by Isabelle Stengers (Université Libre de Bruxelles) were given, appropriately enough, in French. All presentations achieved an impressively high level of quality – a function, most likely, of the conference's high selectivity, as its international Scientific Committee accepted just under two-thirds of abstracts submitted. Over the course of the three-day event, the only hitch came from the acoustics in the Institut du Monde Anglophone, where the panels were held. Our conference room, fronted by a gorgeous high bust of Louis XV, was a small, circular, chapel-like building that had once served as an anatomy theater; its high dome caused presenters' voices to echo, however, and – exacerbated by outside ambient noise – many of the early presentations were quite difficult to hear. Yet we soon learned how to work around the echoes.

For all that, a number of panels deserve particular mention. In the opening talks, for example, Chessa Adsit-Morris (University of California, Santa Cruz) and Brad Tabas (ENSTA Bretagne) both raised questions about the usefulness of the “Anthropocene” concept as applied to Le Guin; Tabas himself advocated for a more poetic understanding of time, pushing against the need to make ersatz periodising distinctions. On Thursday, a panel on “new epistemologies” saw Liesl King (York St John University) arguing that Le Guin's fiction could teach us to move more slowly through life, with increased mindfulness and “sensual receptiveness”, whereas David Creuze (Université de Lille) praised *Always Coming Home* as a novel of *yin* over *yang*: passive, dark, weak, cold, slow, receiving. Later in the day, Meghann Cassidy (École Polytechnique) ably analysed Tenar's subject formation in *The Tombs of Atuan*.

My own panel saw two presentations on *The Dispossessed* and another on *The Lathe of Heaven*. I argued that, following the philosopher Leo Strauss, we can read Plato's *Republic* as an “ambiguous utopia”, just like Le Guin's novel, and that doing so can help us – contra one prominent critic, Tony Burns – keep *The Dispossessed* within the utopian tradition; that reading also highlights the problematic relationship shown by both works between civil society and the intellectual or philosopher. Next, Joshua Abraham Kopin (University of Texas at Austin) argued that Le Guin's utopian novel is marked by an “anarchism of fidelity”, forming bonds and strengthening them. Finally, Justin Cosner (University of Iowa) offered a notable talk on the revolutionary rhetoric in *The Lathe of Heaven*, which raised a fascinating discussion during the Q&A on just how “liberal” a text that novel is. Such a short list of mentions, however, can hardly do justice to the breadth of disciplinary perspectives and ideas offered by all the participants, which ranged from STEM pedagogies and graphic novels to ethnography and psychology. Hopefully, many of these talks will find eventual publication in some form or another – and, indeed, the organisers of this conference – Sarah Bouttier (École polytechnique), Pierre-Louis Patoine (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle), and Robinson – are in the preliminary stages of soliciting presentations in revised and expanded form for a peer-reviewed edited collection.

Yet the highlight of the conference, needless to say, was its three keynote addresses. All were gems. The keynote by Stengers, for example, given in French,

argued that SF narratives, in contrast to thought experiments in the social sciences that tend to oversimplify their parameters, create dense, complex, and consistent fictional worlds that, though retaining some ambiguity, still allow us to experience moral, psychological, and physical situations in an immersive way. Thinking in the SF mode, Stengers argues, thus implies a richer process of imagination than the simplified and static “imaginary” situations common to thought experiments.

For the English-speaking members of the audience, the other two keynotes were just as compelling. Already the author of a highly admired biography on James Tiptree Jr., Julie Phillips (independent scholar) is now the biographer for Le Guin, and she provided us a snapshot of Le Guin’s time in France. According to Phillips, France was a formative experience for her subject, offering the “promise of intellectual creative life”, and Le Guin’s immersion in French literature and culture would show up again and again in her later fiction. Also, Phillips’s tale of the whirlwind Parisian courtship between Le Guin and her future husband Charles, who proposed after only three weeks, added an endearing personal touch. One day after her Wednesday evening keynote, Phillips led us on a small excursion to the Hôtel de Seine, where Le Guin had stayed, and there was some talk of petitioning the city for a commemorative plaque.

Brian Attebery’s (Idaho State University) keynote took a different angle – the possibility of a “hinge” in Le Guin’s career, an earlier and a later Le Guin. The hinge, he argues, centers on *Always Coming Home* (1985). In the period immediately prior, Le Guin had begun making an effort to re-identity herself as a writer simply, not just a SF writer; likewise, in 1983, Le Guin and her husband spent five months at the Kroeber ranch in the Napa Valley, using minimal technology, and Le Guin also began rethinking her ideas on narrative during the early 1980s. All this combined with a discovery (or rediscovery) of oral poetry. The end result, of course, was *Always Coming Home*. After this book, though, Attebery suggests that Le Guin’s editorial work on *The Norton Book of Science Fiction* helped redirect her *back* to science fiction, as she grew excited about the new work being done in a genre whose conventions she had been struggling to shatter for over two decades. Indeed, Attebery’s keynote helped crystallise perhaps the strongest emergent theme from this conference: the importance of *Always Coming Home* in Le Guin’s *oeuvre*, which – while rarely cited as her most beloved book by fans – nonetheless formed a key text for multiple papers during the conference; for example, the presentations by Eli Lee (*Minor Literature[s]*) and Creuze.

In the end, this conference in honor of Le Guin was much like Le Guin herself: welcoming, warm, nuanced, insightful. A chance to cross boundaries, whether national or linguistic, which so often divide scholars, or boundaries more disciplinary in nature. Even if none of us (to my knowledge!) followed Le Guin’s example and “fell in love in Paris”, which as Julie Phillips reminded us is what one is *supposed* to do in Paris, this conference certainly set the stage for many of us to fall in love with Le Guin’s work all over again. Few more fitting outcomes, I think, can be imagined for an event dedicated to the memory of one of speculative fiction’s most cherished icons.

*Biography:* Dennis Wilson Wise is a lecturer for the University of Arizona and primarily interested in the relationship between political theory and genre fantasy. Previous academic work has appeared in *Tolkien Studies*, *Extrapolation*, *Mythlore*, and others. His current project, thanks to support from a R. D. Mullen Postdoctoral Fellowship from *Science Fiction Studies*, involves studying the alliterative poetry of Poul Anderson in various fanzines. Wise also serves as the reviews editor for *Fafnir*.