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Paris, 18–21 June 2019,

Institut du Monde Anglophone, Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle

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"The Legacies of Ursula K. Le Guin: Science, Fiction and Ethics for the Anthropocene" / "Héritages d'Ursula Le Guin : Science, fiction et éthique pour l'Anthropocène"

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- 1 This international conference¹ on the work of American writer Ursula K. Le Guin (1929–2018), the first of its kind in France, was organized by **Sarah Bouttier**, **Pierre-Louis Patoine**, and **Christopher Robinson**, with the support of the École Polytechnique/Chaire Arts et Science and the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle/EA 4398 Prismes. Papers were given in the Institut du Monde Anglophone, in Paris.
- 2 Activities started on Tuesday, June 18, with the projection of **Arwen Curry**'s film *Worlds of Ursula K. Le Guin* (2018) in the independent cinema Le Grand Action. It was this biographical documentary first showing in Paris. The conference itself started the next day, with words of welcome given by Sarah Bouttier and Chantal Schütz. The talks were divided into nine panels and three keynotes over three days. If the speakers explored Le Guin's entire corpus, the novel *Always Coming Home*, often overlooked by academia, was discussed by several participants and the issue of finding one's home in the anthropocene was studied in many different papers. The conference concluded on Friday night, June 21, with a public reading of Le Guin's texts in the bookstore Berkeley Books of Paris.

Panel 1 · Anthropocene

- 3 **Chessa Adsit-Morris** (University of California, Santa Cruz, United States) opened the conference with a paper titled "Post-Anthropocene Imaginings: Co-creating Imaginative Methodological Practices for Unnamed Epochs to Come." She discussed the anthropocene concept and its numerous variants, such as the capitalocene, the cthulhucene, the ecocene, etc. She pointed out how such categorizing could conceal problems and proposed ecofeminist and postcolonial science fiction as a tool to make reality clearer. She quoted Le Guin's short story "She Unnames Them" as an example of how to move away from anthropocentrism by endorsing messiness and breaking away hierarchies. She ended her talk with a presentation of the "Beyond the End of the World" project from the University of Santa Cruz.
- 4 **Brad Tabas** (ENSTA Bretagne, France) started his presentation, "In the Dark that Nourishes. A Dark Guide to Dark Times: Ursula Le Guin and Ethics in the Anthropocene," by mentioning how Le Guin never used the word "anthropocene" publicly, to his knowledge. For him, this absence is significant, as she encountered the term during the conference "Art of Living on a Damaged Planet: Anthropocene" (University of California Santa Cruz, 2014) where she gave a keynote address. He argued her answer to the concept could be found in the trope of darkness in her work, especially in the Earthsea novels. Like Adsit-Morris, he highlighted messiness as a creative concept and discussed the problems of the word "anthropocene," preferring the expression "becoming a man," from *The Wizard of Earthsea*, as a way to learn how to live through the ecological crisis.
- 5 This first talk of the conference to deliberately focus on Le Guin's children's literature, titled "Negotiating 'Power' and 'Balance' in *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968): An Eco-Critical Study" used an ecocritical lens to read *A Wizard of Earthsea*. **Supriya Baijal** (Deemed University, India) argued that such a book can help "educate out of the classroom" on ecological issues, as "means to set examples." She started by a summary of the plot and then focused on the issues of power and balance, comparing the myth of infinite growth with the wizard Ged's unbridled ambition. She highlighted the need for balance in our keeping of the planet, as shown in Ged's acceptance of his shadow at the end of the novel.
- 6 The first quote used by **Kim Hendricks** (Flemish Research Foundation/KU Leuven, Belgium) in his intervention "Activating the Present: Imagination, Science Fiction and Resistance" came from the Prime Minister of Belgium, Charles Michel: "Nous sommes optimistes, mais réalistes." This sparked a discussion on the relationship between the future and the present time, as well as dystopia and utopia. He compared two imaginative modes: the extrapolative science fiction of David Brin and what he called the "activating the present" mode of Ursula Le Guin. He did not reject Brin's science fiction completely but criticized its "purification of the present" necessary to "precipitate the future." He emphasized how Le Guin's science fiction allowed her to imagine the present differently without such destructive means.

Panel 2 · Worlds, Bonds, Beings

- 7 **Eli Lee's** (Independent scholar and editor at Minor Literature[s], United Kingdom) communication, titled "Another Way to Be"—Navigating the Possibility of Eco-Utopia in *Always Coming Home* was the first of many to discuss Ursula Le Guin's *Always*

Coming Home, a book often overlooked by academia. She argued the society presented in the text was an eco-utopia and proceeded to discuss its characteristics. Before that, she contextualized the work by mentioning Le Guin's previous utopia *The Dispossessed*, Callenbach's *Ecotopia*, and the work of literary critic Darko Suvin. Lee discussed the non-patriarchal, non-hierarchical society showing solidarity with the non-humans in Le Guin's book, which is presented in an ambiguous manner reminiscent of her previous work.

- 8 In her talk titled "The Ethics of Time Travel in the Short Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin," **Katie Stone** (Birkbeck, University of London, United Kingdom) retraced how Le Guin used the concept of time in her short fiction. Stone focused on the relationship between humans and non-humans existing on completely different temporalities. She quoted extensively from the story "The Author of the Acacia Seeds and Other Extracts from the Journal of the Association of Therolinguistics" and argued that Le Guin proposed a radical reimagining of this relationship. Can animals make art? Can mountains have agency? Le Guin's stories are an invitation to consider these questions and effect a transformation of the human reminiscent of Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble*.
- 9 **Francis Gene-Rowe** (Royal Holloway, University of London, United Kingdom) presented "The Language of the Dusk: Finding Equilibrium in an Ending World." He started by explaining how the anthropocene concept erased all complexities by simplifying the problem. He emphasized how humanity was both the superpower capable of wrecking the planet but also a helpless victim of itself. He tried to find answers to the problem in Le Guin's work, focusing on *The Lathe of Heaven* and *The Farthest Shore*. He discussed the themes of death and loss—of people, of language, of history, of home—which he linked with both Walter Benjamin's "angel at the end of time" and Donna Haraway's notion of "becoming," in this case with the dead.

Panel 3 · Indigeneity

- 10 In her presentation titled "Indigeneity and Utopia in Le Guin's Ekumen," **Arwen Spicer** (Clark College, Vancouver, United States) emphasized diversity over unicity—of cultures, of interpretations, of modes of thinking. If she started by pointing out how problematic Le Guin's position of privilege could be, both as a rich white settler and an adopter of the anthropologist's stance, Spicer showed that Le Guin defused these problems by having the readers listen to "many voices in the household." Spicer then talked about utopia and focused on some Ekumen stories. She identified three characteristics: ambiguity, multiculturalism and a progressing league. The first two, she argued, came from the Native American mindset while the third one was a Western trope. She finished by comparing Le Guin's work with indigenous authors of science fiction.
- 11 **Miranda Iossifidis** and **Lisa Garforth** (Newcastle University, United Kingdom) gave a joint paper titled "Reading Le Guin: Ethnographic Figures and Speculative Sociologies" about their reading of science fiction and their exploration of Le Guin's worlds as sociologists. Garforth started by discussing *Always Coming Home* which she termed "a green critical utopia," using Tom Moylan's concept of the critical utopia, as found in his book *Demand the Impossible*. She focused on the character of Pandora, the non-authoritative anthropologist of the book, and her constant worrying. She emphasized the collective work done by Pandora and her "colluding readers." Iossifidis talked

about the story "The Matter of Seggri" and compared its fragmentary form with *Always Coming Home*. She argued Le Guin invited—or provoked—her readers to react creatively to the texts.

- 12 **Stefan Schustereder** (Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen, Germany), in his paper "A Cruel Mirror in Space? A Postcolonial Reading of Ursula Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest*" focused his attention on this novella and discussed its reading in the present time. The issues tackled by the novella include racism, climate change, and colonialism, and he argued they were still as relevant today as they were at the time of publication, the seventies. He emphasized the complexity of the work and rejected a simplistic pitting of colonized against colonizer by discussing the notion of hybridity in the resulting confrontation between the two sides.

Keynote: Julie Phillips (Biographer of Le Guin, Amsterdam, Netherlands) · "Love and Language: Ursula K. Le Guin in Paris"

- 13 Julie Phillips was the first keynote speaker to give her talk. She is an American writer and book critic specializing in biographies. She is currently working on a biography of Ursula K. Le Guin. Her keynote was about the time Ursula Kroeber spent in Paris in the early fifties. She had received a Fulbright scholarship to study in France, which was an "elsewhere beyond realism" for Le Guin, she argued, a place to practice her science fictional and fantastical imaginings. There, she also met her husband Charles Le Guin, an American student of French history, and married him. Their relationship became the focus of Julie Phillips' talk, with numerous examples of their correspondence and photographs of their time in Paris. The theme of coming home, much talked about during the conference, was first explored in this keynote. Phillips quoted Le Guin as saying this was her "only idea."

Panel 4 · New Epistemologies

- 14 **David Creuze** (University of Lille, France) gave a paper titled "Coming Back Home from the Abyss: Ursula K. Le Guin's Yin Utopianism," in which he discussed the method of yin utopianism proposed by Le Guin in her essay "A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be" and its application in her book *Always Coming Home*. He emphasized the importance of a dialogical interplay between text and reader to effect utopia and, using Tom Moylan's concept of critical utopias, discussed the refocusing away from the setting and towards the characters found in Le Guin's utopia. He finished with a mention of Hans Jonas's *The Responsibility Imperative* and suggested that science fiction could be used as a way to give a presence to the as yet unborn future generations.
- 15 **Liesl King's** (York St John University, United Kingdom) talk titled "Moving Slowly with Le Guin—A Philosophy for Survival" focused on how slowness is a necessary quality to survive the anthropocene. She started with a mention of "A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be" and argued that in her writing Le Guin proposed an alternative to the hot progress mode. She emphasized the theme of returning home and quoted Le Guin as saying "true voyage is return" in *The Dispossessed*. She found numerous examples spanning Le Guin's entire career to make her point and highlighted the links between grief, hope, and collective action. She finished her talk with a presentation of her online journal *Terra Two: An Ark for Off-World Survival*.

Keynote: Brian Attebery (Idaho State University, *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, United States) · "Always Coming Home, the Library of America, and the Hinge in Le Guin's Career"

- 16 The second keynote speaker of the conference, professor and editor Brian Attebery, talked about Le Guin's career by focusing on *Always Coming Home*, the novel—"because there are no other words to better describe the book"—he edited for Library of America. He argued that the yin utopia *Always Coming Home*, published in 1985, marked an interesting period in Le Guin's career, at the very center of the decade in which she reconstructed herself as a feminist and wrote several theoretical essays on literature. He compared the "continents on both sides of this island" and explained that in the later period, while never rejecting science fiction and fantasy, Le Guin became more political and self-critical. He dated this period as starting around 1980 and mentioned a symposium held at the University of Chicago in 1979, which included theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricœur and ended with a talk by Le Guin.

Panel 5 · Stages of Life

- 17 **Meghann Cassidy** (École Polytechnique, France) started her paper, titled "Subjectivity and Childhood in the Earthsea Quartet," with a striking image, that of the caterpillar transforming into a butterfly. She highlighted the fact that this transformation implied a liquefying process of the caterpillar before its reconfiguration. She then compared the process to adolescence and discussed the issue of identity loss. To do that, she focused on the Earthsea novel *The Tombs of Atuan* and Le Guin's thought experiments found therein. She focused on an exploration of the character of Tenar and the naming/un naming process.
- 18 In her paper "Redefinition of Human Family Paradigm in Selected Texts of the Hainish Cycle" **Patrycja Kurjatto Renard** (Université du Littoral Côte d'Opale, France) discussed the author's thought experiments linked with family structure, not as a literary critic but "simply as a reader of Le Guin." She focused on two different models found in four short stories, all coming from the Hainish Cycle of science fiction. She described them at length, starting with the "sedoretu" concept, in which families are organized around four parents making two heterosexual and two homosexual couples. She then focused on the sexual segregation in "The Matter of Seggri," where men are treated as cattle and "reduced to selected body parts." She argued these stories used tropes from both magical realism and the gothic, and were highly metafictional.

Panel 6 · Utopia

- 19 After mentioning two of the most important thinkers of utopia, Darko Suvin and Tom Moylan, **Dennis Wilson Wise** (University of Arizona, United States) compared in his talk, "Unrealizable Ambiguous Utopias: Reading the Dispossessed through Leo Strauss and Plato," Plato's utopia in *The Republic* with Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*. He argued, using Leo Strauss' arguments, that Plato had also written an ambiguous utopia, and that his book was not to be considered as only the blueprint of a perfect society, as is usual. Both works could be read as literary works in their own right, a reading which emphasizes the educational role rather than the pontificating role.

- 20 **Joshua Abraham Kopin** (University of Texas at Austin, United States), in his paper "Fragile, Makeshift, Improbable: Le Guin's Languages of Fidelity," discussed the notion of fidelity in Le Guin's work. Beyond marital fidelity, Le Guin's fidelity is a promise to the other, a way of associating with clearer utopian promises than the societies she invented, he argued. He discussed Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* and its main character, Shevek, in whom he saw the embodiment of a higher ethic of association. *The Dispossessed's* utopia is not to be found on Anarres, as is commonly read, but in the actions of Shevek, who "chooses to choose." Kopin finished by briefly tracking the notion of fidelity in the rest of Le Guin's corpus.
- 21 In his talk titled "Revolutionary Rhetoric: 'Effective Dreams' and Utopic Potentialities in Ursula Le Guin's *Lathe of Heaven*," **Justin Cosner** (University of Iowa, United States) discussed how Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* deconstructs traditional science fiction and criticizes its heroic utilitarian modes. Its main character's world-changing dreams are never enough to solve the problems of the world, such as peace and racism. He discussed the problems of responsibility, the call for informed radical action from Le Guin, and quoted extensively from Fredric Jameson and Carl Malmgren.

Panel 7 · Translation/Transmission

- 22 Read by Julie Phillips, **Stephanie Burt's** (Harvard University, United States) paper, titled "Le Guin's mutants, Le Guin's gods: X-Men comics, *The Lathe of Heaven*, and the paradoxical essence of a superhero story," was about Le Guin's treatment of the possibility of super or better humans and compared it with how the X-Men comics use superheroes. The main point was the problem of forcing change to the world by some "quick easy fix," such as we find in *The Lathe of Heaven* or Chris Claremont's *X-Men: Asgardian Wars*, which quotes and discusses Le Guin's book. Both show how collective problems cannot be resolved only by individual answers, or superheroes easily become supervillains. Both explore the issues of power and responsibility.
- 23 **Maria Skakuj-Puri** (Independent scholar and translator, India) presented the work of Polish poet and translator of poetry—by Emily Dickinson and William Shakespeare, among many others—Stanisław Barańczak. She contextualized her talk, titled "Translating Ursula K. le Guin in Communist Poland: Stanisław Barańczak and *A Wizard of Earthsea*" by giving an account of the history of science fiction publishing in Poland, the life of Barańczak, how censorship functioned at the time, and some of the strategies used by Barańczak to translate Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea*. She highlighted the fact that it was the only novel he ever translated. She finished by talking about the latest collected edition of *Earthsea* stories in Polish, which includes an original preface by Ursula Le Guin.
- 24 **Emily York** (James Madison University, United States) presented the work she does in the classroom in her paper, "Le Guin in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) Pedagogies." Teaching the ethics of technology and science to engineering students, she has used Le Guin's short stories and essays to great success to offer them a more critical mindset on their future jobs. Her goal is to start conversation by "making them think" about whether technology is accessible to everybody or not, and to make them think about their own power and the responsibility it entails. She emphasized the usefulness of stories and finished by presenting a few of the critical future scenarios made by her students as a final project.

- 25 **Diégo Antolinos-Basso** (Sciences Po Paris, France) and **Damien A. Bright** (University of Chicago, United States) gave a joint presentation/performance where each read a letter to the other, titled: "Neither Heroism nor Tragedy. Learning to Make Way for New Correspondences between Science and its Questions through Ursula Le Guin's Writings on Writing." Their focus was on Le Guin's essays about writing, especially the book *Steering the Craft*. Playing with the pun in the title, they argued that Le Guin was not acting as captain of her craft, but as a pirate, playing with her readers' expectations in her texts. They compared science fiction and science facts and wondered about the common unwillingness of scientists to be involved politically. They finished by discussing the trickster trope.

Panel 8 · Fiction-panier

- 26 For this first talk in French, titled "Exploration écoféministe de "Sur": autonomie, nomination, et historiographie," **Noémie Moutel** (Université de Caen, France) presented Le Guin's short story "Sur" and how she has used it both in the classroom and in the ecofeminist collective "Les Cruel·les Truel·les." She started by emphasizing how ecofeminism tries to give a postcolonial and feminist response to the challenges of the anthropocene. Le Guin's work, as a form of "subaltern writing" (*écriture des subalternes*) is especially well suited for the task, she argued. As an example, she discussed "Sur," a parody of traditional exploration stories, where an expedition of women from Argentina, Peru, and Chile get to the South Pole and back before any white men can, but do not leave any traces of their passage.
- 27 In "Raconter d'autres histoires avec Ursula K. Le Guin," **Thierry Drumm** (Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium) talked about the necessity of cultivating other stories which would break apart the heroic mode by taking the Earthsea novels as examples. The problem of the hero he illustrated by quoting the first lines of Le Guin's essay "Woman/Wilderness" about "Civilized Man" owning both nature and women. He argued that novels in general, but Le Guin's in particular, were peopled by normal people instead of heroes, which allowed her to emphasize "power-with" rather than "power-on." This "subaltern writing" (*écriture des subalternes*), again, gives readers a vision from below, necessary to have a full comprehension of the world.

Panel 9 · Hors la maison du maître

- 28 **Quentin Dubois** (Université Toulouse-Jean-Jaurès, France), in his paper "Ursula Le Guin : une besace chaotique dans le *Jupiter Space*" started by mentioning Le Guin's essay "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" and gave his own translation and understanding of the concept, the "besace chaotique." He proceeded to explain it in detail, by using Felix Guattari, Donna Haraway and Zoe Sofoulis/Sofia. He emphasized the originality of Le Guin's fiction by contrasting it with the "Jupiter Space," a concept taken from Sofoulis, of a traditional science fiction obsessed with techno-heroics. Le Guin's fiction, he argued, offers an ecofeminist alternative.
- 29 **Éliane Beaufigli** (Université Paris 8, France), in her talk called "Des fictions-paniers aux non-héros contemporains," was interested in the figure of the hero and how it is deconstructed in Le Guin's essay "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction." In it, Le Guin goes away from the hunter planting its spear in the side of the mammoth—which has become a problematic trope in the anthropocene—and writes about women gathering

food and other bits and pieces in her bag. This aesthetic change allows Le Guin to tell new kinds of stories, depicting day-to-day activities on cyclical rhythms rather than tall tales with a linear progression. This alternative focus puts the emphasis on process rather than progress. Beaufils finished her intervention by talking about how to translate this idea to the theater, usually understood as the scene of the tragic, and how performance art makes for an interesting possibility.

Keynote: Isabelle Stengers (Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium) · "Penser sur le mode SF"

- 30 For this last keynote of the conference, Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers talked about the need to cultivate a science fiction mode of thinking. She discussed at length Ursula Le Guin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," a perfect utopia based on the premise of a single child suffering for the sake of the whole city, as well as *The Dispossessed*, "The Author of Acacia Seeds" and others. She focused her discussion on the speculative attitude necessary to make sense of the work and of the world. Imagination—as opposed to the concept of the imaginary—was highlighted as a quality often lacking both in the hard sciences and in the humanities. Le Guin, argued Stengers, discovers collectively, with her readers, a non-theoretical theory of belonging in the world. Stengers ended her talk with the Ekumen from the Hainish books. They are always neutral and do not interfere with the people they visit. Change is never forced, it comes from their life stories. These stories—all our stories, but especially science fiction stories—we need, argued Stengers, to effectuate change.
- 31 Link to the program: <https://litorg.hypotheses.org/le-guin-2019>

NOTES

1. I wish to thank Katie Stone for sharing her notes.
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Subjects: Actualité de la recherche

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