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Introduction: Radical Speculation and Ursula K. Le Guin

Alexis Lothian

Ada is a journal of gender, new media, and technology: three terms that are unstable both in themselves and in their interactions. While our readers can often expect to find scholarly accounts of digital spaces that range from social media to artistic practice, from institutionalized knowledge production to radical social movements, technologies of gender and new media encompass many realms. This issue, something of a sequel to Issue Three on feminist science fiction, invites alternate definitions of the key terms “new media” and “technology.” What new possibilities can be created when gendered politics interface with speculative technologies, with the technology of speculation itself? The six essays collected here offer a range of responses, united by their focus on what is made possible by the ongoing renewal and transformation of the worlds imagined by feminist science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin.

The cover, a detail from Tuesday Smillie’s painting “A Slow and Arduous Progression,” depicts pages torn, folded, and piled together, on the background of a dark open space whose edges hint at distant stars. The image reminds us that print is a communication technology with its own affordances, not a transparent form to be posed against the fascinating (im)materialities of digital cultural production. Paper crumples, stains, tears; a text does not pass untransformed through editions and through time. The hands that hold books change them, as the changing contexts of reading change the meanings of sentences, stories, ideas—often slowly, often arduously. In the writings collected here, two of Le Guin’s most influential books—1969’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* and 1974’s *The Dispossessed*—are taken up and transformed, becoming the basis for six speculative meditations on contemporary political worlds.

The occasion for each of these reflections was the second Tiptree Symposium at the University of Oregon, an event in early December 2016 that celebrated Le Guin’s illustrious and influential body of work. The assembled audience was composed of academics and feminist science fiction fans alongside Oregon students and faculty; Le Guin herself participated during the first day. As a group, we were collectively wrestling with the raw wound of the November 2016 election result. We were thinking and talking much about the rise of the new American fascism and its kindred global

movements, while also sitting with what then appeared to be small lights of fragile hope coming from the movement against the Dakota Access Pipeline ruling (on which work was halted the day after the symposium, in a decision that would later be reversed by the White House).^[1] We drew what energy we could from the ongoing, enduring energies of protest and the work of transformative change.

The capacity of Le Guin's science fiction to provide resources for activist world making was the focus of the symposium's second morning. Joan Haran and I, each tasked with organizing a panel, independently sought reflections on *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*. These two panels, along with the conversation that followed them, turned out to be perhaps the most compelling set of talks I have ever attended. It was a serendipitous gathering of creative thinkers focused on taking up the tools Le Guin provides and adapting them to use for thinking, working, and living in and through a terrifying, complicated historical moment. And it felt like the crystallization of a world I have been trying to build—through inchoate and conscious, individual and collective means—for a good deal of my life.

The talks can be viewed online thanks to the University of Oregon Libraries, but I wanted them to exist in written form where their insights could be shared, studied, and further transformed by readers and interlocutors.^[2] Thanks to the editors of *Ada* and to the members of the Fembot Collective, each of the original speakers has had the opportunity to elaborate and refine their ideas through a process of open collective review. Four have developed their talks into expanded articles, while two speakers preferred to publish their talks as lightly edited transcripts of their original remarks. They appear here in the order in which they were originally delivered.

The first three papers in the issue expand on the talks given in the panel I organized, "Speculative Gender and *The Left Hand of Darkness*." My impetus in bringing together this panel was to talk about the ongoing power and influence of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin's 1969 novel about a society in which there are no men or women, only people whose reproductive biology does not rely on stably sexed bodies. Within the academic and fan worlds of feminist science fiction, the novel has been inspirational for many writers and thinkers invested in building worlds where gender is not restricted by heteronormative, patriarchal, capitalist, white supremacist structures of power.^[3] Recently, though, I had heard the novel referred to as a "transgender" text. I thought it questionable to define the novel in relationship to transgender identities and communities, because it is a thought experiment that does

not draw on trans lives or queer ways of living gender directly. I had heard similar critiques from trans and genderqueer friends and students who encountered the novel in this context. But I had not heard any extended engagements with the novel from contemporary readers who are themselves transgender and embedded in trans scholarly and artistic communities, and I wanted to know what their analyses would be. Almost half a century after its initial publication, how and in what ways might this novel have something to say to thinkers and creators engaged in building and living worlds that do gender outside of hetero and cisgender norms? And so I invited three trans thinkers—artist Smillie, theorist Aren Aizura, and artist-theorist micha cárdenas—to think together about the novel and about speculative gender more broadly.

Smillie opens the conversation with “Radical Imagination and *The Left Hand of Darkness*,” an essay that draws from some of the conceptual work underpinning Reflecting Light into the Unshadow, her series of paintings inspired by Le Guin’s novel, in which this issue’s cover appears.^[4] Smillie writes of how we can see *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a proto-transfeminist text, even as we recognize its failures. Le Guin’s habit of returning to and rethinking her ideas in response both to formal critiques and to her own reflections becomes a guideline for the practice of imagining other worlds, knowing failure will be an inevitable part of the work we do.

Aizura’s “Communizing Care in *Left Hand of Darkness*” moves deftly between the novel’s personal resonances and the political urgency of its speculative imagining. He recalls his experience of pregnancy, in which Le Guin’s novel offered a landscape whose gendering was closer to his own life than most cisnormative representations of gestation. Yet the most vivid and utopian aspects of *Left Hand* for Aizura turn out not to be its depiction of gender as such, but its “vision of care.” Outside of Le Guin’s world, living in non-normative gender as individuals cannot be enough to escape from the uneven distributions demanded by the oppressive structures of a gendered, racialized, capitalist society. And so Aizura’s reflection on Le Guin becomes an assertion of the urgency of transformative change for the world and the universe, not just a new view of gender. He insists that transformative change must attend to the embodied labor of care.

In the final response to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, “Imagining a Trans World,” cárdenas reminds us not to forget the non-fictional, non-alien transgender lives that have often been ignored while Le Guin’s novel has been being lauded for its treatment

of gender. After examining some historical context that negates the commonplace assumption that experiences and identities of the kind we now call transgender are recent phenomena, cárdenas uses her own creative work as an example of contemporary transgender science fiction. Returning to the focus on bodies, reproduction, and care that Aizura also highlights, cárdenas draws from her Pregnancy series of poems and videos to showcase the speculative knowledge about gender that comes out of trans women's lived experiences navigating a hostile medical industrial complex.

At the Tiptree Symposium, the second panel took up *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin's 1974 novel of an anarchist utopia in which a scientist-philosopher becomes a revolutionary (without stopping being a scientist or a philosopher). Haran discusses her planning process in "Instantiating Imaginactivism: Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* as Inspiration," where she also explicates the concept of "imaginactivism": a term she has coined to describe what happens when speculative and fictional imagining meet the radical work of movements for social change. It is a framework that applies to all the writings gathered here, and indeed to *Ada* and the Fembot Collective more broadly, since Haran describes not just fiction and art but also "the infrastructural work" done with "colleagues and collaborators ... in creating opportunities to disseminate the work of others" as imaginactivism. The talks by adrienne maree brown and Grace Dillon, each presented as lightly-edited transcripts, give a sense of what it was like to be present amid the imaginactivism that was taking place at the Tiptree Symposium.

In "Ursula K. Le Guin's Fiction as Inspiration for Activism," brown explores the role that fictional speculation has played in her own social justice work as an organizer, writer, and scholar. She recalls passing *The Dispossessed* to fellow activists, and discussing the questions it raises with them—most vividly the question of how we can transform ourselves alongside others to move toward a more just world.

Finally, Dillon's "The NishPossessed: Reading Le Guin in Indian Country," turns to models of justice and knowledge in Anishinaabe social and intellectual worlds, which continue to proliferate despite the genocidal violence of settler colonialism. For Dillon, *The Dispossessed* and Le Guin's other writings have long resonated with the thoughts and practices of her Indigenous community. In fiction, metaphor, and speculation, she finds the transformative possibility of truth.

The connections among the essays here are vivid and many. Though they approach from multiple directions, it is clear that all six of the writers are committed to the

project of combining imaginative creativity and radical critique with the goal of moving collectively toward a more just world. As depicted in Smillie's painting, the movement toward such a world is likely to be slow and arduous. We cannot rely on dominant narratives of progress, teleology, and development, on the overthrow of the old by the new. Yet the writings gathered here show that if we continue to speculate about worlds that radically differ from what dominant, heteronormative, colonial culture has taught us to perceive as realistic—and to critically engage with our own and others' acts of speculation—we may arrive at possibilities we have as yet barely dared to imagine.

Acknowledgments

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This issue has straddled a shift in institutional home for *Ada* and Fembot, one that I have been particularly excited to see since the new home happens to be my own, the University of Maryland. I am grateful to the former webmistress Shehram Mokhtar and new webmistress Eva Peskin as well as to copyeditor Kaitlyn Wauthier and editors Radhika Gajjala and Carol Stabile. Carol in particular has shepherded this issue from beginning to end, since she co-organized the Tiptree Symposium, invited both Joan Haran and I to form panels, and then welcomed the idea of publishing the resulting papers in *Ada*.

^[1] Hersher, Rebecca. "Key Moments in the Dakota Access Pipeline Fight." *NPR*, February 22, 2017. <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/02/22/514988040/key-moments-in-the-dakota-access-pipeline-fight>.

[2] Notkin, Debbie. "Video of Tiptree Symposium Now Available." *James Tiptree, Jr Literary Award*. January 10, 2017. <https://tiptree.org/2017/01/video-of-2016-tiptree-symposium-now-available>.

[3] Merrick, Helen. *The Secret Feminist Cabal: A Cultural History of Science Fiction Feminisms*. Seattle, WA: Aqueduct Press, 2009.

[4] Smillie, Tuesday "Portfolio: Reflecting Light into the Unshadow," accessed October 15, 2017, <http://tuesdaysmillie.com/section/392088-Reflecting-Light-into-The-Unshadow.html>.

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Alexis Lothian researches and teaches at the intersections of gender studies, digital media, speculative fiction, and queer theory. She is Assistant Professor of Women’s Studies and Core Faculty in the Program in Design Cultures and Creativity at University of Maryland College Park. Her book *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility* is forthcoming from NYU Press in 2018. She also works on digital artistic forms used within fan communities to engage critical readings of media texts and to participate in social justice activism. Her work has been published in venues that include *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *Cinema Journal*, *Camera Obscura*, *Social Text*, *Periscope*, *Poetics Today*, *Extrapolation*, and the feminist science fiction publisher Aqueduct Press. She was a founding member of the editorial team of the open access fan studies journal *Transformative Works and Cultures* and has edited two special issues of *Ada: a Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* on feminist science fiction. More about her work can be found at queergeektheory.org.

ONE THOUGHT ON “INTRODUCTION: RADICAL SPECULATION AND URSULA K. LE GUIN”

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