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Ursula Le Guin's Speculative Anthropology: Thick Description, Historicity and Science Fiction

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Abstract
This article argues that Ursula Le Guin's science fiction is a form of 'speculative anthropology' that reconciles thick description and historicity. Like Clifford Geertz's ethnographic writings, Le Guin's science fiction utilises thick description to place the reader within unfamiliar social worlds rendered with extraordinary phenomenological fluency. At the same time, by incorporating social antagonisms, cultural contestation, and historical contingency, Le Guin never allows thick description to neutralise historicity. Rather, by combining the two and exploring their interplay, Le Guin establishes a critical relation between her imagined worlds and the reader's own historical moment. This enables her to both counter Fredric Jameson's influential criticism of her work – the charge of 'world reduction' – and point to ungrasped utopian possibilities within the present. Le Guin's speculative anthropology thus combines the strengths while overcoming some of the limitations of both Geertz's thick-descriptive method and Jameson's theory of the science fiction genre.

Keywords
anthropology, Clifford Geertz, Fredric Jameson, Ursula Le Guin, science fiction, thick description, utopia

Introduction

The intersection of science fiction studies with other areas of academic enquiry has proven a fertile one in recent years. Scholarship of this kind includes work on the relationship between science fiction and cultural

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studies (Milner, 2010), economics (Davies, 2018), sociology (Seeger and Davison-Vecchione, 2019), and intellectual history (Bell, 2020). Anthropologists have likewise shown interest in science fiction. In 2018, the Society for Cultural Anthropology commissioned a blog series on the theme of speculative anthropologies (Anderson et al., 2018). These intriguing suggestions by scholars from across the humanities and social sciences point to some of the many potential resonances between science fiction and the discipline of anthropology. Developing these ideas, Matthew Wolf-Meyer has authored a short monograph on anthropology and speculative fiction, drawing on a range of science fiction literature and film (Wolf-Meyer, 2019). Wolf-Meyer's contention is that insisting on a sharp distinction between social theory and speculative fiction misrepresents and downplays the speculative nature of knowledge claims in the social sciences (2019: 6). Wolf-Meyer also draws attention to their shared focus: as he observes, 'the questions anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists have been pursuing since the nineteenth century have also been motivating speculative fiction writers, from Mary Shelley, Jules Verne, and H.G. Wells, to our contemporaries' (2019: 5). As this rollcall of authors indicates, comparisons between the social sciences and the science fiction genre, as a subset of speculative fiction, are highly promising. Such comparisons allow anthropology to build on the 'literary turn' it took in the 1980s and 1990s, when scholars like James Clifford and George Marcus (1986) brought techniques associated with literary fiction to bear on anthropological writing. One major science fiction author conspicuously absent from Wolf-Meyer's study is Ursula Le Guin, a writer whose work clearly exhibits anthropological influences and, the present article shall argue, itself merits consideration as a form of 'speculative anthropology'.

It is no surprise that Le Guin's work should be influenced by anthropology.[1] Le Guin's mother, Theodora Kroeber, pursued graduate studies in anthropology, participated in an archaeological dig in Peru's Nazca Valley, co-authored a journal article on methodologies in cultural anthropology (Clements, Schenck, and Brown, 1926), published a collection of retellings of California Native American legends in 1959 (Kroeber, 2005), and later married the anthropologist Alfred Louis (A.L.) Kroeber, one of the most influential American cultural anthropologists of the first half of the 20th century. After Alfred received his PhD in anthropology from Columbia University in 1901, where his thesis was supervised by Franz Boas, he went on to become Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, where he taught until his retirement. As well as forging personal ties with a number of Native Americans in the Napa Valley area, Alfred was the author of the *Handbook of the Indians of California*, a major 1925 study of the demographics, languages, social structures, folkways, religion, and material culture of the principal Native American tribes of California

(Kroeber, 1979). He also worked closely with Ishi, the last known member of the Yahi people, of whom Theodora subsequently wrote an acclaimed biography, *Ishi in Two Worlds*, published in 1961 (Kroeber, 2002). The influence of her parents' involvement with anthropology on Le Guin's upbringing, education, and intellectual development was therefore profound.

As a way into the following discussion of Le Guin's speculative anthropology, and in order to motivate the questions that we pursue throughout it, it is instructive to consider an influential critique of Le Guin's work put forward by Fredric Jameson in his essay 'World Reduction in Le Guin'. The core of Jameson's criticism is that in her major science fiction novels Le Guin is engaged in thought experiments which involve a drastic simplification of human life as we know it. These involve, Jameson claims, a 'surgical excision of empirical reality, something like a process of ontological attenuation in which the sheer teeming multiplicity of what exists, of what we call reality, is deliberately thinned and weeded out through an operation of radical abstraction and simplification which I will henceforth term *world reduction*' (Jameson, 2005c: 271). In the case of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Jameson sees the depiction of the inhabitants of the planet Gethen, on which the novel is set, as an attempt to strip away many of the features and historical traces which constitute present-day humanity, so as to be left with an 'essential' human nature – something that Jameson, as a thoroughgoing historicist, is committed to rejecting (2005c: 269). Jameson also voices reservations about the novel's ostensibly radical gender politics. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is concerned with a race of ambisexual beings, the Gethenians, who spend most of their lives in an androgynous state, only becoming male or female for a few days each month during a sexually active period known as 'kemmer'. Whereas commentators on the novel have tended to focus on the nature of the Gethenians themselves, Jameson shifts the focus to the text's political unconscious. What Le Guin's novel tries to repress is, according to Jameson, conflicting human desires and hence historical conflict, which 'admits of no [merely fictional] "solution"' (Jameson, 2005c: 274). In effect, the fictional device of kemmer short-circuits political conflict around gender by inventing a world in which such conflict can never arise. This criticism is followed by an analogous criticism levelled at Le Guin's slightly later work, *The Dispossessed*.

The Dispossessed focuses on the relationship between two neighbouring worlds, Anarres and Urras, the former of which is organised along anarcho-syndicalist lines, while the latter features a patriarchal capitalist society with obvious parallels to 20th-century America. Regarding the novel's attempt to think beyond capitalism in the case of Anarres, Jameson identifies similar limitations to those he finds in *The Left Hand of Darkness*: in order to describe a liberated society, Le Guin is

forced to imagine humanity ‘released from the multiple determinisms (economic, political, social) of history itself’ (Jameson, 2005c: 275). Jameson’s criticism of the later novel’s world reduction thus parallels that of the earlier: ‘this attempt to rethink Western history without capitalism is of a piece, structurally and in its general spirit, with the attempt to imagine human biology without desire’ (Jameson, 2005c: 277).

Jameson’s readings are, then, examples of ideology critique: both novels are read as trying to resolve social antagonisms in the form of fantasy, thereby proffering imaginary solutions to real problems. There is a case to be made, however, that Jameson’s readings neglect much of the richness and specificity of Le Guin’s science fiction, in the process foreclosing its anthropological aspect as well as its utopian potential. In order to recover this potential, a different approach is required, one capable of doing justice to the complex worldbuilding that is characteristic of Le Guin’s fiction. As we shall see, attending to the interplay of thick description and historicity in Le Guin’s work reveals the outline of an implicit theory of speculative anthropology that facilitates exploration of the relationship between anthropology and science fiction. In effect, Le Guin uses science fiction to combine the strengths – and partly overcome the limitations – of Geertzian thick description and Jamesonian historicist formalism as approaches to analysing symbolic practices.

Clifford Geertz and Thick Description

In his own words, Clifford Geertz sets out to demonstrate that anthropology is ‘not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning’ (Geertz, 2017f: 5).[2] Central to this interpretive anthropology is the concept of ‘thick description’, which Geertz adapts from the philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1971b; 1971c). By this, Geertz means an attempt to reconstruct the symbolic meaning that human actors ascribe to their activity within a defined cultural context. Geertz is highly sensitive to the complex, superimposed, interpenetrating conceptual structures that the ethnographer has the difficult task of grasping and then rendering discursively (Geertz, 2017f: 11). He acknowledges the dilemma of how the anthropologist is expected ‘to sound like a pilgrim and a cartographer at the same time’, that is, to simultaneously convey intimate immersion in the cultural worlds they visit and keep a cool distance from those worlds (Geertz, 1988: 10). Geertz criticises ideational understandings of culture, preferring instead to conceptualise culture as both socially constituted and socially constituting, and to concentrate on symbols that hold and convey meanings for the social actors who have produced them. In doing so, he puts forward a view of anthropology that brings together finely detailed ethnography, a broadly hermeneutic approach to the interpretation of cultural texts, and a striking literary sensibility. Geertz likewise explicitly calls on anthropologists to develop a

'scientific phenomenology of culture' (2017b: 389). Phenomenological approaches to qualitative social science aim to understand human action via the actor's own frames of reference, focusing on the actor's embodied and intersubjective engagements with their world, as well as the organised 'stocks' of taken-for-granted knowledge on which their everyday activities draw. However, in explicit contrast to philosophical phenomenologists, Geertz stresses the symbolically mediated relation between actor and situation. Geertz looks at how social actors engage in (inter)subjectively meaningful activities within a 'self-evident' world of everyday life, but sees this world, crucially, as 'a cultural product... framed in terms of the symbolic conceptions of "stubborn fact" handed down from generation to generation' (2017c: 119).

Arguably the most well-known of Geertz's ethnographies to employ thick description is 'Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight'. In almost cinematic style, Geertz describes being taken to one of the many popular, but illegal, cockfights in a Balinese village in 1958 and then fleeing from the police when they arrive to break up the gathering. The account he offers vividly renders the event such that the reader feels something of what it is like to 'be there' and analyses the experience through the layers of meaning the participants ascribe to the event. In doing so, the ethnography not only relates what happened, but helps the reader to see it as a symbolically laden activity. Geertz interprets the cockfight as a ritual that is 'fundamentally a dramatization of status concerns' (2017a: 459). Rather than the monetary bets as such, the depth of Balinese cockfighting as a kind of play comes from 'the migration of the Balinese status hierarchy into the body of the cockfight' (Geertz, 2017a: 457). Drawing partly on the literary critic Northrop Frye's account of literature as a form of socially constitutive meaning-making, Geertz then reaches the following extensive conclusions:

> What the cockfight says it says in a vocabulary of sentiment – the thrill of risk, the despair of loss, the pleasure of triumph. Yet what it says is not merely that risk is exciting, loss depressing, or triumph gratifying, banal tautologies of affect, but that it is of these emotions, thus exampled, that society is built and individuals put together. Attending cockfights and participating in them is, for the Balinese, a kind of sentimental education. What he learns there is what his culture's ethos and his private sensibility (or, anyway, certain aspects of them) look like when spelled out externally in a collective text; that the two are near enough alike to be articulated in the symbolics of a single such text; and – the disquieting part – that the text in which this revelation is accomplished

> consists of a chicken hacking another mindlessly to bits. (Geertz, 2017a: 471)

Geertz sees 'the more profound corollary' of his research as the insight that 'cultural forms can be treated as texts, as imaginative works built out of social materials' (2017a: 470).

Influential and compelling as it may be, Geertz's approach is open to several criticisms. To begin with, viewing ritualistic events as symbolic reflections of social structure that affirm a society's core values neglects inquiry into the process of symbolisation itself, including the participants' contestation of how status relationships are symbolised and centred (Bronner, 2005). Leo Howe argues that, by ignoring the mechanics of power and confusing 'the local idiom of power' with its material basis, Geertz risks making societies such as Bali appear more 'other' than warranted (Howe, 1991: 451). Howe demonstrates this with ethnographic evidence of how pervasive hierarchy is in Bali, how Balinese social relations become encoded in hierarchically informed ideas, and how these ideas historically become formative presuppositions of Balinese life (1991: 453).

Geertz likewise at times fails to appreciate the specifically political dimension of cultural change and the ways in which social and political conflict affects culture. In the case of the Balinese cockfight, one can reasonably assume that the prohibition of such ceremonies and their interruption by the Javanese police involve political confrontations, which the Balinese interpret in explicitly political terms (Peletz, 1993). When Geertz does turn his attention to the relationship between national politics and culture, he expressly aims to develop 'an understanding of how it is that every people gets the politics it imagines' (Geertz, 2017e: 335). This is somewhat unsatisfactory because it ignores how some groups pay a price for imagining something different, as well as how groups differ in how much they gain from politics (Waters, 1980). As Mitchell Duneier points out, in his account of the cockfight, Geertz kept no records of the family members' bets or conversation, yet treated class distinctions as largely irrelevant to how the event is perceived, claiming that family members always root for cocks that belong to their own family leaders (Duneier, 2011: 7–8). How might the account have differed had we heard from Balinese witnesses themselves, especially those from subordinate classes?

William Roseberry likewise argues that Geertz neglects key aspects of Balinese society, such as the context of state formation and colonialism, because of his insistence on seeing culture as a text, which separates it from its material process of creation, as well as the larger historical process that shapes it and that it shapes in turn (Roseberry, 1982: 1022). Although William Sewell Jr. appreciates the force of Roseberry's criticism, he sees the issue as more one of synchrony versus diachrony rather

than idealism versus materialism: 'By treating a cultural performance as a text . . . one fixes it and subjects it to a synchronic gaze, bracketing the question of the processes that produced it in order to work out its internal logic' (Sewell, 1997: 36–7). Although Geertz specifies the synchronic coherence underlying the cultural practices he examines, this analysis does not usually circle back to a diachronic view of the social tensions or contingent historical circumstances that produced the cultural performance in question (Sewell, 1997: 37).

In summary, the strength of Geertz's interpretive anthropology is its ability to capture the rich texture of human activity and its place in a web of cultural meaning; its weakness is its insufficient sensitivity to perspectival differences within a given culture (including those arising from social and political conflict), and to the macro-historical context in which cultures are situated. This is not to say that Geertz never addresses conflict or history. When Geertz does consider these, however, it comes at the price of disrupting the phenomenological continuity of his thick description.

Thick Description in Le Guin

Like Geertz, Le Guin uses thick description for the purpose of making sense of the practices of societies which differ radically from the observer's (author's or reader's) own. In Geertz's case, the societies under consideration are those of real-world human groups studied by social scientists. In the case of Le Guin's speculative anthropology, these are fictional societies typically seen from the perspective of an outsider figure who plays the role of ersatz anthropologist. Le Guin states that she chose to write *The Dispossessed* as a novel rather than, for instance, an essay because this allowed the story to have

> . . . the inherent self-contradictions of novelistic narrative that prevent simplistic, single-theme interpretation, the novelistic 'thickness of description' (Geertz's term) that resists reduction to abstracts and binaries, the embodiment of ethical dilemma in a drama of character that evades allegorical interpretation, the presence of symbolic elements that are not fully accessible to rational thought. (Le Guin, 2005: 306)

A comparable 'thickness of description' can be found at work in some of Le Guin's other science fiction novels.

While not formally an anthropologist, the protagonist of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Genly Ai, plays the role of participant-observer in an alien culture, gradually deciphering the meaning of its inhabitants' practices over the course of several years. During Ai's time on Gethen/Winter, he often struggles to interpret the opaque codes and behaviours

of those he encounters. At the root of these difficulties lies the Gethenians' gender system, which Le Guin shows has ramifications for every aspect of their lives. The following reflections by Ai on his early encounters with Estraven, a senior Gethenian politician, provide insight into the nature of the challenges this system presents him with:

> Though I had been nearly two years on Winter I was still far from being able to see the people of the planet through their own eyes. I tried to, but my efforts took the form of self-consciously seeing a Gethenian first as a man, then as a woman, forcing him into those categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential to my own. Thus as I sipped my smoking sour beer I thought that at table Estraven's performance had been womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit. Was it in fact perhaps this soft supple femininity that I disliked and distrusted in him? For it was impossible to think of him as a woman, that dark, ironic, powerful presence near me in the firelit darkness, and yet whenever I thought of him as a man I felt a sense of falseness, of imposture: in him, or in my own attitude towards him? (Le Guin, 2017b: 11–12).

This passage conveys a sense of the adjustments, readjustments, and re-readjustments that Ai finds he must make in order to comprehend his interlocutor. It is sustained partly by a tension – sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit – between Ai's binary, patriarchal understanding of gender and the gender system he finds among the Gethenians. The self-interrogative, self-reflexive mode of the passage enacts Ai's rapid changes of mind and the sudden, gestalt-shift-like changes in perspective he undergoes. The cumulative effect of the passage is a deepening turn against the very categories in which it is couched. At first, Ai reflects, he had viewed the typical Gethenian 'first as a man, then as a woman', before becoming aware of the insufficiency of this way of seeing, at least in part due to the degree of self-conscious effort required to do so. Another attempt to make sense of gender on Gethen involves projecting onto Estraven qualities Ai associates with femininity – 'charm and tact and lack of substance' – in an attempt to stabilise the apparent flux which confronts him. This leads Ai to a question: is it these specifically 'feminine' characteristics in the 'man' before him that he finds himself reacting against? But this possibility is then reframed and subtly undercut by the final sentence. Its opening clause ('For it was impossible to think of him as a woman') increases our awareness of the ambiguity of the term 'feminine' in the context of Ai's train of thought. Ai rules out the option of seeing Estraven as a woman because of the latter's 'dark, ironic, powerful presence', which inclines Ai to view him, in line with his own socially instilled expectations, as a man. This latter possibility is negated in turn,

however, by the 'sense of falseness, of imposture' that comes over Ai whenever he tries to see Estraven exclusively in this way. Had Le Guin ended the sentence at this point with a full stop, Ai's thought would have culminated in an uncertainty about how to define Estraven's gender. Instead, Le Guin introduces an unexpected colon, and the words that follow it raise Ai's reflections to a higher level of self-consciousness. The question he is left with is not simply that of why he feels a sense of falseness in regarding Estraven as *either* a man *or* a woman but, crucially, of whether his familiar gender categories are *themselves* the source of that sense of falseness. The falseness has, we might say, begun to migrate from the 'anomalous' Estraven to the gender conventions Ai adheres to, thereby bringing about a crisis in the latter.

The question Ai raises in the last sentence is left unanswered, at least at this early point in the novel, but in raising it in this way and in exploring its contours in the involved, self-interrogative manner of this passage, Le Guin is able to interpolate the reader in a very direct way into the experience undergone by a participant-observer coming to know an unfamiliar culture. It is noteworthy here that, before coming to Gethen, Ai was fully aware of the gender system on the planet, yet still finds it hard to adjust to once he arrives. This contrast between Ai's bare knowledge of that system and his actual encounter with it serves as a fictional exemplification of the difference between thin and thick description: the information he has been furnished with prior to his visit is a long way from his lived experience on Gethen as rendered by Le Guin via her fictional analogue of a Geertzian thick-descriptive field report.

Thick description is put to many uses by Le Guin, however, beyond providing a sense of the epistemological crises which fieldwork can induce in the participant-observer. In the case of *The Dispossessed*, thick description is used to provide, if anything, an even more complete picture of an alien society's norms and practices. The protagonist of the novel, Shevek, is a physicist from the anarcho-syndicalist world of Anarres. Like Ai, Shevek does not have a background in anthropology, yet his open-mindedness and intellectual curiosity mean he approaches life on Urras, the planet where much of the action is set, with all the attentiveness and inquisitiveness of a dedicated ethnographer. The patriarchal capitalist Urrasian state of A-Io is a society whose values and priorities are at first deeply puzzling to Shevek. In one early Urrasian encounter, Shevek reflects that, 'this curious matter of superiority, of relative height, was important to the Urrasti; they often used the word "higher" as a synonym for "better" in their writings, where an Anarresti would use "more central" [...] It was one puzzle among hundreds' (Le Guin, 1999: 16). Given that Urras is clearly modelled on contemporary US society, the effect of such passages is to estrange the reader from that way of life, rendering it unfamiliar and questionable by aligning us with Shevek's perspective.

The aspect of the novel which most closely approximates Geertzian thick description, however, is Le Guin's treatment of life on Anarres. In these parts of the book, rather than viewing a familiar kind of society through the eyes of an alien observer, we are viewing a decidedly unfamiliar kind of society – one where the concept of private property is not just absent but almost inconceivable, for instance – through the eyes of someone acculturated within it and able to take its ways largely as given. By weaving the absence of patriarchy, private property, social hierarchy, and law into her narrative in this way, Le Guin forces the reader to work actively to construct plausible interpretations of the evidence they receive of how such a society might function. She does not, in other words, provide a comprehensive aerial perspective on Anarres. Instead, the reader is left to construct as coherent an account as they can of what they are given. Although we are privy to some of the teachings of Odo, the founder of the dominant political philosophy of Anarres, these are dense, decontextualised, and occasionally incomplete fragments. What we are presented with, rather, are suggestive accounts of everyday scenes on Anarres without, as it were, an accompanying set of footnotes explaining the principles which inform them.

The following passages succinctly illustrate some of the central values of Shevek's society:

> . . . Sabul wanted to keep the new Urrasti physics *private* – to own it, as a property, a source of power over his colleagues on Anarres. But this idea was so counter to Shevek's habits of thinking that it had great difficulty getting itself clear in his mind, and when it did he suppressed it at once, with contempt, as a genuinely disgusting thought. (Le Guin, 1999: 93)

> As a child, if you slept alone in a single it meant you had bothered the others in the dormitory until they wouldn't tolerate you; you had egoised. Solitude equated with disgrace. (Le Guin, 1999: 93)

> . . . sexual privacy was freely available and socially expected; and beyond that privacy was not functional. It was excess, waste. The economy of Anarres would not support the building, maintenance, heating, lighting of individual houses and apartments. A person whose nature was genuinely unsociable had to get away from society and look after himself. He was completely free to do so . . . But for those who accepted the privilege and obligation of human solidarity, privacy was a value only where it served a function. (Le Guin, 1999: 94)

The dominant social value underlying the various practices alluded to in these passages is what the Anarresti call, in a conscious echo on Le Guin's part of the anarchist tradition, 'mutual aid'. Rather than making this theory explicit, however, Le Guin instead emphasises the ingrained responses of individuals to a range of everyday issues: expressing contempt in the face of the desire to privatise knowledge, equating solitude with disgrace, and equating privacy with waste, for example.

The second passage employs the verb 'egoise', a term of Le Guin's own invention. This term is never defined, but it often appears in exchanges between the Anarresti. On the simplest level, someone may be accused of egoising if they act out of an inflated sense of self-importance. On a second level, to egoise is to act in a way which denies or overrides the sense of solidarity that is the foundation of the Anarresti way of life. Thirdly, egoising has connotations of a mean, hoarding mentality, and is associated with squandering resources, as in the case of the individual who takes an unwarranted share of land for themselves. Fourthly, there is what might be called an 'ecological' dimension to the condemnation of egoising, since promoting one's own power or advantage at the expense of others damages an entire network of nested relationships and interinvolvements. Finally, echoing Le Guin's interest in the Chinese Taoist tradition, there is a metaphysical dimension to egoising. Shevek remarks that, 'It's the self that suffers, and there's a place where the self – ceases' (Le Guin, 1999: 53). Given this emphasis on the limits of the self, egoising may be understood as resistance to the ultimate nature of things. It is also therefore to fall into a kind of error: the person who egoises is acting on the basis of their isolated self as opposed to acting out of a sense of the whole of which they are a part. The term 'egoising' unites all these diverse senses.

In *Always Coming Home*, published 11 years after *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin's speculative anthropology is at its most explicit and self-aware. Although often billed as a novel, the book describes itself as 'an archaeology of the future' and takes the form of a compendious bricolage of texts recovered from a society inhabited by the Kesh people of Northern California in the distant future (Le Guin, 2016: 3). The book is composed of scraps of narrative related in the first person, anthropological field notes, poems, songs, folk tales, musical scores, diagrams, sketches of artefacts, and even recipes. To a greater extent than either of the previous texts, *Always Coming Home* requires sustained, active engagement on the part of the reader in constructing a context for the people and practices it depicts.

Around a third of the book is taken up by the story of Stone Telling, a Kesh woman whose life illustrates some of the main elements of Kesh society. Many of these texts are also framed by commentary from a character named Pandora, an anthropologist from another society that seems to inhabit a much later period than that of the Kesh. By presenting

first-person narrative and commentary alongside each other, Le Guin tasks the reader with following Pandora's lead by working to make sense of the symbolic structures of Kesh culture in a manner redolent of Geertz's study of the Balinese cockfight. As in that study, Le Guin's novel provides many instances of what a 'culture's ethos' – in this case the Kesh's – 'look[s] like when spelled out externally in a collective text', primarily in the form of a range of arts and crafts (Geertz, 2017a: 470). Like the Gethenian gender system and the Anarresti prohibition on egoising, the practices and values of the Kesh depart radically from those of patriarchal capitalist society. Most notably, the Kesh do not experience a gulf separating human from nonhuman. They see humanity as having no particular privilege or centrality within nature, suggesting affinities with deep ecology and setting up a contrast with a capitalist ethos of profit and growth. *Always Coming Home* represents the most ambitious of Le Guin's exercises in speculative anthropology: an attempt to envision a way of life in which the guiding assumptions and values of capitalist modernity are wholly absent, yet in which modern concerns – about the environment, alienation, and oppression – are addressed.

From these examples, we see how Le Guin's affectively and symbolically immersive encounters with imagined anthropological 'others' prompt self-reflection in both her characters and her readers. She thereby utilises thick description to achieve reflexivity of the kind Michael Taussig (2010: xiv) has in mind when he warns how, '[i]n trying to explain the strange and the unknown, we must never lose sight of how truly strange is our own reality'. Like the anthropologist Kathleen Stewart (2007: 5), Le Guin writes 'not as a trusted guide carefully laying out the links between theoretical categories and the real world, but as a point of impact, curiosity, and encounter', depicting character interactions in a way that understands how ethnographic subjects can 'resist researchers' efforts and interpretations, and add their own interpretations and insights' (Naples, 2003: 4). Like Kim Fortun (2001: 22) in her ethnographic studies of real-world social actors, Le Guin presents diverse, narratively mediated texts like folk tales and transcripts not because they establish the finality of the offered account but 'rather because they harbor potential for ever further elaboration'. As we will see, this resistance to closure is also key to Le Guin's approach to historicity.

Historicity in Le Guin

While employing thick description, Le Guin remains sensitive to historicity, presenting the elements of her invented worlds – practices, institutions, philosophies, religions, etc. – as having developed historically. This lends these elements a vital sense of historical contingency, undercutting

any impression that they are immutable or simply given, however they may be understood by those who inhabit these worlds.

In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin uses changes in viewpoint to suggest possible long-term explanations for present social conditions. For instance, an investigator who was part of the first landing party on Gethen hypothesises that the sparse population and harsh climate are major reasons for the absence of war (Le Guin, 2017a: 96). In the story's present, however, Ai points to a number of more recent developments that might bring an end to this long-standing state of affairs, including the rise of patriotism, the nation-state, and economic prestige competition (Le Guin, 2017a: 49). Elsewhere, Ai considers the comparatively slow rate of technological progress on Gethen, which seems to have developed 'without any industrial revolution, without any revolution at all' (Le Guin, 2017a: 98). Ai attributes this gradual pace to caution in the face of the unforgiving environment, but underscores that, despite appearances, technological progress on Gethen has never ceased: both 'the torrent and the glacier... get where they are going' (Le Guin, 2017a: 98). The effect of all this is to place the society that Ai observes within a much larger set of historical processes, thereby helping to explain why Gethen exists in its current state and how certain developments, such as the recent increase in competition between Gethenian polities for economic and other forms of prestige, might be creating the conditions for further and more drastic change. In these and related ways, Le Guin ensures that her speculative anthropology articulates *both* a synchronic account of webs of human meaning-making *and* a diachronic account of the modification of those webs over time.

Historicity is perhaps even more central to *The Dispossessed*. A major historical event that informs much of the novel is a failed revolution on Urras that occurred two centuries before the novel takes place, which Le Guin explores elsewhere in her 1974 short story 'The Day before the Revolution' (Le Guin, 2017b). After their attempted revolution was forestalled, the Odonians agreed to leave Urras and settle on the harsher, scarcer world of Anarres. The novel conveys the extent of the changes undergone by the Odonian community by illustrating how aspects of their pre-revolutionary past that were taken for granted at the time have now become alien to them. An Odonian called Tirin shows a more critical awareness of history when discussing archival film footage of Urras in a class on the history of the Odonian movement:

> If those pictures are a hundred and fifty years ago, things could be entirely different now on Urras. I don't say they are, but if they were how would we know it? We don't go there, we don't talk, there's no communication. We really have no idea what life's like on Urras now. (Le Guin, 1999: 38)

This illustrates not only consciousness of the possibility of radical social change across historical eras but also of how historical memory of the failed revolution and the subsequent development of Odonian society can be leveraged as a source of political criticism of that very society. The Odonians, Tirin suggests, have allowed themselves to become isolated on Anarres, not only in the sense that they agreed to their initial exile but also in terms of their failure to stay in communication with the Urrasians, thereby undermining one of their philosophy's own revolutionary tenets. Consequently, Odonian culture has begun to ossify and lose its vitality. As another Odonian, Bedap, laments, 'Kids learn to parrot Odo's words as if they were *laws* – the ultimate blasphemy!' (Le Guin, 1999: 140).

On Urras, on the other hand, the Ioti use museums to preserve their ancient cultural memory, including its most graphically and sadistically violent episodes:

> Shevek and Vea came to a glass case in which lay the cloak of Queen Teaea, made of the tanned skins of rebels flayed alive, which that terrible and defiant woman had worn when she went among her plague-stricken people to pray God to end pestilence, fourteen hundred years ago. [...] 'Why do you people cling to your shame?' [Shevek] said. 'But it's all just history! Things like that couldn't happen now!' [replied Vea.] (Le Guin, 1999: 180)

This passage illustrates how the Ioti ruling classes nostalgically look upon their society's past, with the displayed cloak serving as a symbol of power and authority in the face of challenges to the status quo. While Vea's response to Shevek's horrified question indicates that she does not view the exhibit as an ideological statement, immediately before this she flippantly remarks that the cloak 'looks awfully like goatskin' (Le Guin, 1999: 180), suggesting a lack of sympathy for the slaughtered rebels and reflecting how the Ioti have been taught to understand their violent past (and, it is implied, their present). This recalls Geertz's remark that culture imposes meaning on experience through 'symbolic conceptions of "stubborn fact" handed down from generation to generation', which frame the 'world of everyday life' (Geertz, 2017c: 119). The scene's dialogic quality calls the Ioti's settled view of the past into question, however, by viewing the same artefact from an alien (Shevek's) perspective. In terms of the hermeneutic phenomenology that informs Geertz's thick description, Shevek disturbs the Ioti's taken-for-granted knowledge of their everyday world by drawing attention to a significant symbolic object within that world and viewing it through a different cultural frame. As with other scenes set on Urras, the reader is made conscious of how ideas of hierarchy which are alien to Shevek have historically become formative presuppositions of everyday life on Urras, thereby integrating thick

description and historicity in a way that avoids a noted weakness of Geertz's own approach. Relatedly, whereas Geertz's account of the cock-fight and its breakup has been criticised for its lack of interest in how subordinate class participants viewed the event and how all those present understood the confrontation with law enforcement politically, Le Guin's account of the Ioti general strike and its breakup foregrounds both of these elements and places them in a macro-historical perspective. Uniting the Anarresti and Urrasian strands of the novel, the episode of the general strike – viewed from the immersed perspective of a participant-observer who becomes more a participant than an observer – implies that the history of Urras could conceivably have been radically different had the Odonians not cut themselves off from those who might have supported their cause.

In *Always Coming Home*, meanwhile, historicity is elevated to a meta-textual principle through the book's framing as an ethnographic account of a future people. In her narration, Pandora expresses self-reflexive concerns about how she is conducting her study of the Kesh. Early in the book, she draws attention to the incomplete pattern she is assembling, illustrating this through the metaphor of a broken clay bowl (Le Guin, 2016: 53). This would seem to be a commentary on the task of the ethnographer and the problem of representation, since Pandora's object of study, an entire way of life, is by its nature incomplete and open-ended, yet she is conscious of the presumed authoritativeness that comes from couching her account in social-scientific terms. Pandora is wary of presenting Kesh culture as static or fixed – the danger of prioritising synchrony over diachrony that we saw in the case of Geertz.

In this respect, it is worth considering the Kesh's distinctive understanding of their position in time and space. Two key elements here are the 'City of Mind' and the 'City of Man' (Le Guin, 2016: 149–72). The City of Mind is a network of intercommunicating sites 'occupied by independent, self-contained, and self-regulating communities of cybernetic devices or beings' (Le Guin, 2016: 149).[3] The City of Man, on the other hand, is how the 'period in which we live, our civilisation, Civilisation as we know it, appeared in the Valley [Kesh] thought', that is, 'as a remote region, set apart from the community and continuity of human/animal/earthly existence – a sort of peninsula sticking out from the mainland, very thickly built upon, very heavily populated, very obscure, and very far away' (Le Guin, 2016: 153). Pandora elaborates: 'the City of Mind, the computer network, including the Exchanges, was referred to as being "outside the world" – existing in the same time-region or mode as the City of Man, civilisation. The relation between the City and the Valley is not clear' (Le Guin, 2016: 153). Pandora pursues this point in her consideration of the story of a Kesh man who journeys to the United States in the late 20th century, where he is horrified by the pollution, war, and inequality, and eventually dies 'of grief

and poison' (Le Guin, 2016: 157). This is followed by the story of 'Big Man and Little Man', which takes the form of a creation myth and tells of the backward-headed 'Little Man' (implicitly modern humanity) killing and poisoning everything in the world and eventually dying of fear (Le Guin, 2016: 157–9). Pandora's following editorial, which makes explicit the post-apocalyptic framing of the novel, clarifies that the Backward-Heads populate Kesh ghost stories because the Valley is still marked by 'the permanent desolation of vast regions through release of radioactive or poisonous substances, the permanent genetic impairment from which [the Kesh] suffered most directly in the form of sterility, stillbirth, and congenital disease' (Le Guin, 2016: 159). Le Guin's own society is thus woven into Kesh lore and superstition via the evidence left from that era's destructive activity. This serves to underscore the extent to which a past moment of historical rupture – namely, the anthropogenic processes that culminated in ecological destruction and the collapse of industrialised society – pervades the present reality of the Kesh in terms of both cultural memory and physical geography. As in the previous two novels, this juxtaposition of familiar and unfamiliar transforms capitalist modernity into the 'other' of the society depicted – to the extent that even the wholly artificial City of Mind is seen by the Kesh as belonging to an earlier 'time-region' rather than their own, despite the City's acknowledged existence within their own moment. In this way, both the world inhabited by the characters and the world inhabited by the reader are historicised and seen in relation to one another. By establishing this diachronic relation and setting her imagined worlds in motion, Le Guin reflexively brings questions of power, voice, translation, and memory into sharper relief and complicates traditional ethnographic binaries like insider/outsider and observer/observed.

Le Guin's Speculative Anthropology

Jameson's 'World Reduction in Le Guin' and Geertz's 'Notes on the Balinese Cockfight' represent two strongly contrasting ways of approaching the analysis of cultural texts: a 'transcendent' approach that abstracts away from content and resituates the text within the historical totality of literary forms, and an 'immanent' approach that focuses almost solely on content and brackets the text's wider historical frame. In the face of the apparent irreconcilability of these approaches, Le Guin's synthesis of historicity and thick description in a science-fictional context takes on a new significance.

Allowing for the important difference that Geertz is concerned with empirically existing societies while Le Guin is concerned with invented ones (a point to which we shall return), both writers can be seen to employ a range of literary techniques to disclose the phenomenological texture of unfamiliar ways of life. 'Description' scarcely does justice to

the richness of this way of bringing experience to words. Beyond simply 'describing' character, action, and setting, Le Guin inhabits language in such a way as to be able to initiate the reader, both cognitively and affectively, into alternate ways of being. To this extent, Le Guin and Geertz are engaged in strikingly complementary enterprises. Unlike Geertz, however, Le Guin never allows thick description to neutralise historicity. She avoids this by incorporating social antagonism, cultural contestation, and historical contingency directly into her thick descriptions. The 'thickness' of experience as rendered in Le Guin's novels is never seamless, and does not lead to a neglect of the conflicted, unstable, and ambiguous elements of the societies portrayed.

Another dimension to the historicity of these novels, one with a bearing on their status as science fiction, is its critical relation to the present. The imaginative challenge posed to capitalism, imperialism, individualism, ecological irresponsibility, patriarchy, and the gender binary in the three novels we have been discussing is considerable. This challenge is made possible by their resituating of familiar social and political realities within a speculative frame which is nevertheless continuous with the world of the reader. To return to the issue of fiction versus reality raised above, the fact that Le Guin is describing invented societies as opposed to real ones starts to become less important at this point. A large and complex society built around the principle of mutual aid may not as a matter of fact exist, yet *The Dispossessed* manages not just to powerfully rearticulate ideas of the sort found in anarchists like Kropotkin but also to give the reader some sense of what a radical, non-egoic solidarity might be like in practice. Bracketing the fact that the novel takes place on two alien worlds, what Carl Freedman has called science fiction's 'cognitive continuum with the actual' (Freedman, 2017: 232) can be seen in the fact that the rival systems of government depicted are variations on real-world forms of politics. In addition to the interaction of historical elements within Le Guin's invented worlds, then, we need to distinguish a second mode of historicity whereby they stand in a critical relationship not only to Le Guin's (and our own) present but to unrealised possibilities *within* that present. To this extent, Le Guin's work steps outside the parameters of Jameson's own theory of science fiction. On the one hand, in imagining the 'future' she is indirectly imagining the present, as Jameson would want to say (Jameson, 2005b: 288). At the same time, the anthropological component of her writing means the scenarios she projects are not merely, in Jameson's words, 'mock futures' (2005b: 288) but rather occupy a zone somewhere between present and future: a kind of exploratory anticipation.

Inevitably, separating out the thick-descriptive, historicist, and science-fictional aspects of Le Guin's work for analytical purposes is a somewhat artificial enterprise. In reality, these are virtually inseparable, and it is arguably on account of this fully integrated quality that her

speculative anthropology possesses a utopian dimension unavailable to Geertz. While Geertz clearly rejects primitivism, exoticism, or the idealisation of traditional societies, he nevertheless holds that modern cultures may be able to learn from the ways of life that are the focus of anthropological research (Geertz, 2000a: 68–88). Le Guin's own borrowings from such studies, most notably in *Always Coming Home*, which draws on fieldwork on Native American cultures, suggests she shares this view. There is an obvious limitation to the potential of such a learning process, however, to which Le Guin, as a novelist, is not subject. This is that the anthropologist as an empirical social scientist is constrained to represent as accurately as possible the actual societies with which they are confronted. This otherwise obvious point is worth making as it highlights the importance of combining anthropological knowledge and methodology with science-fictional worldbuilding. What Le Guin has in common with Geertz is an ability to place the reader within a fully realised yet unfamiliar social world. By employing the science fiction genre, however, with its simultaneous relation of difference and sameness to the present, and its unique way of granting a historical perspective on that present, Le Guin initiates a utopian mode of anthropology concerned as much with life *as it might be* as with life as it is. The nonbinary gender system of the Gethenians, the non-egoic solidarity of the Anarresti, and the ecological attunement of the Kesh are all examples of science-fictional devices which, although radically utopian in one sense, nevertheless display clear links to real historical developments, including feminism, queer politics, socialism, anarchism, and environmental activism. The phenomenological fluency with which these practices are rendered helps the reader to relate them back to their own experience and to recognise that, *contra* Jameson's charge of world reduction, none of them requires a leap outside the process of history altogether. If anything, Le Guin illustrates how science fiction as a genre allows thick description and historicity to become mutually enabling rather than mutually exclusive.

In mapping the relationship between historicity, thick description, and science fiction in Le Guin, we have identified the core of her implicit theory of anthropology. One might nevertheless wish to ask what value such speculative anthropology is supposed to have for anthropologists themselves. What exactly is to be gained by anthropological engagement with science fiction? After all, a 'speculative' reconstruction of a traditional way of life on the part of an anthropologist in the field would just be bad anthropology, however imaginative it might be. An initial answer is that, by illustrating how society could be organised differently, science fiction is a valuable resource for thinking critically about the present by denaturalising practices we take for granted and imagining counterfactual lines of development. This is a promising approach to the genre for social scientists because many of the phenomena examined in science fiction (e.g. gender, class) are constitutive of real-world social relations

and so are regarded as defining objects of study in several social-scientific disciplines. A sceptic might respond, however, by arguing that instead of engaging with Le Guin's portrayal of, say, a nonbinary culture, anthropologists could simply turn to the actual ethnographic record to find examples of such cultures, especially as the ethnographic record provides more secure empirical footing.

Part of the answer to this lies in how, when comparing extant cultures, it is easy to think that a given culture developed as it did because of unique economic, social, or geographical factors that cannot arise in the ethnographer's own society. This makes it more difficult to conceive of such cultures as representing possibilities 'for us' than imagined cultures that directly extrapolate from observable processes in the ethnographer's immediate context. At the very least, it suggests that these two forms of intercultural comparison yield somewhat different critical orientations. Another part of the answer lies in the fact that ethnography is a form of writing that not only *describes* but also *constructs* its subject. This point was central to anthropology's literary turn, which looked back to the interest voiced by earlier anthropologists in literary theory and practice (Craith and Fournier, 2016). As James Clifford, a key figure in the literary turn, has observed, 'Margaret Mead, Edward Sapir, and Ruth Benedict saw themselves as both anthropologists and literary artists' (Clifford, 1986: 1). Meanwhile, in his key 1973 essay on thick description, Geertz states that 'anthropological writings are necessarily second and third order interpretations' and 'are thus, fictions; fictions, in the sense that they are "something made", "something fashioned"' (Geertz, 2017f: 17) – a point he subsequently expanded on (Geertz, 1988). Anthropology is of course distinguishable from fiction for many purposes, but, as the literary turn demonstrated, their shared emphasis on the reconstruction and elaboration of diverse kinds of human experience means that no straightforward separation between the two can be consistently maintained. Conversely, as seen from our discussion of Le Guin's novels, 'fictional' need not mean 'entirely invented'. As well as incorporating real-world elements, Le Guin's fiction dramatises the cognitive and affective challenges of entering into and comprehending an unfamiliar way of life without either (i) entirely reducing it to the reader's local idiom, or (ii) assuming that cultural differences make mutual understanding impossible.

A final component of speculative anthropology likely to prove of interest to social scientists is its relationship to the future. Although we cannot fully engage with them here, there have been various proposals for bringing futurity centre-stage in anthropology. For example, in projecting an 'anthropology of the future', Rebecca Bryant and Daniel M. Knight make the case for 'a reorientation of the discipline from being to becoming, from structure to agency, and from social institutions to the hope, planning, practices, and action that project those into the yet-to-come' (Bryant and Knight, 2019: 192–3). In response to these intimations, we shall close with the suggestion that when we recognise Le Guin's deployments of

speculative anthropology as containing possibilities *for us*, a productive dialogue between anthropology and science fiction studies may beckon.

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Notes

1. Le Guin has sometimes been considered part of a subgenre known as ‘anthropological science fiction’, encompassing Chad Oliver, Michael Bishop, and Joanna Russ, among others (Collins, 2004). The term ‘speculative anthropology’ as we use it here, however, refers to a specific combination of thick description, historicity, and utopian anticipation. Whether it can be applied to writers other than Le Guin would therefore have to be considered on a case-by-case basis (see also Collins, 2005).
2. When Geertz was appointed at Harvard, he provided assistance on a research project on the multiple meanings of the term ‘culture’ led by, among others, A.L. Kroeber, ‘the then dean of the discipline’ (Geertz, 2000b: 12).
3. Le Guin elsewhere suggests the inspiration for the ‘City of Mind’ came partly from her reading of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s lecture, ‘The Scope of Anthropology’ (Le Guin, 2018b: 117).

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