

## ISSUE NO. 12

## Ursula Le Guin's Fiction as Inspiration for Activism

**adrienne maree brown***As presented at the Tiptree Symposium on Ursula K. Le Guin, 2 December 2016.**Transcribed by adrienne maree brown and lightly edited by Alexis Lothian.*

hi everyone i'm adrienne, it's nice to meet you.

you just have to exert your own selfness at all times no matter what.

i live in detroit.

people don't think that detroit is the best, but it is the best. it's a post-apocalyptic city where black and brown people have been experimenting with other ways of being in this world – after capitalism, under capitalism, in direct resistance to capitalism. i think it's a great place. i invite you all to come there some time – to visit. don't move there.

a few words on *the dispossessed*. (i don't identify as an academic, but i do scholarship, and i like to pull the two apart. i've never been a teacher, i don't have any degrees although i did go to columbia university for a long time. but then i failed french, so.)

i have done a ton of work on octavia butler's work. i grew up in a star trek household. i was primed to be into science fiction – i was raised by a black man married to a white woman, both from the deep south. i think star trek was an important political experience – he might not say that – but being exposed to a world where his partnership and children wouldn't be persecuted feels important. so i was primed for that. i read science fiction, philip dick, other stuff.

but when i came across octavia's work it was this transformative experience for me. here was this black, awkward woman writing about awkward black girls transforming the whole world and i was like, this is for me.

it was a couple of years after that that i came across le guin's work, and *the dispossessed* was the first piece of her work that i read. it had that same feeling – this is someone who's like me. how is ursula someone like me? and yet this is clearly someone who wanted to challenge everything about the world we live in and wanted to use fiction as the way to do that challenging.

*the dispossessed* is a call to action and foundational text for people who want to do social justice work. i often tell people that. the credibility i have to do that is because i have been doing social justice work for the past 20 years. harm reduction, people doing direct action, and i actually ran the ruckus society for five years (trains people in nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience – people who are supporting standing rock and black lives matter). i dabbled in electoral politics and i didn't find it very satisfying, and i feel right about that after this year.

all along the journey of doing social justice work, i was reading science fiction like it was in the closet. this is something i find to be a relevant text but i didn't know how to say that to serious activists – to read sci fi to understand philosophy and ways of transforming the world.

*the dispossessed* was a book i could say: “you call yourself an anarchist, you need to read this book.” a lot of people toss around the term anarchy. i've seen it used in a derogatory way. i felt *the dispossessed* offered a beautiful exploration of “what does it really take to commit yourself to complete freedom? and then what are the new problems that arise out of a commitment to complete freedom?”

le guin does this, always – no easy answers. here is a new situation, proposition, and some new problems. for instance, here is a scheduled time to go have a bunch of group sex in a bathhouse – awesome, great job ursula. but then here's the problems that would emerge from that.

in *the dispossessed*, the social pressures that shevek has to push up against are not the ones that we deal with. in the world that i'm in now, being special is the goal. we're supposed to go off, come up with a brilliant idea or book, and then battle to the death to become number one bestseller, or most funded nonprofit. even if you're trying to change the world you are still coming back into a highly competitive environment. your specialness is important to be able to advance anything.

shevek is in the opposite situation – he has a brilliant idea in a society where that kind of specialization and identifying yourself as better than anyone else or having some special call is actually pushed back on or rejected. i loved that problem. oh, i would struggle with that – i like to be special like once a week. not every day, i love other people's work. but i like to be in a realm of people who think they are special in some way. i think a lot of us do, but we don't like to admit that because its gauche.

so the other ways that shevek is tested is that he has something that is potentially good for all that exists, and then he comes across societies that ... he doesn't agree with how they're existing. so he travels from his anarchist moon to the planet, to a society in luxury capitalism.

i was telling karen joy fowler that i landed in eugene, we're driving around and i have this massive SUV cause the rental car company didn't have the economy car that i rented. i was saying it felt like a very american experience to land and get given this massive vehicle and then go to the hotel and i'm just me – i'm a thick woman, but i don't need two beds and another pull out bed. but that's just the condition of an american hotel, often. you need all of this.

when shevek goes to urras it's like – this society is devoid of anything below a surface experience of pleasure and joy and happiness. everything is happening right at the surface. i can feel the resistance, and the complexity of “this is a soft bed, these sheets are really nice – still i want my freedom.” i experience this: “this hot tub is nice, how can we universalize this?” we focus on the wrong things sometimes. don't take it away but make it more accessible.

so this ansible concept – it doesn't matter whether its in a capitalist society, or the authoritarian proletariat. there's some concepts that are so universal that we want everyone to have access to them. and i feel like the battle that shevek does – do i choose those who deeply share my value system, or share it with everyone? i feel this – when i come up against someone who doesn't agree with me, it's so confusing in my heart. i'm like, the thing i am talking about is not a political position, it feels like making things accessible to everyone. i want your racist uncle and my racist uncle to both have access to healthcare.

and the ansible is this communications device like that. and the question is: how do you come up with things that are universal concepts, benefits.

so i make everyone read *the dispossessed*. people come back usually floored by it, but also asking: what are the societies people would be willing to participate in? this is the question le guin asks, and butler asks. i believe my mentor grace lee boggs (detroit activist who lived to be 100, she passed last year) was also asking this. it's not enough to have the idea and impose it on others. how do you transform yourself for that world? how do you take on the responsibility?

as i was writing this i was thinking that this is the problem for social justice workers. we are great at coming up with the ideas for how everyone else needs to change, what society needs to do, how everyone else is a mess, flawed, failing – we love to tell people about themselves, invite them to be told.

what we're not great at is turning the mirror on ourselves. when push comes to shove, when i get that gold credit card in the mail, whatever it is that hooks you into the comfort of society and status quo – do i reject it? or do i make that compromise? and how many compromises can we make on our freedom before we are no longer free, and we've opted into something else?

le guin says that no matter what your socialization is, there will come a point when you get tested. and you will have to decide as an individual what you will do.

earlier we were talking about *octavia's brood* (co-edited with walidah imarisha) – isn't the cover beautiful? john jennings did that for us. this is the core question that our *brood* writers came to. it's not what we asked. we asked: what is the furthest horizon you can see in your work? but what they answered is: what do i do when i'm tested? my values for parenting a certain way, a commitment to the planet. what does it mean when i have to be the one whose practices have to shift in order to actually even begin to reach for the justice i want?

i want to name that because in this political moment, with trump as the president-elect, even for the optimists there's nothing good. it's not enough to spend the time listing out how our opposition is horrible, deplorable – we did that the whole campaign. how do we instead start to take on the responsibility of calling things out in real time as they happen, naming the society we want, flexing the muscle of imagination, and applying it to everything we practice?

it would be so easy to be depressed and dissociated for the next four years. turning back to le guin's work, turning back to butler's work, turning back to these writers who are so formidable, i see instead that my work has to be becoming even more vigilant with asserting my vision for the future that i want to see with the people that i want to see it with.

there are two more concepts i want to bring. emergent strategy: looking at the natural world; and, biomimicry: between the natural world and humans. le guin talks to birds and she talks back – she has been writing in response to the natural world, not just in

response to humans. how many sci fi writers have been doing that, asking what are birds doing to survive? how are ants surviving? they're doing it. the animals we have been taught to uplift – lions, tigers, bears – are not doing so well. they are endangered, in part because of us, but in part because of form.

the creatures that are proliferating aren't the ones we like to talk about. "go roaches?" – no one has a team called the roaches. during the last world series i started calling the cleveland team the cleveland roaches cause i thought that would be less offensive. mice, squirrels, all these creatures that are proliferating are collaborative collectivized creatures that figure out how to do things in community with each other. *the dispossessed* is, at it's core: stop with the rampant individualism. even if you have a beautiful idea, how do you bring it back into the fold of community to advance it? that's a brilliant emergent strategy. shevek didn't start off knowing how to do this. it was many experiments, many conversations before reaching the conclusion that "i have to bypass luxury and be free."

last piece i will talk about is pleasure. i am a love and pleasure activist. the body learns on yes. we learn much more when someone tells us yes. we know this when giving advice about getting a lover to increase orgasms. so often our move to get people to change is to unveil, to say "you're so messy, you failed at this, you don't know how to do justice, you used the wrong language for my whole people, i want to cut you off and write an article about it." the other way we change is an invitation. how do we make justice the most pleasurable experience we can have? instead of ugh, consensus, ugh, mediation. it's so weighted and heavy to do transformative justice work instead of this pleasurable experience of connection.

in *the dispossessed*, you see this surface level pleasure with the topless ballgowns and endless amounts of food. you see that level of surface pleasure, and then you see the deeper pleasures that they're experiencing on anarres, of deep relationship and community and child raising together – which we're taught are not pleasurable, that we are supposed to rush through so we can get to the party. i just want to name that: how do we transform our concept of what feels pleasurable to us?

audre lorde teaches us that once we have tasted the erotic, pleasure, being fully awake in real time, it becomes impossible to settle for suffering. so many of our communities have experienced so much suffering, but they haven't gotten the flip side, to experience the pleasure of being alive. now i say this, the pleasure of being alive in my black, fat, queer body which every society has tried to reject. but i feel so much better. i look at

trump and i think, i know you don't feel like this. you may have won something, but i am winning for real. there's something about inferiority and superiority. if someone spends their entire time trying to prove they are superior to everyone else, what is deep inside of that is a deep-seated self-loathing inferiority.

on the flip side of that is the pleasure of being like "i love exactly who i am and i am in the right time doing the right work with the right people." i think at the end of *the dispossessed* that's what shevek is walking around feeling: "maybe i don't have all that, but i have all this and it's so good." how do we make that a viral experience that so many people have over this next period of time, a viral experience of self loving, and being in relationship with a bunch of other people who are learning how to love ourselves against all the odds? and from that, what society becomes possible?

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*further conversation from the q&a period*

nisi shawl: can you talk about the communities you derive from, come from, and go back to?

adrienne maree brown: i have fallen completely in love with detroit, unexpectedly. i grew up as a military brat, nomadic, every two years a new home. that makes me very adaptive. i land in a new location, i scan for my needs. when i landed in detroit, i found something deeper and more satisfying than i had experienced anywhere else. i had lived in california, where everyone talked about these values, about the rightness of them, but didn't necessarily live them. then i experienced detroit, where people don't necessarily talk about things or call themselves activists, but everyone was composting, taking care of each other, in interdependent situations. the coming back is the physical experience of landing in that black city – i feel a relaxing in my system. and then, on a spiritual and philosophical level, i return to the ideas that grace and jimmy boggs put out into the world: the ideas of motown, the ideas of black brilliance, black joy, black magic, the idea of having a black society.

the other place i return to is the south. all my folks are from south carolina, which is on fire right now.

then i did **ancestry.com** (<http://ancestry.com>) and i am trying to figure out what you do with that data. i have numbers that i am nigerian, with cote d'ivoire, ghana, and

scandinavian and western european – these are all my places.

i have been in all these conversations about what re-indigenization looks like for those of us that have been systematically untied from our lineage and set off to float around and figure things out, doing all kinds of messy things as we try to find our way back. is there a way i could pass through the colonialism and pass through the trauma and include a song from nigeria in my legacy? is that dream work, is that magic work? or do i need to re-indigenize here?

i think all humans need an indigenous connection to place, but it might have to be planetary. that might have to be the closest i can get to it – i feel a certain way about this planet. even as someone raised on star trek. for a long time i used to think i want to go to space. now i'm like – i love this place. so much. it makes me cry to know i am connected to this land, this whole thing. and how do i be in [the] right relationship with all the people, the creatures on it?

karen joy fowler: my question has to do with the movement of theory to practice. the examples i have seen of this are: you can take the theory of marxism and have an actual revolution and what results does not look like what marx hoped would result. or you can narrow your focus very much, give up on the revolutionary potential of feminism and try to get women the vote, and that too does not seem to have changed the world in the way that we would have hoped. when the problems are global, obviously there are things you can do in your own community, but is there anything you can do that brings the theory into being in effective ways? please solve the problems of the world for me in the time that you have left.

adrienne maree brown: what has helped me stay in social justice has been this formula that i am about to say. the main thing is: we don't know. the hardest part is when we try to use facts, plans, strategies to try to pretend like we know something that we don't know, we don't know if we're right. we don't know if being right will actually win out in the end. i don't think we give up because of that. i think even if we go out with a percentage of us fighting for justice, i say let's go out with a bang. that's definitely my belief system, i want to go out on the right side of things – but right is emergent. experimenting is really important. we don't give ourselves enough space to experiment right now. we just expect that we'll go from having a great idea to being able to live in that idea. i think transformative justice is a great example of this. i don't believe in a

punitive system, i don't believe in prisons; i believe in abolition. and yet i have a hard time with engaging in transformative justice practices even with my best friends and family. i need to be in these experiments regularly, growing my own capacity to practice these things i want to see practiced on a mass scale. starting at a small scale. every four years we're like "the whole globe!" and instead i'm like: do you talk to your parents, do you talk to your family, to your neighbors? do you bring your whole values to those people? start there.

i think if more people were to turn and have more authentic conversations with their families and their lovers we would be in a totally different situation in a year. but everyone's lying. so that's the other thing – stop lying. and lying happens in a really small way. none of us think we're liars. i'll just notice this: every time you [grace dillon] laugh, my instinct is to laugh with you. and one of my small practices is to ask myself, is it time to laugh? i don't need to laugh because you're laughing, i can just be in appreciation of your laughter. even those little things. when someone who is racist is polite to me, my instinct is to be polite in response instead of to say "you're still a racist asshole." so, trying to figure out how to be more honest at a micro level.

and then more contradictions. i think the answer is not that there is a right way, but rather how do we become wider and wider and wider to hold more contradictions within each other – in our personal spheres and in our community containers.

the way i was politicized was: here is the right way. these are the right positions to hold and these are the politicians that might advance that. or fuck the politicians. i think fidel castro's passing highlights this – how do we hold the contradictions of how messy an actual revolution is? because if we can't tolerate the contradictions, we will always slip into reform. and i think we are slowly dying of reform. we have to push for that messy revolutionary stuff, and hold the contradictions: it's not cheery hearted, love is not flowers and cookies. love is being radically honest and surviving. so one thing i've been moving people away from as much as i can is a paradigm of right and wrong. i think that's no longer useful. what i have found very useful is: i survived, i learned, i have agency.

before i was sexually assaulted, i had one belief around prisons, around abortions. after that, everything shifted. for a while i was pro-prisons. and it shifted again as i came into relationship with people who had done sexual assault and had grown and were still whole human beings and learning. we need to be able to hold a much wider container



and be in the experiments, and get really messy. and then submit to, we don't know; we still have to do the right thing.

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## ONE THOUGHT ON “URSULA LE GUIN’S FICTION AS INSPIRATION FOR ACTIVISM”

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