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# Imagining Alternatives to Present-Day Gender With Help From Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*

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**Imagining Alternatives to Present-Day Gender  
With Help From  
Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness***

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree  
Bachelor of Arts in Sociology

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## Introduction

Two people, one from Earth, one from another world. Two sets of survival gear. Eight hundred deadly miles of ice... and a planet's future at stake. These are the elements at play in Ursula K. Le Guin's world-famous science fiction novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Though published nearly a half-century ago, *Left Hand* is still in print and continues to reach new readers today. Upon its release in 1969, it won the United States' two major SF (science fiction) awards, the Hugo and Nebula. But it wasn't just a hit with SF fans. From highbrow critics to everyday readers, from lifelong SF lovers to people who wouldn't know an android from an alien, *Left Hand* has amassed a legion of passionate fans—as well as a few detractors. In 2013, almost forty-five years after its release, *Left Hand* even inspired a stage adaptation at Hand2Mouth Theatre in Portland, Oregon.

While the SF genre has origins solidly in the 1920s, if not much earlier, only recently have SF books like *Left Hand* become a subject of study for social scientists (Stableford 45). *Left Hand* has held great appeal for both readers and scholars due to the thought-provoking way it 'plays with' (to use Le Guin's wording) a certain concept, one known to all of us here on Earth, but one that many of us rarely notice or question: gender. As a story, *Left Hand* deals with many topics: betrayal and redemption, love and rejection, politics and survival, and much more. But it has left its most noticeable mark through its dealing with gender. More specifically, for this thesis-writer and for many others, *Left Hand* is interesting because it portrays something not seen in any other piece of popular media: humanity, people, society, *us*, minus gender. For throughout the book, Le Guin considers what a human society without gender might look like.

A minimal summary of the story: protagonist Genly Ai is a lone ambassador from Earth living on a wintry planet called Gethen. Genly's mission is to convince the humans of Gethen to

join a diplomatic, non-authoritative union of other peopled planets. To succeed in his mission, Genly must learn to understand and connect with the people of Gethen. Unfortunately for him, this has proven to be a difficult task. Gethenians are incomprehensible in Genly's eyes because, as individuals and as a society, they do not know the concept or practice of gender. A series of political upheavals leaves Genly and the only Gethenian who trusts him, Therem, forced to embark on an 800-mile journey across a desolate icy landscape. Against the odds, Genly and Therem build an intimate friendship, even as their lives hang in the balance.

Why is this one book so unique? Why is gender not thoroughly 'played with' in countless other media works? After all, gender, as a social idea, is relevant to the lives of nearly everyone on Earth. Sex, romance, friendship, family, nature, technology: in stories, these essential aspects of human life are constantly interrogated, examined, abstracted, changed, and re-imagined. Yet gender—along with some other key aspects of social life, like race and sexual identity—goes largely untouched.

A clue may lie in the relatedness of gender and ideology. As I will explore soon, the relationship between gender and ideology is dense and complicated, but some basic definitions are useful here. *Gender oppression* is the use of the concept of gender by those with social power to harm and constrain people in a systemic manner (Halberstam 118). Gender oppression works with help of *gender ideology*, or common, taken-for-granted ideas about gender. One main function of ideology is to limit the range of acceptable views or ideas about a topic in a way that benefits some people and hurts others (Ott and Mack 127). It follows that social concepts surrounded by ideology, like gender, are less likely to be questioned in an inventive or dissenting way. Therefore, it makes sense that few popular stories portray or use gender in a way that is wildly different from how people experience it in everyday life.

### **Imagining Alternatives**

In the absence of clear openings for questioning gender, whether in stories or in real life, the harmful power structures that involve gender come to seem impermeable, natural, and inevitable. In his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Muñoz expertly describes this process and its consequences. Judging from the experiences of people who cannot conform to ideological rules involving gender and sexuality, Muñoz determines that “the present is not enough... It is impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging” (Muñoz 458). Here Muñoz pinpoints the critical failing of our everyday: it is not just depressing or frustrating, but poisonous and actively harmful for those not accepted by normative society. Yet because our present is so oppressive, it seems inescapable. Within the temporality of ‘straight time,’ Muñoz argues, we learn that “there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life” (22), and the only imaginable futurity is that of “reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality” (22) and continued suffering. As an example, Muñoz points out that pragmatic gay/lesbian politics work under straight time. That is, when thinking of the future, white, upper-class gay and lesbian activists tend to envision the assimilation of queer peoples into oppressive society, such as through the normative institution of marriage. In all, the present is a slow killer, sucking the life out of people and a sense of potential out of the future.

Dealing with the present means pulling oneself out of a murky bog of social and political hegemony. The present is, as Muñoz says, “insolvent” (460)—extremely difficult to transform—but he still demands that we “wrest ourselves from [its] stultifying hold” (459). For him, one must transcend the present, not by ignoring or denying it, but by de-naturalizing it. De-naturalizing the present means contextualizing it within a whole timeline of possibilities and

seeing the potential to change its fundamentals. If the power of gender ideology today lies in its façade of naturalness and inevitability, then fighting it means imagining alternatives to it. This way of thinking—placing our current present in the context of alternatives, other possible futures besides its continuation—signals “a queerness to come, a way of being in the world...that challenges the dominance of an affective world, a present full of anxiousness and fear” (Munoz 456). Putting the present in the context of alternatives provides an escape tunnel from the seemingly inevitable continuation of suffering. To continue his critique of gay marriage as an example, Munoz challenges his reader to imagine a transformation of society bigger and more thorough than that imagined by gay/lesbian political pragmatism.

How can we take up Munoz’s challenge to de-naturalize the present and render it less powerful and overwhelming? That is, how can we imagine alternatives to our current harmful gender system, despite the encumbrance of ideology? How *should* we do so, in order to be most effective? Alternatives must seem real, possible, tangible, and meaningful before they can have any weight—political, emotional, or motivational—in comparison with the crushing present. I argue that studying *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a social phenomenon—involving its historical origins, its author, the story itself, and its readers—reveals a model for imagining alternatives to the current gender system and for building paths to ‘step out of’ the present. The book *Left Hand* itself is deeply flawed; it re-invokes certain strains of gender-normative, sexist, racist and colonialist thinking. However, *Left Hand* as a social, contextualized event creates a rebellious idea about gender and humanity and generates this aforementioned model.

My aim in this paper is to investigate *Left Hand* as more than just a book, but as a component in our social world. This includes its social-historical and authorial origins, its actual content, and the diverse responses it has garnered from readers: in general, its social meanings

and effects. I want to ask, first, how and why did this unique media depiction of human genderlessness come to exist? Next, what work does the book's story do, or fail to do, in breaking down the harmful ideas about gender that currently rule our society? Next, in what ways has *Left Hand* connected with readers—especially those harmed by current ideas about gender—and to what effect? All of these queries come together for the purpose of answering my most important and overarching questions: what exactly does *Left Hand* as a social phenomenon demonstrate or teach in regards to the task of imagining alternatives to our current gender system? How *should* we go about this task? What is a workable model for imagining alternatives to our current gender system—a model that could be used or referred to in present life?

### Structure

This thesis makes use of ideas from the fields of sociology, critical media studies, gender and queer theory, feminist studies, and cultural studies. I aim to use these multiple disciplines to create an approach grounded by the problems of our current society while still allowing for creative, sometimes wild, thinking and suggestions regarding these problems. As an example, I will look at how gender-related oppression, social change, and media intersect and use my findings to give advice to media creators on how to broach the topic of gender in their works.

In Chapter 1, Approaches to Gender in an Age of Exploration, I will put forth a theoretical framework explaining this paper's approach to issues of gender, including how gender ties into crucial issues of sexuality, race, and other components of human identity and oppression. I will highlight the different ways people are currently approaching the issue of gender and the possible future(s) of gender in the twenty-first century. For instance, I will look at

peoples' opinions about the idea of a genderless society and use any resulting insights to help inform my upcoming arguments.

In Chapter 2, *Launching the Subversive Imagination*, I will provide a historical context for *Left Hand* and investigate what Le Guin herself was aiming to do in writing it. I will give an overview of the literary traditions, particularly feminist science fiction, that led up to Le Guin's book. For instance, I will examine Le Guin's statement that science fiction is not about the future, but about the present. By acknowledging Le Guin's goals and ideas, I can later assess whether she fulfilled them, as well as whether her goals were substantial enough to have value.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I will conduct a detailed review and analysis of Le Guin's novel as a piece of writing. I will determine what Le Guin has put forth through her work—in other words, what exactly audiences are interpreting as they read. In Chapter 3, *Breaking Down: Counterfactuality and Genderless Society in *The Left Hand of Darkness**, I will profile the world that Le Guin creates and determine how she incorporates issues related to not just gender, but also sexuality, race and colonialism in conjunction with gender. Then, in Chapter 4, *Building Up: Genderless Humanity in *The Left Hand of Darkness**, I will dive into the plot and characters of the book and analyze what its narrative (as opposed to its world) means and enacts when it comes to gender. I will question whether Le Guin did achieve her goals involving gender and to what extent.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I will examine readers' reactions to this public imagining of human genderlessness and pinpoint what these reactions can tell us about the social/societal value of *Left Hand* as a media piece. In Chapter 5, *Failure to Land?: Celebrations and Critiques Among Mainstream Readers*, I will assess the reactions of professional literary reviewers and academics, but I will focus mainly on the reactions of 'mainstream' readers. In *A New Home Base*:

Celebrations and Critiques Among Genderqueer Readers, I will pay necessary attention to the views of readers who identify as agender or genderqueer regarding what these fictional ideas and suppositions make them feel and think. For instance, does *Left Hand* have representative value for genderqueer readers, or does it actually just otherize and alienate them?

Lastly, in my conclusion, I will demonstrate the meanings and consequences of what I have uncovered. I will answer the question: what model for imagining alternatives to our present gender system does *Left Hand*, as a small but unique component in our society, put forth? Using this knowledge, I will offer suggestions to two groups—first, to media creators on how to think and write about gender (as well as other loci of oppression and identity) more productively, and second, to everybody in society who wishes to resist and help overcome violent gender ideology. Finally, I will identify any relevant questions that have been left unanswered and describe related work that might be done in the future.

## **Chapter 1: Approaches to Gender in an Age of**

### **Exploration**

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” This statement by Simone de Beauvoir, found in her 1949 book *The Second Sex*, sent shockwaves through academic circles at the time. It now marks one of many attempts, by theorists past and present, to posit an accurate understanding of how gender functions in Western society. Two broad fields of thinking encircle these attempts—feminist theory and the more recently born queer theory. Feminist and queer theorists have long concerned themselves with social controversies involving gender and gender identity. In addition to their efforts towards understanding, feminist and queer theorists have also tried to determine solutions. Though these two groups have clashed on occasion, their ideas also overlap, and it is possible to meld the two into a dynamic perspective – and a useful perspective for this paper. Looking how gender works in our society, how current ideology surrounding gender harms people, and how different groups have challenged (or failed to challenge) said gender ideology is the crucial first step needed before we can imagine any meaningful alternatives to the current gender system.

#### **Gender Oppression and Ideology: A Toxic Mixture**

Over time, theorists have tackled a world of complicated questions and problems related to gender. But perhaps the most basic one is: what exactly *is* gender? Different people have tried to define and characterize gender in many ways. Queer theorist Judith Halberstam puts forth one dynamic definition that shows gender’s multifaceted nature:

Gender is...a marker of social difference, a bodily performance of normativity and the challenges made to [normativity]. It names a social relation that subjects often experience as organic, ingrained, ‘real,’ invisible, and immutable. It also

names a primary mode of oppression that sorts human bodies into binary categories in order to assign labor, responsibilities, moral attributes, and emotional styles. (118)

In order to fully illuminate Halberstam's definition, it is important to clarify the different building blocks, or concepts involving gender, that are at play. First, the term *gender identity* refers to people's sense of their own gender—a sense that tends to be separate from the social institution of gender Halberstam describes above. Terms that refer to gender identity include: cisgender, or the sense that one's gender identity lines up with others' normative expectations (expectations based on a few different factors to be explained soon); trans or transgender, which refers to a sense that one's gender identity does not match up with society's expectations. *Gender expression* refers to how people choose to express their gender. Getting to the bottom of Halberstam's definition, *gender oppression* is the systemic use of the concept of gender by those in power to harm and limit lives. Gender oppression works with help of common *gender ideology*, or normative ideas related to gender that are linked to the use of power.

One of the key tasks of feminist and queer theory and activism is to challenge gender ideology. Brian Ott and Robert Mack define ideology as “a system of ideas that unconsciously shapes and constrains both our beliefs and behaviors” (127). According to Ott and Mack, ideology has four main functions: to limit the range of acceptable views or ideas about a topic; to make certain social arrangements and power structures seem normal and natural; to privilege the needs and interests of powerful groups over non-powerful groups; and finally, to hold sway over peoples' self-formations, affecting our sense of what identities are real or possible (Ott and Mack 128-129).

In the line with complex nature of ideology, Western gender ideology is made up of

multiple dictums. First, there are supposedly two genders—‘man’ and ‘woman’—as opposed to many. Second, a person’s gender is determined by the ‘sex’ assigned to them at birth (‘sex’ being a concept, to be debunked soon, based on a baby’s physiology). Third, even the accepted genders of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are only achievable through certain normative actions and behaviors on the part of any given man or woman. Lastly, and related to dictum three, a person’s gender and/or level of gender conformity should help determine their social roles and the treatment they receive (Ott and Mack 127, 178). All of these rules cause suffering for countless people within Western society’s gender-based regime.

Imperative to note is that this regime is tied inextricably to racism, classism, colonialism, and other aspects of human oppression. Detailing these connections in full would require a second thesis, but one example lies in the way people’s multi-layered identities can affect the treatment they receive under the Western gender regime. For instance, a working-class person of color who does not conform to gender norms will face harsher repercussions than a gender non-conforming upper-class, white person. The people most likely to experience a violent attack from someone reacting to their gender nonconformity are trans women of color (Mogul, Ritchie and Whitlock 32).

An absolutely key aspect of Western gender ideology is its relation to colonialism and racism. In the process of upholding white racial supremacy, white people have historically targeted and violently rejected the unique, significant gender identities born from the cultures of people of color. In addition to the racial violence they were already practicing, white colonists who came to the Americas in the 1400s and onward specifically targeted indigenous Americans who did not conform to the colonists’ gender expectations – such as those indigenous people who were ‘two-spirit,’ or filling both traditionally male and traditionally female social roles.

Colonists viewed two-spirit people as moral abominations and sought them out for violent elimination (Hughes and Dvorsky 2008). In short, “colonial rule has always targeted diverse modes of embodiment and desires as sexual transgressions in order to control Indigenous communities” (Smith 469).

Today, commonly accepted ideas about gender are still centered on whiteness and ignore realities of gender specific to people of color. Even among ostensibly progressive groups, ideas about gender continue to exclude and harm people of color. Kristin Smith states in teaching her college students to analyze how the “dominant cultural logics of normalcy” surrounding sexuality and gender have affected their lives, she is compelled to remind them to see “how they might benefit from these logics at the expense of others” (469). For instance, as mentioned above, a person with a non-normative gender identity is more likely to find acceptance from others if they are white. In another example, queer people of color seeking self-understanding are less likely to find answers or useful language in mainstream gender discourse. In her article “Decolonizing Trans/gender,” B. Binaohan states, “To understand or conceive of myself as either ‘binary’ or ‘non-binary’ requires that I center whiteness in how I understand myself... We’ve reached a point where many of us lack the words or concepts to express our genders as they are beyond whiteness” (4). With these factors in mind, I will go forward in this paper referring to the Western gender system not simply as Western, but also white-Western.

Gender ideology serves as gas for the engine of gender oppression. Resisting and rebuffing it is necessary in trying to prevent the suffering of people. Yet today’s gender system is implanted in almost all aspects of our lives, from law, to work, to issues of personal identity. The continued and pressing question is: why are people so attached to common ideas about gender and so resistant to change?

## Real or Not Real?

On November 4th, 2013, in Oakland, California, genderqueer teen Sasha Fleischman woke from a nap on a bus and realized their clothing was burning. Someone had lit their skirt on fire in reaction to Fleischman's decision to wear a traditionally feminine item. Though perceived as a boy by their attacker, Sasha purposefully did not conform to gender-related norms and instead wore what felt comfortable to them as a genderqueer person. Gender non-conforming people like Sasha—most commonly, transgender women of color—are attacked, even killed, on a disturbingly regular basis for not living up to others' sense of what is right and wrong when it comes to gender. The truth is, people like Sasha are not attacked because of a simple sense, on the part of attackers, that they are 'different,' not like the rest of us. Murray Davis writes,

Anything that undermines confidence in the scheme of classification on which people base their lives sickens them as though the very grounded on which they stood precipitously dropped away... To be...regarded [as disgusting], however, the phenomenon must threaten to destroy not only one of their fundamental cognitive categories but their whole cognitive system. (72)

In other words, in the context of gender(ed) oppression, some identities are permissible while others must be rejected as forcefully as possible. Why? So that those in power can maintain a coherent and comforting sense of reality. This idea of 'realness'—'realness' as true humanity, 'real' as worthy of humane treatment—is a cornerstone concept for understanding the workings of gender ideology.

Common white-Western gender ideology denies and stands in opposition to the many diverse gender identities that people actually experience. The broad term 'genderqueer,' coined by Riki Wilchins in a 1995 newsletter from the transgender rights group Transsexual Menace,

speaks to gender identity or expression that does not fit into normative categories like ‘man’ or ‘woman.’ ‘Genderqueer’ builds off ‘queer,’ a once-slur re-appropriated by activist groups to recognize diverse sexualities beyond heterosexual and homosexual. Well-known genderqueer identities include bi-gender (feeling simultaneously like a man and a woman) and gender-fluid (feeling gender that changes over the course of time).

Interrogating gender and the concept of ‘real humanity’ further is necessary to determine how gender ideology might be pulled apart. One of the most famous queer theorists, Judith Butler, has used the intellectual tool of postmodernism to break down our usual ideas about what gender is. Butler posits that gender, instead of being something innate to each person, actually is more similar to a performance: a repeated set of actions that refer back to some ideal, perfect gender (30). Because it is impossible to ‘do gender’ perfectly, we all fail at the job. Only in failing are we able to practice agency and creativity in the field of gender. In short, no gender is actually *real*, objectively true, immovably solid. However, our society certainly functions as though gender is in all ways real—real enough to be the basis for violent interpersonal treatment.

In brief, within white-Western society, the experiences of gender non-conforming people go unacknowledged and are made, to borrow a term from Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man*, ‘un-visible.’ That is, they are not only invisible, due to a marginalizing lack of public awareness, but actually impossible for most people to see or comprehend within the confines of dominant gender ideology.

### **Shying from ‘Extremism’**

Feminist and queer theorists and activists are always coming up with new angles to confront new questions about gender. This often results in conflicts between ways of thinking, whether within each group or between them. For instance, feminism suggests that whether a

person is ‘male’ or ‘female’ should not determine their social destiny. But feminists have historically needed to grapple with accusations that they are not actually women—that they are mannish, unfeminine, and therefore lesser (Wilchins 6). In defensive response, some asserted that equality of opportunity for men and women could be instated without wiping out difference between the two groups. In other words, women could take on masculine-type behavior while still retaining normal femininity and without rejecting gender norms. This logic catered to the worries of many critics of feminism, who thought that challenging gender inequality incorrectly—that is, being too ‘extremist’—might completely demolish gender roles, to the detriment of society (Wilchins 8).

Some so-called radical feminists, while purporting to resist the gendered pressures of society, have themselves taken on similar oppressive beliefs about gender. For instance, the Michigan Womyn’s Festival, a yearly festival meant to celebrate women, bans transgender women to this day on the premise that they are not ‘real’ women (Wilchins 11). Radical feminists have gone as far as to call transgender people misguided and to label transgender identities as completely artificial. One lesbian feminist who Wilchins spoke with said, “I don’t want to be perceived as one of them” (10). While these problems continue to appear in the feminist movement, they are lessening as feminist leaders seek to respect transgender theorists and activists.

Meanwhile, some mainstream lesbian/gay theorists and activists have made similar mistakes in the process of trying to shy away from an ‘extremist’ reputation. The lesbian and gay rights movement, which has served as a base for queer theory, was itself sparked by the Stonewall Riot, an activist response to anti-gay and anti-transgender violence led by transgender women of color in New York City in 1969 (Wilchins 19). As heterosexuality forms a large

aspect of current gender norms—that is, ‘real’ women like men, and ‘real’ men like women—LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans) activists have historically attempted to deconstruct gender and gender expectations. However, while lesbian/gay political groups have nominally included transgender people in their efforts, this inclusion is undermined by many lesbian/gay activists’ insistence to heterosexual audiences that—in Wilchins’ paraphrase—“‘we’re just like you, we just sleep with the same sex’” (20) and “‘gender issues are something those people over *there* have’” (29). Like in the feminist movement, lesbian/gay theorists and activists have sometimes looked away from gender-related problems in order to maintain a picture of (at least partial) normalcy. Led often by white men, the mainstream lesbian/gay movement has generally insisted that gay/lesbian people can fit into the current gender system without breaking it down—that gays and lesbians can indeed fit into society as ‘real’ women and ‘real’ men.

### **Finding a Way Forward**

The problem of progressive groups not wanting to seem ‘too extreme’ to mainstream society demonstrates a major quandary for those who wish to combat gender oppression. The question always begging to be answered is: what is the best way to go about ending gender oppression? For instance, should we work slowly, meeting the mainstream as non-threateningly as possible, in order to ensure acceptance and win privileges within central society - even if it means going along with the gender binary? Or should we take any measures possible to turn the entire gender system on its head and reject the idea of being accepted or assimilated? In fact, should we try to get rid of gender altogether?

Some have advocated for this type of solution. In *Postgenderism: Beyond the Gender Binary*, George Dvorsky and James Hughes argue that “only the blurring and erosion of biological sex...and of binary social roles by emerging technologies will enable individuals to

access all human potentials and experiences regardless of their born sex or assumed gender” (3). Here, Dvorsky and Hughes suggest that we must rid ourselves of gender differences, by any means necessary, before full equality for everyone can be achieved.

In contrast, in their writing “Genderless Society Is Not the Answer,” Drew Cordes calls not for a genderless but a ‘gender liberated’ society where people can express whatever gender identity they have, without facing deep social restrictions. I fully agree with Cordes’ promotion. By speaking about gender-less societies in such depth, I do not mean to indict or deny peoples’ genders. Instead, my interest in these representations comes from a desire to interrogate the way our world moves around gender. The development of ‘gender freedom’ could possibly lead anyway to gender falling to the wayside as a social institution.

People without gender: whether or not the idea is intriguing, it does seem impossible within white-Western society’s normative gender ideology. Yet there are people living their lives today who identify as not having a gender. In fact, in the aftermath of their attack, Sasha Fleischman shared with news outlets not only that they identified as genderqueer, but also that they were agender. The fact is that some people, many of whom place themselves under the ‘genderqueer’ umbrella, do not feel a connection to any genders. Identity terms that people take on in this case include ‘agender,’ ‘genderless,’ or sometimes ‘gender neutral.’ While gender is a relevant, valued, and positive source of selfhood for many, the assumption that everybody identifies with the concept of gender harmfully denies peoples’ real experiences. To again borrow Ralph Ellison’s phrase, agender people are made ‘un-visible’ within dominant gender ideology—not just invisible, but actually impossible for the average person to see.

Next to gender ideology, the reality of genderlessness seems to have its own gravity, pulling the fabric of gender and our common beliefs about it apart at the sides. Acknowledging

human genderlessness means questioning traditional notions. Increasing awareness and comprehension of agender identity, as well as gender non-conformity in general, could help poke much-needed holes in society's conceptualizations of gender. Unfortunately, the idea of people not identifying with any gender has gone almost completely unconsidered in public outlets, whether academic journals or mainstream media. The latter is unfortunate because media have a significant role to play in society.

The two instances I shared in this chapter involving the avoidance of extremism, witnessed in both feminist and lesbian/gay camps, indeed show a harmful upholding of gender ideology. Particularly noticeable is the toxicity of the gender binary, or the idea that everyone must fit into society as either 'men' or 'women.' As has been said, this is not how many people relate to their gender. The result of such ideology is that peoples' identities are erased and peoples' humanities and experiences are denied. However, these narratives also demonstrate the character of gender ideology. The presence of such harmful thought within seemingly progressive groups shows how insidious and adaptable ideology can be. The problem here is not just the presence of ideology, but its irresistibility as well. In order to think and eventually act outside of the confines of gender ideology, we must see it, understand the harm its causes, and be able to recognize its many forms. With all of the knowledge presented in this chapter in mind, imagining alternatives to our current gender system becomes a clearly urgent and necessary task—but this knowledge also makes the task a little easier.

While not depicting modern-day society or modern-day people, one striking exception to the media embargo on human genderlessness appears in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. In this chapter, I have shown various ways that peoples' realities in the context of gender are denied. In *Left Hand*, we see an unacknowledged human reality at play in a non-real, yet extremely

compelling world. A disclaimer before moving forward, into a realm where fictional stories rule: drawing connections from non-realistic stories and characters to people's real identities and experiences of social suffering may be problematic. Most of the time, when a character in fiction is labeled as 'genderless,' they are a mindless robot, a mystical creature, or another clearly 'non-human' or 'less-than-human' character. For instance, a set of primary villains in the famous SF/fantasy show *Doctor Who* are genderless robots who are violent, inhuman, and thoroughly un-relatable. Such characters do not at all represent human agender identity. The fact that characters like these are a common media pseudo-representation of genderlessness likely undermines peoples' perceptions of the 'realness' or validity of genderless identity.

Due to these complications, I will tread carefully when speaking of the 'genderless' characters in *Left Hand* in relation to people of real agender identity. I will also rely most heavily on the voices of agender people to weigh in on the issue of representation.

## [Chapter 2]

### Launching the Subversive Imagination

For countless individuals over hundreds of generations, stories have held a deep significance. In his *New York Times* review of Rainbow Rowell's novel *Eleanor and Park*, author John Green stated that the book "reminded [him] not just what it's like to be young and in love with a girl, but also what it's like to be young and in love with a book" (1). Indeed, many of us have fallen in love with a story for some period, whether as children or adults. The connections that stories make with us are often deeply personal. For instance, novelist Courtney Summers has reported receiving emails from fans who said her books stopped them from committing suicide. At the same time, the power of stories can extend far beyond the individual level.

The connection between storytelling and social change is often clear. In media theorist Stuart Hall's terms, communication is always linked with power; thus, taking the reigns of public communication empowers people who ordinarily may be powerless. Members of marginalized groups can therefore gain power through storytelling. Authors can incorporate facts of oppression exactly as they manifest in the real world and portray characters who face the same challenges of oppression as real people. By representing realities that usually go unrepresented in media, books can expose, lift up and validate the experiences of oppressed groups.

Just as stories can make us feel, see and think about what is, they can also make us feel, see and think about new ideas. Generally, those seeking change in society can use storytelling as a way to encourage transformation in their social environment. In his article "Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative," Richard Delgado asserts that "[s]tories are the oldest, most primordial meeting ground in human experience" (2438). If stories are a meeting

ground, then they can be a place for innovative social acts like discussion and dissent—acts that are necessary for the emergence of lasting social change.

One genre of literature that has historically tried to take advantage of stories' many powers—sometimes successfully, and sometimes not—is SF. In his book *The Sociology of Science Fiction*, Brian Stableford argues that SF is valuable because it can cause a 'gestalt shift' in the minds of readers, a "breakthrough to new concepts, which allow a new interpretation of the perceived world by setting 'today' in a new context which extends far beyond yesterday and tomorrow to hitherto unsuspected imaginative horizons" (72). Stableford's comments imply that stories can have a significant effect on both an individual and social level. In the case of SF, he points out, this effect can be uniquely dynamic and exciting.

But do Stableford's claims have any weight? How could a genre full of spaceships and talking robots possibly make a difference in the real world? If stories, SF stories in particular, have the potential to challenge our everyday-level thinking, what is the nature of that potential? In this chapter, I follow the historical trail of one SF book and, in the process, attempt to assess and clarify the value of stories in fighting gender ideology. I argue that in examining the historical and authorial context surrounding the novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, it becomes clear that we can and should use stories to help us imagine alternatives to our current gender system. Actually, *Left Hand* might never have been written if not for one teenage girl who decided to buck normative gender expectations by becoming a world-renowned author.

### **A History of SF (Featuring: Feminism)**

On a dark night in Switzerland in 1816, eighteen-year-old Mary Shelley started writing what would become one of the most famous and innovative novels of the nineteenth century: *Frankenstein*. Though nobody knew it at the time, Shelley's story—about a scientist who turns a

human corpse into a frightening, misunderstood monster—was a precursor to a new genre of literature that would fully emerge a hundred years later: science fiction. Many consider *Frankenstein* to be the first real SF novel, because unlike other early fantasy fiction, the story is based on a purposeful decision on the part of the protagonist to employ futuristic science as part of his quest (Stableford 45).

As one might expect, the development of science fiction came hand-in-hand with developments in science. In an attempt at a clear definition of the genre, Brian Attebery describes SF as a “system” of narrative creation that “reflect[s] insights derived from, technological offshoots of, and attitudes toward science” (2). The late nineteenth century and early twentieth century brought along a number of turning points in human knowledge and societal practice, including the Industrial Revolution in Europe and North America, the determination of the theory of evolution, and the first global war. These and other changes, all having to do with technology and science, caused shifts in the “popular imagination” (Stableford 46). For instance, it was no longer ridiculous to think that society could experience a sudden technological upheaval that would change peoples’ everyday lives on a mass scale, as such a thing had already happened. As transformations occurred and new possibilities arose, so did science fiction. Fittingly, Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon have characterized SF as “a means to think about...contemporary social, cultural, political, and technological transformations, fractures, and gaps” (3).

In 1923, Hugo Gernsback published the first issue of the U.S. magazine *Amazing Stories*, a compendium of what he called ‘scientifiction,’ or stories meant to teach readers about science and technology while offering entertainment value in the form of bare-bones plots (Stableford 49). Though the exact beginning of science fiction is always under debate, with *Amazing Stories*,

the racehorse of modern SF undeniably left the gate. Gernsback recruited writers across the country to cover various exciting topics like genetic manipulation, human conquest of space, and the many possible futures of civilization. To Gernsback's dismay, however, many readers seemed more interested in the increasingly detailed plots of these stories than in the knowledge they were meant to impart (Stableford 50). Although Gernsback stopped working in 1929, waves of fiction continued to focus on, or at least employ as tools, ideas related to scientific progress and exploration.

While Gernsback held the idealistic belief that SF could predict and actually bring about a better future for humanity, influential SF writer and publisher John Campbell had a different, somewhat less grandiose idea of SF's value. He proposed that SF should be a realm of the "thought-experiment": a process of writing somewhat akin to the scientific method, where story could be used not as a cut-and-dry vehicle for current knowledge, but as a place to ask 'what if...?' and hopefully generate new knowledge as a result (Stableford 62). In *Sociology Through Science Fiction*, John Milstead puts forth a similar description of science fiction as an act of experiment: "As models, the societies described in science fiction can generate serious inquiry into the nature of contemporary social reality. That is, they provide starting points for constructing hypotheses about the present" (xiii). These starting points, he continues, are made up by elements of the familiar, but contain enough unfamiliar material that they allow us to see the familiar differently. Similarly, Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon have posited that SF "has congenitally used...the alien to comment on the familiar" (4).

As sad as it might have made Hugo Gernsback, SF has long been devoted to the entertainment of the masses. And entertain the masses it has. Today, SF accounts for roughly 10% of new fiction published each year (Stableford 63). The TV series *Star Trek*, the film *2001*:

*A Space Odyssey*, and the *Star Wars* film trilogy—released in 1966, 1968 and 1977 respectively—carved out a place for SF in Hollywood that continues to emit popular works for all ages. Dizzying special-effects marvels like *Star Wars* aside, a huge number of works in the SF genre have melded entertainment with meaningful intellectual efforts. The potential of SF to challenge minds and bring about new ideas, as described by Milstead, has indeed been taken advantage of to some level. A large tradition within the genre that exemplifies this is feminist science fiction.

As mainstream science fiction gained further steam in the 1940s, 50s and 60s, women interested in the genre faced the challenge of sexism within the genre and its surrounding community. Despite the fact that a woman, Mary Shelley, was a founder (if not *the* founder) of SF, women in SF—readers, fans, and especially writers—have historically been marginalized (Stableford 65). (Readers and writers of color have always encountered this problem as well.) Male authors dominated early SF, and publishers doubted the ability of any woman to write a good, sellable story. Despite purporting to tell tales of imagination and unknown worlds, male authors tended to write characters who acted in perfect alignment with accepted gender roles: men had adventures and were heroes, while women stayed at home and required protection, or simply did not seem to exist (Attebery 5). In order to be published, many women hid their true identity and passed themselves off as men. For instance, the esteemed author James Tiptree Jr. was later revealed to be Alice Sheldon—to the dismay of some reviewers, who had insisted her writing was too scientific to secretly be a woman's. However, women writers' voices would not be pushed aside for long.

Works of feminist SF, which arose in the 1960s, sought to explore gender and women's issues (such as reproduction) as concepts that could be questioned and 'played with' in a way

that was entertaining, while still encouraging new notions in the minds of readers (Melzer 220). Feminist SF was born from the utopian tradition, which began as early as the 380 BC with Plato's *The Republic*. Before SF came on the scene, feminist utopian fiction was a way for women (and some men) to pointedly question the way society dealt with gender and women's issues by constructing images of better—or at least different, and arguably better—societies (Little 206). For instance, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1915 novel *Herland* portrayed a utopian society composed only of women.

Feminist SF, which started gaining traction in the 1960s, kept the spirit of depicting possible alternatives to the present while incorporating SF elements. In feminist SF works, 'hard SF,' which emphasized the details of technology and the physical sciences, tended to give way to 'soft SF,' which employed biology and the social sciences (Attebery 5). For example, a 'hard SF' book might spend many pages detailing the technological inventions that the characters are employing in their mission, while a 'soft SF' book might spend as many pages focusing on the social consequences of those inventions for wider society. Notably, says Patricia Melzer, "feminist science fiction mirrors and/or anticipates theoretical and political debates" (220). For instance, Joanna Russ took theory directly from Anne Fausto-Sterling's 1993 article, "The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough" in order to give body to her 1995 novel *Shadow Man*, about a future where our world has five different sexes (Melzer 220). Many consider Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* to be a touchstone work in the genre of feminist SF, and certainly the first to reach a mainstream audience.

### **Ursula Le Guin and *The Left Hand of Darkness***

*The Left Hand of Darkness* is the best-known work of its prominent and much-loved author, Ursula K. Le Guin. Since the beginning of her career in the late 1960s, Le Guin has

published over fifty books, as well as many more short stories and works of poetry. In her writing, she has covered a rainbow of topics, from politics, crime, and anarchy, to gender, sexuality, and race, to environmentalism, violence, and the apocalypse, and much more. *The Left Hand of Darkness*, published in 1969, was her first widely successful work. In writing this ‘soft SF’ novel, Le Guin employed social as well as natural science to construct a compelling story and a convincing world; it was in fact one of the first popular SF novels to make use of social science in this way (LeFanu 2).

In 2014, Le Guin was awarded the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters from the National Book Awards, joining the ranks of other esteemed writers such as Joan Didion, Toni Morrison and Tom Wolfe. In her acceptance speech in November, Le Guin took the chance to speak passionately about social change. She declared unequivocally: “We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable—but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings.” Speaking to her fellows in the publishing world, she continued, “Resistance and change often begin in art—very often our art, the art of words.” Le Guin’s comments reflect her interest, demonstrated in *Left Hand*, in using storytelling as a tool to question what our society takes for granted.

We have seen that SF came out of transformations and fractures in society. For Le Guin, the transformation that inspired her was the rise of second-wave feminism and the women’s movement in the 60s (“Is Gender” 7). Though critics may have other opinions, Le Guin herself calls *Left Hand* a feminist book (“Is Gender” 8). Of its essential origins, she says:

I began to want to define and understand the meaning of sexuality and the meaning of gender, in my life and in our society... But I was not a theoretician, a political thinker or activist, or a sociologist. I was and am a fiction writer. The

way I did my thinking was to write a novel. [*Left Hand*] is the record of my consciousness, the process of my thinking. (8)

In her introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*—a mini-essay, included in every copy of the book—Le Guin seems to agree with John Campbell that SF should be a realm not of predictions, or of simple, straight-line extrapolations of current situations into the future. She describes this less exciting model with the phrase, ““If this goes on, this is what will happen”” (i). Instead, she proposes, SF should be a place for thought experiments, wherein “thought and intuition can move freely within bounds set only by the terms of the experiment, which may be very large indeed” (ii). Le Guin conceptualizes the model of the thought-experiment with the phrase: “Let’s say this or that is such and so, and see what happens” (ii). The purpose of thought-experimental SF writing, she says, is not to predict the future, but “to describe reality, the present world” (ii). That is, she says, she aims to open peoples’ eyes to what is around them, without actually telling people what they should or will see. This again echoes Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon’s statement: “Science fiction...has congenitally used the future to comment on the present and the alien to comment on the familiar” (4).

But how can stories of science fiction, which boil over with foreign and futuristic elements, actually describe our present reality? How can that which is so unfamiliar in fact say something, tell us something, about the familiar? Le Guin uses *Left Hand* as an example. First, she insists:

This book is not about the future. Yes, indeed the people in it are androgynous, but that doesn’t mean that I’m predicting that in a millennium or so we will all be androgynous, or announcing that I think we damned well ought to be androgynous. (v)

Indeed, Le Guin has stated repeatedly that she does not consider *Left Hand* a utopia or a suggestion for a better human future (“Is Gender” 7). As we saw in the previous chapter, one’s personal gender or genders can be a source of identity and happiness, and to somehow eliminate the social concept of gender in its entirety would be traumatic for many on Earth. However, current gender ideology harms us all by attaching systemic oppression to gender and proposing that those who do not fit mainstream gender expectations are less than human, and deserve to be treated as such. The truth is that gender does not, and cannot, encompass all that we are. Along these lines, Le Guin continues:

I’m merely observing, in the peculiar, devious, and thought-experimental manner proper to science fiction, that if you look at us at certain odd times of day in certain weathers, we already are [androgynous]. I am not predicting, or prescribing; I am describing. I am describing certain aspects of psychological reality in the novelist’s way, which is by inventing elaborately circumstantial lies.

(v)

The question that drives Le Guin’s thought experiment is this: besides physical form or ‘sex,’ what actually differentiates men and women? Indeed, she says, “because of our lifelong social conditioning, it is hard for us to see [the answer]” (“Is Gender” 9). Today, with the help of feminist and queer theorists like Judith Butler, we can understand that so-called biological sex—physical form—has less to do with gender than previously thought; ideas of gender generally drive us to see biological sex as real and meaningful (Melzer 225). (Predictably, Le Guin’s linking of sex with gender, as well as her attachment to a man-woman binary, also shows up within her story. For now, let us defer addressing this issue to the upcoming chapters.) With her story now positioned as descriptive, her beliefs about gender and humanity shared, and her

driving question laid out, Le Guin has her thought-experiment: “I eliminated gender, to find out what was left. Whatever was left would be, presumably, simply human” (“Is Gender” 10).

(Another quick parenthetical note: Le Guin alternately refers to her characters as androgynous, which would mean they possess a mix of man-ness and woman-ness, and genderless. This switching of terms occurs in the book as well. However, for people with non-conforming gender identities, androgynous and agender tend to be two very different things—one is a gender(s) while the other is, for most who use the term, the lack thereof. It is the latter concept that I use throughout this paper as I believe, especially in the context of the story, it is more accurate. I’ll address this further soon.)

One remaining question is what Le Guin perceives the purpose of her thought experiment to be. In her article “Is Gender Necessary? Redux,” Le Guin states it outright:

[*Left Hand*] poses no practicable alternative to contemporary society... All it tries to do is open up an alternative viewpoint, to widen the imagination, without making any very definite suggestions as to what might be seen from that new viewpoint. (16)

Here, again, Le Guin denies the conception of this specific imagined society as an actual alternative to our present one. She is trying put forth an alternative to something else: the way we think about gender. She wants to release the reader from current limitations erected by ideology. From there, she seems to mean, further movement is up to the reader: she just wants to open the gate. In this endeavor, how does she succeed, and how does she fail? I aim to find out.

### **Feminist SF Today: Thinking Queerly**

Feminist SF has grown significantly since Le Guin published *Left Hand* in 1969, particularly in its approach to sex, gender and sexuality as inter-related concepts. Patricia Melzer

notes that in attempting to imagine worlds without the domination of patriarchy, classic feminist SF works often failed to “denaturalize the correlation between sex (male or female) and gender (man or woman)” or “challenge the opposition of man and woman as a social system by changing the binary gender system” (220). ‘Heterosexual-homosexual’ was another binary often left unquestioned (Melzer 225). As an example of a work that does things differently, Melzer quotes Samuel Delany’s book *Triton*, in which Delany “destabilizes the naturalized correlation between sex, gender and sexuality...by adding a number of genders,” as well as many “socially accepted” transgender identities (222).

New feminist SF—some call it queer SF—has been influenced for the better by queer theory, as well as other social justice-minded fields of thought like critical race theory, postmodernism, and post-colonialism. Wendy Pearson draws a parallel between the genre and queerness itself: “Queer, with its denaturalization of master narrative and its movement towards subcultural and subaltern understandings of texts, operates, by analogy, on some of the same levels as does sf” (18). As seen in Delany’s *Triton*, realities of queerness (or gender-queerness) may indeed take on a new kind of life within the pages of SF storytelling. To fuse or pair queerness and science fiction is to bring magnets together. Signaling this, in 1991, the yearly James Tiptree, Jr. Award was instituted to recognize stories that do progressive work in exploring gender and sexuality (Attebery 6).

De Witt Douglas Kilgore argues in his writing “Queering the Coming Race?” that far from calling for a “magical change” in society, science fiction that plays with our current norms, and suggests something different, can “open out to offer a future that is unfinished, a work in progress” (248). Indeed, as Le Guin says in her introduction to *Left Hand*, SF is not about predicting or controlling the future. It is about opening the door to a future that is not just a

continuation of the present. In this spirit, in the next chapter I will strive to do a ‘queer reading’ of *Left Hand*. Wendy Pearson defines doing a ‘queer reading’ as “disinterring the many and peculiar ways through which the dominant Western conception of sexuality [author’s note: and gender] underlies, is implicated in, and sometimes collides with sf’s attempt to envision alternative ways of being-in-the-world” (34).

As present ideas and realities change and evolve, so will SF’s subversive imagination. In the 2008 anthology *Queer Universes*, Wendy Gay Pearson argues that “sf has a long history, dating back at least to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, of questioning systems of thought, particularly those we now label meta-narratives (science, history, and so on)” (18). The grand challenge for feminist/queer SF today is to continue to denaturalize, question, and break through the ideology that “unconsciously shapes and constrains both our beliefs and behaviors” (Ott and Mack 127). As ideology changes, evolves, and intensifies, so must the subversive efforts of SF writers and their stories. At the same time, it is not enough for writers to create increasingly subversive stories. Readers must embrace them.

Munoz inadvertently hints towards the character of *Left Hand*’s value when he says that freedom from the present can be “glimpsed through reveries of quotidian life” (456). Here, Munoz imagines resistance against the toxic present as an everyday invocation: the intellectual and emotional seeing of something deeply different from normal, in between the passing images of normal life. Stories can be carried in one’s bag throughout the day, read on the bus or in the park; they can be consumed a few paragraphs at a time, in between all the stresses and demands of everyday living. In this way, stories can serve as convenient, accessible portals into a different way of thinking. And unlike dense theoretical work or long political manifestos, stories can be fun and appealing to the average person, even as they challenge average thinking.

Le Guin says in her introduction to *Left Hand*: “When we’re done with [a novel], we may find—if it’s a good novel—that we’re a bit different from what we were before we read it, that we have been changed a little, as if by having met a new face, crossed a street we never crossed before” (v). In this sense, every story can be a small engine for bringing about the future, in individuals’ lives across the globe, over and over again—if we are willing to take advantage of their energy. *Left Hand*’s origin tale, including the motivations of its writer, shows that stories can be a tool for thinking differently, in new and previously-unknown ways, about gender. Gender ideology has a tight grip on all of us, causing us to ‘know’ that the future will be the same as the present. But within stories, and especially within SF, what we know is forced to go to battle with what we see.

Le Guin wanted to challenge readers’ ideas about gender—but was she successful? If stories have the power, or at least the potential, to help build paths to change, then what change has *Left Hand* actually produced, if any? How should the power of stories to bring about change be harnessed to make them most effective? I will attempt to answer these questions in the upcoming chapters.

## **[Chapter 3]**

### **Breaking Down:**

#### **Genderless Society and Counterfactuality in *The Left Hand of Darkness***

Fast-forward many years into the future. Our Earth has become part of a galaxy-wide community of planets populated by humans. Recently, this community located a new faraway planet where humans live, called Gethen. This community has sent an ambassador to talk to the people of Gethen. The task of this ambassador is to try to convince the various governments of Gethen to join in on the community's systems of trade. Despite having lived on Gethen for two years, the ambassador—a man from Earth—has made almost no progress in his mission. He finds the people of Gethen difficult to understand and has therefore failed to connect on a personal level with anyone.

So begins Ursula Le Guin's SF novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*. In this chapter and the next, I will investigate what exactly Le Guin presents to readers in *Left Hand* so as to better see the book's potential for social impact and its actual impact or consequences among readers. The story of *Left Hand* involves myriad topics, from outright murder to political betrayal, from selfless love to unbearable grief, from religion to sex. Yet its dealings with gender have attracted the most attention. In the next chapter, I will look at the stories and characters of the book, as they serve as a distinct factor in the model that *Left Hand* and its context puts forth for imagining alternatives to gender. But first, I will look at the world that Le Guin has created.

I argue that this world takes an important step towards productively fighting gender ideology: it breaks down our ideas about gender in a radical, unexpected, and forceful way by

proposing *that*, as well as a *way in which*, human society could work, thrive, and indeed, be human, in the absence of gender. This portrayal of a new society completely *breaks down* our society's ideas about gender and razes the field of ideas so that new life can grow. Later—as seen in Chapter 4—through the characters, that life is grown; alternative ideas about humanity and gender are built and allowed to thrive.

### **Counterfactuality**

What if the white-western gender system didn't exist? What if gender didn't exist at all? *Counterfactual thinking* is the use of 'what if' questions like these to help construct an accurate explanation or context for a phenomenon. In his 2012 article "The Counterfactual Imagination," sociologist Ronald Paulsen observes that that "these days, social scientists are concerned with what is, perhaps with what has been, but very rarely with what could be" (172). This is primarily because they want to be seen as empirical scientists who deal only with what is real. However, Paulsen argues that sociologists should not be afraid to think in the sphere of the unreal. Through the use of counterfactual thinking, "the factual state of affairs—what is or what has been—can be questioned, de-familiarized, evaluated, and analyzed more imaginatively than when only theorizing from the available facts" (159). For instance, one can better determine the impact of a historical event by imagining what would have happened if the event had never transpired. Paulsen comments that many societal power structures, such as capitalism, are shrouded in lack of understanding that prevents change. Without the use of a counterfactual imagination, such structures will continue to go unquestioned and even unnoticed.

The cost of only think factually, then—of failing to contrast the factual with the counterfactual—can be high. Though he describes a variety of possible types of counterfactuals, Paulsen focuses in on power counterfactuals. Counterfactual thinking, he says, enables "an

analysis of power relations in which the conflict is [normally] unobservable or veiled in formal consensus” (168). He continues, “to be able to observe power at all, one must imagine how those subject to power would behave differently if it were not for the exercise of power” (160). If those subject to power would behave differently, then one can deduce that there is a power relation present. Further, one can imagine how that population would act sans the power relation. This complete process therefore sheds light on the traits and truths of the power relation.

Not considering counterfactuals is “an ideological move” (Paulsen 174). When it comes to the white-western gender system, people’s tendency to disregard possible realities different from the system is a key aspect of its success. The ideology buried in the system makes it seem inevitable, inherent to reality, and unstoppable. But, as Ursula Le Guin has said, “Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings.”

In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin offers out a counterfactual. Through her depiction of a genderless human society, Le Guin expresses the possibility of a world where gender works differently—in this case, by not existing at all. By describing how gender could work, Le Guin helps explain, through contrast, how and why white-western gender does work. Meanwhile, pinpointing flaws is the book is key. Stableford argues that “because science fiction deals so frequently with images of the future and with alternative modes of social organization...it may actually be more revealing of people’s attitudes to social change than fiction dedicated to the description and evaluation of contemporary social situations” (7). Determining the limits of our wildest imagination is crucial to breaking them down—and challenging the social institution of gender, as it currently stands, in the process.

In this chapter I will expound on what exactly Le Guin puts forth in the pages of *Left Hand* and what it all means as a counterfactual conjecture. With this base, I can better evaluate

the successes and failures of the book and better understand readers' reactions to it. (Here I argue for the existence of one source of counterfactual thinking in relation to *Left Hand*—the one found inside its covers. Soon I will see whether counterfactual thinking might be made available through *Left Hand* not just through the book's content, but through its social context and reader reactions as well.)

### **Contrasting Two Societies**

As an author, Le Guin is known for portraying the original cultures and societies in her stories with deep detail and realism, akin to anthropological work. (This may be due to the fact to the fact that both of her parents were anthropologists.) In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, she fleshes out her world, Gethen, with gusto, taking time to portray its politics, labor systems, family structures, religions, social customs, stories and much more. Given the detail, it is easy to see four major areas where Gethenian society diverges strikingly from society on Earth. These areas are gender, 'sex,' sexuality, and power.

#### *Gender, or Lack Thereof, and Society*

As described in Chapter 1, gender, according to white-western gender ideology, is a concrete, biologically based determinate of who a person truly is. In opposition to this definition, Judith Halberstam describes gender as a social idea, a "primary mode of oppression that sorts human bodies into binary categories in order to assign labor, responsibilities, moral attributes, and emotional styles" (31). Gender has another form as a personal and welcome element in many peoples' individual identities. From the first form is where a huge number of problems emerge. Among others, not conforming to mainstream gender expectations means being dehumanized and rejected by society.

In wild contrast, there is no concept of gender on Gethen. Without gender, Gethenian

society functions uniquely from the white/Western one many Earthlings know. There are no differences in expectations regarding peoples' "labor, responsibilities, moral attributes, [or] emotional styles," to use Halberstam's listing of the social aspects of gender. In the working world, in politics, in family structure, there is no split between one general set of people and the other, with one side mistreating and dominating the other. Some Earthlings say men and women communicate differently. For Gethenians, of course there are still people who communicate in all kinds of ways—shyly, aggressively, bubbly, stoic. But there is no grand-scale system of categorization overlaid onto these traits. Every human on Gethen has the potential to get pregnant, so no one group is saddled with childbearing and any roles or traits that could be associated with it. Everything, from social mores to communication to love, is affected by the exclusion of gender. As a scientist from Earth reports in the book, there is "no division of humanity into strong and weak halves, protective/protected, dominant/submissive, owner/chattel, active/passive" (101)—at least, in the context of gender.

*Bodily 'Sex' and Society*

In the ideological framework of the white-western gender system, the term 'sex' is used to refer to physical characteristics that categorize someone as being either (and only) a man or a woman. As many non-western cultures have historically accepted, so-called biological sex and gender are not actually connected in this way. Not only can someone, for instance, have 'female' sexual characteristics and have another gender identity besides 'woman,' the line between 'female' and 'male' sexual characteristics can be physically blurred on an individual level. For instance, people can be intersex, or have both 'male' and 'female' sexual characteristics.

In *Left Hand*, Le Guin presents something wildly different from any common Earthly ideas of sex. Each month, people from Gethen experience a unique sexuality-related phase

lasting a few days. During this phase, people develop a set of either (so-called) ‘male’ or (so-called) ‘female’ sexual characteristics. Which set a person takes on varies randomly by the month and is determined only by subtle, largely uncontrollable, external factors. Reproduction can occur between someone with a ‘female’ set of characteristics and someone with a ‘male’ set. Somebody in ‘female’ set during this described phase can become pregnant and carry a baby. Because the set a person takes on can change randomly by the month, in fact, “the mother of several children may be the father of several more” (97).

A lack of clarity arises here with Le Guin’s use of language. Similar to white-Western vocabulary, Le Guin does describe these physical sets as ‘male’ and ‘female’; at the same time, it’s never clear what exactly these terms are meant to signal. For instance, do they refer to the exact same outer-body characteristics that they refer to in white-western discourse about sex, or not? In any case, even though Le Guin refers to the Gethenians multiple times as genderless, she also calls up the white-Western ‘sex’ binary of male/female to describe a certain part of their bodily existence. Further, she sometimes refers to the Gethenians as ‘both’ male and female, implying that these binary halves make up a ‘whole’ humanity. While the Gethenians obviously do not extend ‘sex’ into gender, as we do on Earth, and while they are more often described as just genderless, in these ways Le Guin refers to and does not challenge the ‘sex’ binary of male/female.

It is unclear how Gethenians actually conceptualize ‘sex,’ and if their conceptualization actually has any relation to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century white-Western concept of gender/‘sex.’ The answer is almost definitely no. Going forward in this essay, I will somewhat artificially lay this confusion to rest and lean only on Le Guin’s assertion that Gethenians do not have gender, as well as that Gethenian society simply does not involve anything like the white-Western gender

regime.

*Sexuality and Society*

On Gethen, people are not sexual for the majority of the time. However, encouraged by mainstream culture and fully permitted by the government, people take a break from their jobs during their sexual phase—called kemmer—and tend to focus on having sex. Kemmer is widely known as a time to explore one's sexuality, have fun, and build positive relationships with others. Sex can happen between either two people or multiple people in kemmer. Whether a person possesses the 'female' or 'male' set during kemmer has no effect on their experience except on a physical level. This is an extreme difference from the white-western gender system, where one's sexual characteristics are meant to determine one's sexual role, behavior, and level of aggression or passivity.

One interaction between protagonist Genly and Therem, points to, demonstrates, and illuminates how 'sex,' gender and sexuality are all conflated in white-Western gender logic. At one point during their 800-mile trek, Therem experiences their sexual phase while in close contact with Genly. In an involuntary reaction to Genly's 'male' state, Therem takes on the 'female' state. Genly describes how he sees Therem at the moment he realizes they are in kemmer: "...[They] looked at me with a direct, gentle gaze. [Their] face in the reddish light was as soft, as vulnerable, as remote as the face of a woman..." (248). Has Therem actually taken on a 'vulnerable' personhood that directly harkens to Earthly stereotypes about what it means to be a woman? Doubtful. More likely is that Genly is projecting his gendered expectations of 'female-ness' onto Therem.

However, when it comes to Le Guin's portrayal of sexuality on Gethen, unfortunate issues do rear their heads: for example, the heteronormativity built into Le Guin's depiction of

sexuality. Heteronormativity is the white-Western ideological assumption that all humans have only heterosexual desires, as based on the concrete binaries of male/female or man/woman. In *Left Hand*, we only hear about people in the ‘male’ and ‘female’ states having sex. Again, we do not know how Gethenians conceptualize ‘sex’ or if the terms ‘male’ and ‘female’ are at all accurate. Furthermore, Le Guin has stated that couples of the same ‘sex’ and do interact during their kemmer phases. However, in the book this is never seen, and the fact that Le Guin does use the terms ‘male’ and ‘female’ to some extent signals heterosexuality. Instead, the reader is shown a radically different human gender system that still hems to a heteronormative line.

Similarly, though it is not a ubiquitous phenomenon, Gethenians tend to find partners with whom they swear a long-term monogamous partnership. Unlike white/western marriage, this practice is not incorporated into government policies and practices, but it is a massive part of Gethenian culture and stories. But here again, Le Guin’s overlays a white-Western norm related to sexuality and gender onto Gethenian society—in this case, the norm of absolute monogamy. These examples, to some level, harm the potential of the book to thoroughly upset notions surrounding sexuality and gender.

#### *Power (Politics, Imprisonment, Class) and Society*

Even though power dynamics similar to the white/western gender system do not exist on Gethen, power relations still play out through other means. The most notable venue is politics. Through Genly, the reader sees two of five countries on Gethen. The first is home to a monarchy with extremely limited rule over its people. The other is home to a bureaucratic government that, through a secret branch of agents, occasionally whisks people away to ‘volunteer camps’ where they are forced to work for no pay. In both countries, shady politicians fight to have influence over others, some for the sake of a cause (like a religion), and others purely for personal gain.

Furthermore, issues of class appear on Gethen. Some people must scrape together the money they need to eat, while others live in luxury. In these ways, power relations play out on Gethen. By showing such power relations on Gethen, Le Guin posits the ways a genderless society would actually function and makes her portrayal stronger, more thorough, and therefore more comparable to our Earthly world.

*Missing Puzzle Pieces: Race and Colonialism*

One exception to Le Guin's useful portrayal of different power relations is her depiction—or lack thereof—of the concept of race. Le Guin's choice to have a black main character is interesting and appealing. She has stated that she did so in order to surprise and jar white readers, who would likely assume the protagonist was white like them. Despite her good intentions in making her protagonist non-white, this is where Le Guin's addressing of race ends. In her story, at least, there are no mentions of a social concept like race on Gethen. At least in one instance, Gethenians do seem to think about skin color—a character asks Genly at one point if all Terrans “are as black as you”—but otherwise there are no comments. Whether or not a ‘real-life’ version of Gethenian society would be host to power relations involving race, the fact that Le Guin leaves the idea unaddressed is an error. On Earth, race and gender as societal factors are overwhelmingly connected, as explained in Chapter 2. Asking questions about gender—such as ‘what would human society without gender really look like?’—inherently means asking questions about race—like ‘how would race then play out in society without gender?’ Therefore, *Left Hand* sidesteps an opportunity to address, counter, and ‘play with’ certain issues of *white-western* gender ideology. Because of the power in race, sidestepping the issue of systemic racism is a way of leaving it in place.

The silence on race in *Left Hand* becomes more deafening when we consider another

social factor that—as seen in Chapter 1—is tied inextricably to gender: colonialism. The fact is that *Left Hand*, at least on the surface, is the story of a man with a ‘normative’ (at least in the reader’s mind) gender, who is entrenched in normative gender thinking, who enters an indigenous culture and, for the majority of the story, otherizes and fails to accept the ‘non-normative’ genders of the people in that culture. Genly renders himself incapable of putting himself on the same level as Gethenians and actually understanding them, which is a standard move of the white colonizer. Furthermore, Genly seeks to connect with Gethenians on behalf of a larger political body, made up of people who ascribe to his same ‘normative’ gender system. Albeit, this body is non-authoritative, devoted simply to the “augmentation of the complexity and intensity of the field of intelligent life,” with the function of facilitating economic and cultural trade between faraway human societies (211). Still: ‘cultural trade’ is a bit reminiscent of the ‘cultural domination’ factored into white colonialism. Another stated goal of the Ekumen is to “consciously [extend] the evolutionary tendency inherent in Being; one manifestation of which is exploration” (211)—which is strikingly similar to the logic of Manifest Destiny. In short, through making the genderless characters aliens and the interactions of the characters to some level reminiscent of colonialism, the plot of *Left Hand of Darkness* is flawed in its potential for interrupting ideas and power dynamics around gender. I do not personally see *Left Hand* as a pro-colonialist story, but by not addressing the issue of colonialism—which, though it began centuries ago, is still pertinent to millions of people’s lives today—Le Guin again leaves important assumptions and systems related to gender undisputed.

### **Conclusion**

Perhaps declaring that Le Guin should have addressed race and colonialism is ‘asking too much.’ After all, this is just one book and one story. But, as seen in Chapter 1, gender as a

societal factor is not made up just of individual roles or thoughts but also of systemic power. By ignoring, and even to some extent promoting, its close relational concepts—racism, colonialism, heteronormativity, and the ‘sex’ binary—Le Guin leaves some crucial parts of the gender concept unquestioned, and therefore the book does not fully live up to its radical potential.

Still—*still*—*Left Hand* does an incredible thing. It shows how gender can be removed completely while leaving humanness untouched. This is a counterfactual in the face of the idea that gender is inherent to humanity and necessary for it. Gender can be removed and still leave humanity. Furthermore, there are many different not-unfeasible ways ‘sex’ and sexuality could work in a human world without gender. All agender people, like Sasha Fleischman, know these truths extremely well.

In reaction to some critics, Le Guin has actually addressed and acknowledged these issues. In the next chapter, audiences of *Left Hand* take the stage. While examining the contents of the book itself surely has use, books take on life in the minds of their readers: and seeing what kind of life *Left Hand* takes on will illuminate its true social consequences and possibly its value.

## **[Chapter 3]**

### **Building Up:**

#### **Genderless Humanity in *The Left Hand of Darkness***

As Brian Attebury describes, *Left Hand* managed to fulfill SF's potential to be both "aesthetically rich" and "intellectually challenging": it involves "layer upon layer of cultural detail: myths, manners, kinship customs, architectural styles, rituals both sacred and domestic, and epochs of historical change and continuity" (13). But at its core, *Left Hand* is about a friendship between two people. The first is Genly, the ambassador described above and the book's primary protagonist. The second is Therem, a politician from Gethen. The unfolding of Genly and Therem's relationship makes the whole story unfold. For this reason, I will focus in on their relationship in the following summary of *Left Hand*'s story. (A note: I will be using the gender-neutral pronoun 'they' to refer to all Gethenians, although Le Guin herself uses 'he'—a decision that earned her many critiques and which I will analyze soon.)

In the growth of Therem and Genly's relationship, and in Genly's personal growth, a story is told that fills in the emptiness left by Le Guin's razing of gender norms and ideas in her worldbuilding. Therem and Genly's story is emotionally accessible and deeply human: it shows that without gender, phenomena like humanity, love, joy and survival are still very much possible. To imagine alternatives to our white-Western gender system, we must see that gender and humanity are not connected. Stories like that of Therem and Genly fill in the gaps that might be left by ignoring or sidelining gender in our ideas of what it means to be human.

#### **Outsider to Insider, Alien to Alien: The Plot of *The Left Hand of Darkness***

*"Alone, the relationship I finally make, if I make one, is not impersonal and political: it is*

*individual, it is personal...Not We and They; not I and It; but I and Thou.*” (Le Guin, *Left Hand of Darkness* 259)

Before she started writing *Left Hand*, Le Guin needed a way to find out what a genderless human society would be like. Her answer was to “send an imaginary, but conventional, indeed rather stuffy, young man from Earth into an imaginary culture which is totally free of sex roles because there is no, absolutely no, physiological sex distinction” (“Is Gender” 10). Here we see the two key elements of her effort. The first is her portrayal of Gethenian society, a genderless society (to be described more soon). The second element is the viewpoint she created for her portrayal—her primary protagonist, Genly Ai—and the transformation her protagonist undergoes.

Genly is a heterosexual black man from Earth who holds many of the same flawed notions of gender, gender ideology, and gender stereotypes as many people in white-Western society today. Genly seeks to connect with Gethenians on behalf of a larger political body. This body is non-authoritative, devoted simply to the “augmentation of the complexity and intensity of the field of intelligent life,” with the function of facilitating economic and cultural trade between faraway human societies. He comes to Gethen alone, because, as he tells Therem: “Alone, I cannot change your world. But I can be changed by it. Alone, I must listen, as well as speak” (259). In a similar instance, Genly says about his Gethenians hosts: “We have to meet as equals, with some mutual understanding and candor, before my mission can even begin” (119).

When the book opens, Genly has indeed been on Gethen for two long years with nothing to show for it. Without understanding the people around him, he cannot be a successful ambassador. But the people around him are genderless, and their very existence flouts Genly’s beliefs about gender, rendering him unable to understand the people with whom he is supposed

to connect. Meanwhile, the Gethenian political leaders with whom Genly interacts in the book generally do not trust him. On one hand, they are—as anyone might be—incredulous of the idea that there is a whole universe of alien beings living far away, out in the darkness of space. More uniquely, their suspicion is partly due to shock at Genly's deviant sexuality—that is, Genly's constant state of having a certain gender/sex. (The reason for the Gethenians' aversion will be expounded on soon.) Hypothetically, Genly could call his 'base' ship, and the rest of his team, down from orbit to prove to the Gethenians that what he says about the universe is true, but he is barred from doing so until a major Gethenian government has agreed to join the Ekumen. Luckily, there is one Gethenian who is fascinated and captured by Genly's message: Therem Harthreir Estraven. Therem trusts and likes Genly, but Genly, in a continuation of his general reaction to Gethenians, does not understand—and therefore, in his mind, cannot trust—Therem.

With Therem's help, Genly has secured an appointment with the royal leader of the country where he lives. He plans to meet with the king and finally convince them to start a relationship between his country and the Ekumen. However, before the appointment can occur, Therem invites Genly to a private dinner, during which Therem offers a vague warning that it is no longer a good idea for Genly to move forward with his mission. Genly does not know it, but one power-hungry political leader has convinced the king that Genly is a liar and a threat to the king's power, and moreover, that Therem is 'in' on Genly's plan and wishes to take the throne. Unfortunately, due to Gethenian social customs, Therem cannot be straightforward enough with his advice to fulfill Genly's idea of a real, urgent warning. Frustrated with Therem's vagueness and still untrusting, Genly does not listen. The next day, Genly's meeting with the king goes terribly, and Therem (unbeknownst to Genly) is kicked out of his home country under threat of death. Dejected, Genly travels a bit—visiting a religious coven and other sites within the

countryside—before heading to the second largest country on Gethen, to try his hand at convincing this new government to start a relationship with the Ekumen.

In this new country, Genly is welcomed and housed by a small group of politicians who appear to be friendly and believe his story. However, when he tries to convince the general government of his story, he is yet again met with resistance and ridicule. Around this time, Genly again encounters Therem, who has taken refuge in this new country. Therem implies to Genly that he should leave and go home as soon as possible, as those in power have again determined Genly to be a dangerous threat. Genly does not heed Therem's words and, almost immediately, is betrayed by his friends, imprisoned, and taken to a torturous work camp in the middle of the icy countryside. Therem, feeling guilty for leaving Genly alone, goes on a daunting rescue mission and successfully saves the now drugged, beaten-down Genly. With prison guards and government forces after them, the two unlikely partners now have no choice but to cross 800 miles of icy terrain in order to make it back to Therem's home country. They can only hope that there, Genly will be able to quickly find a broadcasting tower from which to call down his teammates, and Therem will be granted clemency once his country learns of his innocence.

Genly's relationship with Therem is the site of a huge character transformation, wherein Genly overcomes his inability to understand Gethenians for who they are. In the midst of hiking those 800 miles with Genly, Therem remarks, "Each of us is singular, isolate, I as cut off from those like me, from my society and its rules, as he from his. [...] We are equals at last, equal, alien, alone" (250). This experience of being so isolated, together, triggers the start of a close relationship between Genly and Therem. At one intimate, climactic moment on the ice, Genly finally overcomes his distrust of Therem. He states:

And I saw then again, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and had

pretended not to see in him: that he was a woman as well as a man. Any need to explain the sources of that fear vanished with the fear; what I was left with was, at last, acceptance of him as he was. Until then I had rejected him, refused him his own reality. (248)

It becomes clear that Genly and Therem have built a deep bond and may have actually fallen in love.

While Therem's being is familiarized, Genly's own being is increasingly de-familiarized. At the end of the book, Genly and Therem make it back to Therem's home country, but Therem is shot and killed before Genly can call down his ship. Genly is beyond heartbroken, even as his mission becomes a success and Therem's home government agrees to forge a relationship with his teammates. At the very end of the book, when Genly encounters his mission team once again, he thinks to himself:

They all looked strange to me, men and women, well as I knew them. Their voices sounded strange: too deep, too shrill. They were like a troupe of great, strange animals, of two different species; great apes with intelligent eyes... (296)

Having lived on Gethen for so long, Genly finds the appearance of 'normal' humans like himself now abnormal and jarring. This is an intense reversal of current 21<sup>st</sup>-century humans tendency to see human gender, in particular normative or binary gender, as completely normal to the point of being impossible to doubt or question.

With all of these developments laid out, it appears that Le Guin truly wants us to, in the process of reading the book, 'other' ourselves. The story of Therem and Genly, especially with the addition of its tragic ending, demands psychological and emotional investment on the part of the reader. Through intimate suggestion—the whispering of words into the mind's ear—Le Guin

pushes the reader to challenge the notions that give us our own sense of ‘normalcy’ and to come away with a different point of view. Here, de-familiarizing what seems natural, inevitable, is a way of resisting the ideology of normalcy.

### **The Issue of Representation**

In our society, and especially in mass media, queer people are rarely portrayed as fully human. Dyer argues that stereotypes of queer people in media are an attempt by society “to define us for ourselves, in terms that inevitably fall short of the...norm of being human” (357). When media texts portray queerness, they tend to draw a portrait of queerness that is meant to encapsulate all queerness, define it, and preclude other options or possibilities for it. Still, queer has everything to do with options and possibilities. Dyer argues that in the face of continual stereotyping, “the task is to develop our own alternative and challenging definitions of ourselves” (357).

Specifically, Dyer supports the rendering of queer characters as realistic individuals. This would mean viewing them as an individual—“complex, specific, unique” as Dyer puts it. In *Left Hand, Therem*, a Gethenian whose journal entries make up part of the book, likely qualifies as such a character. Therem is a fully-human character with dreams and hopes, a sense of humor and a sense of justice, moments of anger, sadness, and kindness, and so forth. Therem also experiences “personal change and consciousness of change,” another key element of character individuality that Dyer highlights (362). As with queer people in our society, Therem’s ‘gender status’ is a part of their being that has an effect on the self but not a totalizing one. (Here, it is important to re-note that queer is situated in a socio-historical timeline, so cannot truly be overlaid onto a fictional group of people.)

Delgado writes in “Storytelling for Oppositionists”: “[Stories] allure will often provide

the most effective means of overcoming otherness, of forming a new collectivity based on the shared story” (2438). Indeed, storytelling has been a support for ‘othered,’ marginalized people for centuries. But is it fair to say that a representation of genderlessness among aliens—even aliens shown to be smart and empathetic, even aliens who are humans, just not from Earth—at all speaks to or represents real peoples’ genderqueer identities and experiences? Or does it serve only to otherize people who identify as agender and genderqueer—purporting that genderqueer people are just ‘not like us’?

### **Normative Framing and Interpretation of Genderless Humanity**

Through *Genly*, Le Guin seems to work to draw a portrait of Gethen, its society, and its people that will strike the reader as understandable. In one funny moment, Le Guin acknowledges how hard it might be for the reader to conceive of this situation. Harking back to Earthly gender stereotypes, a scientist from Earth says: “What is the first question we ask of a newborn baby?” She continues, “A man wants his virility regarded. A woman wants her femininity appreciated, however indirect and subtle the indications of regard and appreciation. [On Gethen] they will not exist. One is respected and judged only as a human being. It is an appalling experience” (Le Guin 51). The scientist’s last comment, while very general and meant to be humorous, also speaks to the way we Earthlings tend to internalize gender stereotypes to the point of expecting those around us to treat us in a certain way according to our (perceived) gender. Some of us may resent such treatment, but many of us do not and feel uncomfortable when treated ‘incorrectly.’ In many Western languages, there is even a term for what happens when a man is not treated like a man: he is “emasculated.”

In his article “Stereotyping,” Richard Dyer points out how stereotypes have historically been deployed in mass media to demean and dehumanize marginalized groups. Stereotyping by

those in power is “an attempt to fashion the whole of society according to their own world-view, value-system, sensibility and ideology,” with harmful social consequences (356). In his thoughts and actions, Genly Ai demonstrates gender-related stereotyping, an aspect of white-western gender ideology that runs rampant in our society. Not only does he believe stereotypes against women, he employs stereotypes to refuse Gethenians the right to be seen as themselves: genderqueer and genderless.

Upon meeting the person who owns Genly’s living quarters, Genly finds them to have a “prying, spying, ignoble, kindly nature” (48). Because of Genly’s attachment to gender stereotypes, Genly interprets this person’s ‘spying,’ ‘kindly’ personality as one of a woman. And despite logically knowing that this person has no gender, due to Genly’s attachment to gender as a necessary aspect of a person in general, he actively forces them into the category of woman. Genly normally sees Gethenians, inaccurately, as male. But because of the strong signal of a so-called feminine personality, Genly inaccurately views his acquaintance as a woman. Throughout the book, Genly uses words like “passive” and “wily” to describe what he deems feminine. By attaching femininity to such traits when they appear in Gethenians, Genly refers back to the Earthly stereotype of women as weak, beguiling, passive and other similar traits, while also reinforcing the idea of gender as fundamental and necessary for humanity.

In a reflection of theorist Judith Butler’s argument that bodily sex does not produce gender, but the other way around (as explained in Chapter 2), Genly even inscribes gendered, ‘feminine’ meaning on his landlord’s body, taking note of their ‘wagging’ buttocks and “soft fat face” (24) as reasons to see them as a woman. In short, this interaction between Genly and his landlord is exemplary of Genly’s inability to see the Gethenians for who they are: not men, not women, but themselves. This changes eventually, but stays in place for most of the book.

Genly's reactions to Gethenians also speak to the stereotype of 'queer' as associated with deviance and inhumanity. From the beginning, Genly expresses dis-ease with the Gethenians' lack of gender, and constantly finds himself sorting them into 'male' or 'female' categories depending on their behavior at the time of his mental labeling. Because Estraven sometimes strikes Genly as 'feminine' and other times 'male,' Genly feels vaguely suspicious and distrusting of Estraven all the time. This reflects a common modern stereotype of people of ambiguous gender or sexuality as inherently criminal or deviant (Ott and Mack 201). Genly acknowledges that by viewing Gethenians as men or women, he is forcing them "into...categories so irrelevant to [their] nature and so essential to my own" (Le Guin 12). However, Genly's stereotyping continues to have dominance over his thoughts. For Genly, the fact that Therem sometimes strikes him as 'feminine' and other times as 'male' renders them non-understandable.

### **A Model for Change?**

Le Guin shines a sort of light on this thinking and aims to challenge the reader to challenge it—just like Genly attempts and (until the end) fails to do. But does she succeed in creating a successful and persuasive model of personal change for readers?

In *Left Hand*, we see the protagonist take steps and gradually grow into someone new. Genly's journey reflects the individual growth that everyone in society will need to undergo in order to fully undermine current gender ideology. In order to complete his mission — which, at this point, is the sole purpose of his existence — Genly must understand those unlike him, which means undergoing personal change. The specter of this mission was never enough to spark change in Genly, however. In the end, Genly's outside motivation has little weight in the change he eventually undergoes. Neither does the shocking environment of Gethen, where nobody but

him experiences Earthly gender. If anything, this environment makes Genly more resistant towards difference. It is his relationship with Therem that sparks his inner change. The story therefore proposes a specific context for meaningful growth on an individual level: friendship, love, and connection.

Therem in a sense does Genly a favor by opening themselves to him and providing a learning opportunity for Genly. Therem reaches out in creating a loving, intimate relationship that is a bedrock for Genly's positive development. Through their interactions, Therem gives Genly wisdom about gender and humanity. Blogger Zhenya Bourova explains what happens to Genly's prejudices and misunderstandings: "Genly is forced to confront the violence that his insistence on a gender binary does to the non-conforming subjectivity of his companion." In the end, says Bourova, the book is about "the violence done to the other's subjecthood in ascribing them to one half of a duality" (2). This is a striking depiction of an individual overcoming of internalized ideology, one that speaks to the violence that gender expectations enact, and one that is possibly a great, useful example of such overcoming for mainstream readers. We will see in the next chapter.

Human connection is absolutely an ideal ground for change in individuals. But is this a good inspiration for real life? In real life, to create society-wide change, should marginalized groups need to, or be asked to, do such provisional work? Author Assata Shakur has said, "Nobody in the world, nobody in history, has ever gotten their freedom by appealing to the moral sense of the people who were oppressing them." Yet *Left Hand* is a story. Therem is not a real person putting in real emotional work to 'enlighten' a person who dehumanizes them. Perhaps someone reading about Therem and Genly's relationship, who needs to rid themselves of oppressive, violent thought, might come to wish for or even expect the help of a marginalized

person to help them become wiser. But as we will see, seeing the relationship between these two fake characters has been transformative enough for many readers. Blogger Zhenya Bourova explains what happens to Genly's prejudices and misunderstandings: "Genly is forced to confront the violence that his insistence on a gender binary does to the non-conforming subjectivity of his companion." In the end, says Bourova, the book is about "the violence done to the other's subjecthood in ascribing them to one half of a duality." This is a striking depiction of an individual overcoming of internalized ideology, one that speaks to the violence that gender expectations enact, and one that is possibly a great, useful example of such overcoming for mainstream readers. We will see in the next chapter.

But does Genly's character and journey really undermine stereotypes and gender ideology? Or is it misinterpreted – as in, do readers not realize that Genly is meant to show stereotyping and incorrect ideology? Does Le Guin's work fail in this way, cutting off its potential for radicalness, by trying to appeal to an audience who expect normativity? In a similar vein, does the use of a normative narrator, who harshly judges the genderqueer characters, ostracize readers who may identify as genderqueer? The way Le Guin frames her story 'for' the mainstream audience may have negative consequences for some readers. In the next chapter, I will look to the reactions of readers to find out answers to these questions.

## [Chapter 5]

### Failure to Land?:

#### Celebrations and Critiques Among ‘Mainstream’ Readers

Upon its release in 1969, Ursula Le Guin’s *The Left of Darkness* sparked a firestorm of reactions, from pure praise to vitriolic critique, from open-mouthed awe to boredom. On average, its reception was positive. Readers gave it the yearly, prestigious Hugo Award for best SF book, while SF writers gave it the equally significant Nebula Award. In fact, it was the first book to ever win both of these U.S. awards. *Left Hand* arguably built the first bridge from the SF genre, which had—and often still does have—trouble being taken as ‘serious,’ into the world of so-called literary reviewers and readers. After reading the book, literary critic and Brown University professor Robert Scholes praised Le Guin for displaying “powers so remarkable that only full and serious critical scrutiny can begin to reveal her value as a writer.” Scholes continues to compliment, specifically, the dynamic and detailed nature of the book: “[Its] great power...comes from the way it interweaves all its levels and combines all its voices and values into an ordered, balanced whole” (45). In a reflection of the book’s influence on the literary world, Harold Bloom even included *Left Hand* in his 1994 determination of the Western literary canon, arguing that Le Guin “has raised fantasy into high literature for our time.”

While such professionally published, ‘official’ responses to *Left Hand* are all somewhat interesting, the most meaningful reactions to the book come, in my mind, not from professional critics but its ordinary, common-people audiences. For the purposes of this chapter and the next, I have gathered about twenty online reviews by everyday readers: some published on personal blogs, some on websites dedicated to book reviewing, as well as a few from professional news

and reviewing outlets. In order to qualify for collection, each review needed to specifically address *Left Hand*'s relationship to the issue of gender. The reality is that *Left Hand* is about so much more than gender, but to expound on all its themes would likely take multiple theses. I purposefully collected reviews that gave diverse viewpoints. For Chapter 6, I purposefully sought out reviews by people who identify as genderqueer.

The purpose of this chapter and the next is to determine what *Left Hand* and its audiences have built in terms of a new way to look at gender and the future. In other words, what kind of work has *Left Hand* among its readers and therefore in society? What is the relationship between the book at its readers, and what does that relationship mean for imagining a different approach to gender and gender oppression? As we will see, it is possible that *Left Hand* did as much work as it might have or could have. Yet this, its potential lack of achievement, may be equally as significant in sparking productive analyses. Looking at *Left Hand*'s mainstream reception shows that we should and must shed paradigms that are so ingrained in our minds before we can imagine alternatives to the white-Western gender system. *Left Hand*'s lack of achievement among some readers actually provides a model for the more effective approach of both writers and mainstream readers. Meanwhile, the effect and meaning of *Left Hand* among genderqueer readers allow for another illumination, to be described soon.

### **Media Reception and SF Audiences**

According to reception theory, a modern body of thought that deals with the social effects of media, people do not consume media like empty vessels, waiting to take in whatever messages the creator of the media wishes to convey (Ott and Mack 222). Instead, our own personal opinions, life experiences, belief systems, and perspectives serve as lenses that affect - at least to some level - how we 'receive' media. In this way, audiences, not creators, are the primary site of

meaning-making when it comes to media (Ott and Mack 222). Because of this, the meaning of a piece of media can change wildly depending on who is looking at it. One of the first academics to reject the idea of media as a ‘hypodermic needle’ that injects messages into people was Stuart Hall, who proposed the encoding/decoding model as an alternative (Ott and Mack 224). In this model, media creators put forth a message using a particular code, which is often - if the media creators are in a position of power - made up of dominant ideologies. Then, viewers ‘decode’ the media using their own code, which might be the same as the creators’, but may also be different. For instance, one can use the ‘code’ of feminist theory to examine and critique media with issues of gender and oppression in mind.

Furthermore, membership in a certain social group may affect the way individuals interpret media, as our social group memberships often affect our perspectives and backgrounds. This is another aspect to how audiences shape the meaning of the text. Literary critic Stanley Fish used the term ‘interpretive communities’ to refer to groups who find similar meanings in media texts because of their similar positions in society (Ott and Mack 230). Race, gender, sexuality, class status, religion, nationality, and more can all affect how people interpret media. For instance, lesbian fans of a popular TV show may interpret physical touch and words of deep affection between two women characters as a sign of romantic love, while a group of straight, conservative fans may see these characters as ‘just’ close friends and deny any romantic interest between them. Meanwhile, activists might employ the ‘code’ of LGBTQ activism to view this representation as a victory for gay people everywhere—or a loss, if the characters are badly-drawn and stereotypical.

SF is one area of media wherein peoples’ interpretations of texts can vary widely. In fact, unlike many of media creators, science fiction producers are in the unique position of trying to

encourage new, diverse ways of thinking, as opposed to trying to inject the reader with a dominant message. As Le Guin has stated, her aim in writing about the alien world of Gethen was not to suggest that genderless-ness is an answer to humanity's problems, or even to direct the reader towards a certain way of thinking about gender. Instead, her aim in writing *Left Hand* was to open readers' minds to ways of thinking they may not have previously thought possible. While individual readers may or may not open SF books hoping the story will cause them to think differently about a certain subject, SF is unique in the way authors purposely seek to fulfill readers' highly humanlike appetites for the new, the unknown and the exciting (Stableford 73). Many SF readers do enter into books consciously hoping to feel, think or see something new by the end (Stableford 75).

Still, new and exciting often means controversial. As a still-radical portrayal of human genderless-ness - and indeed, it is still radical, much to the disappointment of some readers who we will meet soon - the controversy and diverse perspectives surrounding *The Left Hand of Darkness* are significant in what they say about how our society thinks and feels about gender: its realities, its possibilities, its alternatives, and more.

It is in the different perspectives that people have on the book that *Left Hand's* truest, most robust meaning is found - in terms of its contents or story, perhaps, but more importantly, in terms of its place in society. Before going more into queer and gender-queer people's perceptions of *Left Hand*, let us look now at the reactions of mainstream readers—those not queer or gender-queer, and those most likely to have their minds opened by the book—and the meanings and consequences of those reactions.

### **3, 2, 1, Blast Off: Opening Readers' Minds**

The following smorgasbord of quotes show the ways that *Left Hand*, for these people,

challenged them to think differently about the issues put forth in the book and/or expanded their ideas about gender. No one comment is exactly the same - each person took something different away, but they center around a main theme of mind-opening - and also display discussions that have taken place about the book outside its pages.

- “I have spoken to several people who found *The Left Hand of Darkness* immensely important: it provided their first glimpse of the possibility of non-binary gender” (MacFarlane 1).
- “[T]here’s no other book anyone’s ever talked to me about that fucked with their ideas about gender in the same way this one did – at least, not any book that was as wildly popular as LHoD” (Hurley 1).
- “*The Left Hand of Darkness* should be lauded for its examination of gender, using the alien Gethen to upset our notions of femininity and masculinity” (Khanna 2).
- “A clever use of unreliable narration and even the language of that narration, designed to make us take a good, hard look at our own assumptions. [...] It’s open to multiple readings. This is a book that leaves you thinking” (Jordison 2).
- “I see the envoy Genly Ai’s hesitations and confusions when confronted by men who seem to him unnervingly feminine as a prescient exploration of ideas about masculinity” (LeFanu 2).

Left out of many of the above reviews is a thorough description of how the reviewer was challenged mentally. In this quote, blogger Pam Watts gives a specific demonstration of how *Left Hand* caused her to think more deeply about gender:

[Genly] says that all along he had been denying [Therem] his own reality. That really struck me. Actually, I started crying. I’m not sure why. But maybe it’s that

gender is so complicated. And we have come up with so many words to describe it and ways to change it and subvert it. But really, how we all interact with our own gender is so particular and so deeply felt. Or maybe that's just me. But either way, when we try to shoehorn ourselves and each other into a prescribed gender role OR when we try to pretend that it doesn't matter at all and we've progressed beyond it, something vital is lost. (1)

Here, Watts shows how her experience with *Left Hand* caused her to evaluate and come to deeper insights about her real-life experiences with gender. She now seems to understand better how thoroughly harmful ideas about gender burrow themselves into our relationships with others and ourselves. At the same time, gender has many different important facets besides the form it sometimes takes through white/western ideology.

*Left Hand* may be especially fascinating to readers of present Earth because its primary narrator, Genly Ai, is himself an Earthling who holds the same notions of gender and gender stereotypes as many of us do. The anonymous reviewer from *Parallel Worlds Magazine* explains:

My feeling is that Le Guin wrote this book mainly as a starting point for those who are deeply entrenched in sexism and binary thinking. For the sake of realism, she wasn't going to make it easy for Genly. Sometimes I think we forget how hard it is for people who grew up in one culture to free themselves from a mode of thought which has been drummed into them since birth. The gap between generations or political or religious sects can be just as difficult to bridge as the gap between larger cultures or worlds. (2)

By having Genly undergo change, Le Guin ostensibly encourages us readers to come to a more thorough understanding of what a 'gender-free' humanity might look like - and to

reconsider stereotypes both about men and women and about gender-nonconforming people. The focus on and opportunity for consideration of stereotyping that Le Guin puts forward is possibly uniquely valuable—but also possibly problematic and harmful to the radical potential of the book. The above reviewer hints at this, saying, “As such the beginning [of the book] is not going to completely resonate with those of us who are already quite capable of thinking outside that box of gender.” But critics have more to say than that.

### **Masculinity and the Consequences of a Prejudiced Narrator**

Many have criticized Le Guin for causing a ‘failure to launch’ in her own work. Right after the book’s publication, two well-known scholars and SF writers, Joanna Russ and Stanislaw Lem, lambasted Le Guin for using male pronouns to describe her so-called genderless characters and for (relatedly) painting Gethenian society a society of men. In his article “Lost Opportunities,” Lem argues that while the book is well-written and the world of Gethen contains “richness and variety,” it fails to portray a world of no women or men; instead, “[Le Guin] has written about a planet where there are no women, but only men...garments, manners of speech, mores, and behavior, are masculine...the male element has remained victorious over the female one” (3). Most of the reviews I found that were critical of the book expressed similar opinions. These criticisms center around disappointment that Le Guin failed to live up to her potentially mind-opening premise by making the Gethenians seem masculine instead of genderless - whether by the use of male pronouns, the ‘masculine’ affect of the Gethenian characters, or the portrayal of Gethenians in only ‘masculine’ roles (or at least affects and roles the current white/western gender system considers masculine).

- “Frankly, a gender-free society is not what I found in this book, which was a big disappointment. The Gethenians really are not a gender free society, and Le Guin also

- doesn't present them that way. It is definitely an intersex society, but it's intersex people who predominantly present as male/masculine" (McNeil 3).
- "Perhaps Le Guin's book was so popular because it wasn't actually as radical as we might think. It was very safe... We go off on a boys' own adventure story, on a planet entirely populated by people referred to as 'he,' no matter their gender" (Hurley 2).
  - "[Genly] refers to all the citizens of Gethen with male pronouns, with the reasoning [by Le Guin] that those are more universal and less gendered than female pronouns, which is I think clearly meant to point up his gender assumptions, but at the same time gives the reader the impression that this is a planet made up wholly of men. It has a weird flattening effect on the world-building around gender that I think Le Guin was trying to get across" (Anonymous reviewer 'Snickfic' 2).
  - "I realized belatedly that I was picturing all the characters as de-facto males. Whether this was because of the use of the male pronoun, or because most of the characters occupied roles —politician, officer of the secret police—that are stereotypically "male" (thus betraying my own sexism?), or because of the lack of even a hint of sexual frisson in their interactions with Genly Ai, I'm not sure" (Mishan 1).

Ligaya Mishan's quote expresses the same doubts as the rest, but she also wonders whether it is her own Earthly perspective that is making her see the Gethenians as masculine. This is indeed possible. In 1976, Le Guin responded to critics who called the Gethenians masculine by imploring readers to show her one instance where a Gethenian did or said anything that a woman would not do ("Is Gender" 3). By insisting that the Gethenians 'act' masculine, critics like Lem may be instating their own normative gender expectations onto characters who do not participate in those ideas. Along these lines, Alex Beecroft responds to such criticisms in

her review, saying, “Really? People really think that gender is that binary? People really think that there is some mystic way in which men are real men and women are real women, and it differs from the fact that they are both human?” (2).

However, as I argued at the beginning of this chapter, readers are the ones who make the meaning of the book for themselves. Le Guin’s aim was to make readers see and understand a genderless society. If so many people failed to see the Gethenians as genderless, than this is at least somewhat a failure on Le Guin’s part. Further delineating this misstep on the grounds of the story itself, Amanda McNeil says:

[Genly] mentions that he can’t help seeing the Gethenians as male, although sometimes he sees more ‘feminine features’ in them. Perhaps. But when the narration changes from Genly’s viewpoint to a Gethenian one, we get the exact same presentation of everyone as a gendered he. (1)

Le Guin has actually admitted to making multiple mistakes. In 1976, she released an article called “Is Gender Necessary?” in which she defended herself against critics, insisted the male pronoun was necessary as it was most neutral and to use ‘they’ or another pronoun would have been distracting and even silly. However, in 1987 she released a commentary on her own 1976 article, in which she rescinded many of her defenses. First, she stated that her insistence on male pronouns was actually misguided and unnecessary. Second, she expressed regret that she did not show Gethenians, and specifically Therem, doing ‘feminine’ behavior like caring for children, in order to better jostle readers’ minds. Finally, she said she regretted only portraying ‘male’/‘female’ relationships between Gethenians - a move that indeed drew ire from critics for being heteronormative (i.e., supporting the idea of heterosexuality as natural and inevitable, even among aliens). Relatedly, she has even expressed doubts about whether it was right to have

Genly and Therem's love relationship never extend into sex—on the basis that this also would have helped shake up readers' thinking about gender and sexuality.

Reviewer Zhenya Bourova has a slightly different criticism of the book that Le Guin has never addressed. Throughout the book, Le Guin (through Genly) describes the Gethenians as having a mix of 'masculine' and 'feminine' traits—also implied in her use of the word 'androgynous' to describe them. Moreover, at the moment when Genly says he finally understands Therem for who they are, he states that Therem is both a man and a woman. Now Bourova's criticism comes into play, as she says that while Le Guin wished to eliminate gender to find out 'what was left,' she made fatal mistakes:

[I]n insisting so strongly upon a people in whom the masculine and the feminine were blended, Le Guin made the gender binary – and the very idea of masculine and feminine characteristics – even stronger. If there was a radical point to that experiment – that is, the deconstruction of gender, as opposed to its hypothetical elimination — then the experiment had failed. (2)

Indeed, this is how Genly thinks and how he narrates the story: depending on their actions and manners, he sees the Gethenians as masculine in an Earthly way most of the time, and feminine in an Earthly way other times. Even when he comes to understand them better, he sees them as a combination masculine and feminine. Here again, normative expectations about what 'feminine' and 'masculine' mean—and indeed the belief that such traits exist at all—come into play, this time directly through the narrator, Genly, and his beliefs.

The fact that many readers, and Le Guin herself at times, interpret the Gethenians as androgynous, as opposed to what they really are—genderless—speaks to a stubborn insistence on maleness and femaleness (preferably one or the other) as being inherent to humanity. While

reading reviews of the book, I was disturbed by how often reviewers seemed to ignore or reject the fact that Gethenians are meant to be *human*, just like Genly is meant to be human. ‘An alien race’; ‘humanoids’; ‘hermaphrodites’; ‘ambisexuals’: I saw all of these stern and estranging terms being used to describe the Gethenians as a whole group of characters. Perhaps this is partly Le Guin’s fault: she consistently refers to Gethenian people as just ‘Gethenians’ and not as human beings, except in implication and during certain key moments. By not stressing the outright, undeniable humanness of the people of Gethen, Le Guin may have again missed an opportunity to challenge people’s thoughts about gender.

In a compelling turn of thought, Bouryova concludes her critiques saying that where the book does succeed, perhaps, is in showing “the impossibility of exiting a worldview premised on dualities to see an other as they really are” (1). That is, Bouryova finds the book interesting because of the extent to which Genly’s transformation—his traversing of the space between him and Therem—“*does not, and can never, succeed*, due to the effect of symbolically entrenched binaries and hierarchies on [his] ability to make connections with others” (2, emphasis in original). Of course, the dynamic observations that Bouryova makes may not occur at all to many readers. Applying Bouryova’s thoughts about Genly to the reactions of mainstream readers to *Left Hand*, it becomes clear that the gender binary and gender as a whole, as concepts, are deeply enmeshed in people’s ideas of what it means to be human. Androgyny may or may not make sense, but pure human genderless-ness is still impossible in many people’s minds.

Perhaps *Left Hand*’s moderateness, in the face of its potential to be more radical, really was always the key to the book’s success. Choosing Genly as the main character and having him slowly overcome his prejudices to some extent was Le Guin’s attempt to make the book more accessible and hopefully useful for people not already thinking in a non-normative way about

gender. But this has negative consequences for readers who want the book to be more thoroughly challenging, and most importantly, as will be seen, for some readers who identify as genderqueer. The question at hand is, is it a good idea for a writer seeking to challenge peoples' assumptions to 'hold back,' to focus on appealing to the mainstream audience and its supposed needs, in order to get at least some challenging ideas out there?

More generally, how much does *Left Hand* and its challenge level, high or low, actually matter? We have seen ways that *Left Hand* has upset many peoples' notions about gender. But what are the benefits of this upsetting for the people who are most harmed by such notions? In other words, does *Left Hand* actually have power in normalizing and representing real-world human gender non-conformity? This is a question that we need the opinions of genderqueer readers to help answer.

## [Chapter 6]

### New Home Base:

#### Celebrations and Critiques Among Genderqueer Readers

Possibly the most vital investigation ground for determining *Left Hand*'s meaning and value in society is how it connects, or fails to connect, with those who are most targeted by our society's gender ideology—particularly the lack of acknowledgement of humanity without normative (or any) gender as real, valid and important. That is, when trying to conceptualize *Left Hand*'s long-term value as a media text, the most knowledgeable and important audience to survey must be genderqueer or mainstream-gender-nonconforming readers. It would be impossible to understand 'the genderqueer person's perspective' on *Left Hand*, because there is no such one perspective—but we can perhaps draw some interesting conclusions from a collection of peoples' commentaries. So what meaning does *Left Hand* hold for those who are genderqueer?

Looking at the responses of genderqueer readers, it becomes clear that to imagine alternatives to our gender system and effectively break it down, we must center the voices and experiences of genderqueer people—in societal treatment of them, of course, but also specifically in stories, through the celebration and embracement of non-otherizing characters.

#### One Small Step: Homemaking and Representation in a New World

A number of the reviews by genderqueer-identifying people echoed sentiments expounded on in the last section about the book's ability to 'shake things up' on the topic of gender. A reviewer going by E.J. said the book was "something of a revelation to me as a genderqueer thirteen-year-old" (1). Genderqueer SF fan Alex Powell said, "I read it when I was a

young teen, and even now I remember what an amazing book I thought it was” (1). Another reader, going by the nickname HappeningFish, focuses in on the moment at the end of *Left Hand* wherein Genly encounters humans who have gender for the first time in year, and finds them surreal, unfathomable, strange—that is, similar to how genderqueer people are viewed in white/western culture. They say:

“There’s an amazing moment where he’s been there for a long time and is used to seeing no men or women around, but only people, and then he comes into contact with men and women from earth... won’t ruin the moment, but it makes every genderqueer person do celebratory fists in the air” (1).

The end of HappeningFish’s comment hints to the fact that while many genderqueer readers acknowledged the book’s mind-opening features, many also went beyond that step. One SF fan who identifies as asexual (not experiencing sexual attraction to others) and genderqueer wrote about *Left Hand* at Parallel Worlds Magazine, an online publication dedicated to reviewing SF books with genderqueer characters. This reviewer stated that when they read the book the first time, they were “a very sheltered, transphobic, homophobic, conservative teenager” struggling to understand themselves—and the book was repulsive to them (1). Years later, reading *Left Hand* for the review in question, a large shift had occurred in how they saw themselves: they now identified as asexual and genderqueer. Now, they felt not just impressed by but personally connected to and validated by the book. They say:

Looking back, I can definitely say that this book was a key reference point for my understanding of myself. Because of it I had something to point to mentally, even when I didn't know whether such a... way of being existed anywhere in the real world. (2)

In their post “Holding The Left Hand of Darkness,” genderqueer-identifying blogger Alex Beecroft gives a similar narrative, with the intriguing addition of the term ‘home.’ Beecroft writes:

[*Left Hand*] has been, for me, the only book I have ever read that gave me a glimpse of what life would be like in a society where people were more like me... It hit me like a breath of paradise. It hit me like finding out I had somewhere where I was home. (1)

Beecroft continues to say that while some people have criticized Le Guin for ‘botching’ her premise by making the Gethenians act too masculine, they never saw the Gethenians as men like such readers. Instead, Beecroft just saw the Gethenians as people like them, people not defined by gender. Another genderqueer-identifying book reviewer, B.R. Sanders, echoed this sentiment and specifically the use of the word ‘home,’ saying: “This was the first book to ever feel like home for me because the people populating it have such a fluidity in gender” (2).

These interpretations show two truths. First, they shine a light on the power of media ‘consumers’ in not just consuming media, but shaping its meaning. While media makers have the power to put forward certain messages, Ott and Mack point out that readers have the ability to actively interpret those messages; they write powerfully, “It is audiences who determine what a text ultimately signifies or how it actually functions in their own lives” (222). According to uses and gratification theory, consumers may seek out media for all sorts of personal reasons - from gaining new knowledge, to feeling a sense of connection with others, to escaping the stresses of everyday life (Ott and Mack 223, Stableford 28). Here, the use that readers are extracting from the text is a sense of welcomeness, validation, and home - a sense harder to find in the ‘real world’ for those who are genderqueer.

Second, these reactions speak to *Left Hand's* value as a text. Mainstream media largely fails to represent genderqueer people, or even the possibility of an alternative to white/western gender. This total lack of visibility denies peoples' humanities and realities and supports the continuation of the white/western gender system. Demonstrating what the value of media can be, agender reviewer Morgan Dambergs narrates:

When I was younger, reading about shy and introverted characters helped me feel like I wasn't the only shy, introverted person alive in the world, and like those traits were just personality differences, not flaws I had to fix. I have every reason to believe that, if I'd had the chance to read more books about non-binary characters as a teen or young adult, I could have understood and accepted my agender identity many years ago. That's why the discussion of non-binary genders in the science fiction and fantasy community is so important to me. ...[N]ovels that include non-binary characters can potentially change the lives of real non-binary people for the better. (2)

### **Houston, We Have a Problem: Potential Otherization and Alienation by *Left Hand***

There are important problems to take into account when placing *Left Hand's* Gethenians in the same intellectual space as genderqueer people on Earth today, at least when it comes to saying that the Gethenians open people's minds to such identities (and not *just* the possibility of gender being different, or thinking about gender differently). First, the gender-free characters in *Left Hand* do not explicitly identify as genderqueer or a comparable identity - which is logical, as gender as we know it is not present for them to 'queer.' Really, 'queer' itself is considered by many to be a highly political term with specific socio-historic meanings and values - for instance, the rejection of assimilation of LGBTQ people into mainstream heteronormative society. In other

words, Gethenians are not situated in our current world and therefore may not be able to represent the experiences of genderqueer people today. Commonly in media, even when a person of a marginalized group is fully characterized and individualized in a media piece, they are also isolated in some way from others like them (Dyer 362). Richard Dyer posits that individual queer characters have the most representational power when they are placed within, not a stereotype, a ‘member type’—that is, when a character is linked in solidarity to “historically, culturally specific and determined social groups or class” and the collective struggles of that group or class (363). An example of this dynamic at play would be an apolitical queer character who disassociates from other, more political queer characters in the narrative. In this sense, gender-free Gethenian characters may be too distant from real genderqueer people facing real marginalization to have true weight in helping to undo queer misrepresentation and stereotypes.

Second, and relatedly, it may not be reasonable to say that a representation of genderlessness among aliens—even aliens who are humans, just from Earth—actually relates to peoples’ genderqueer and/or agender identities and experiences. It might even otherize people who identify as agender and genderqueer, as the very basis of the alien as a character is that they are ‘not like us.’ This issue is most urgent when questioning the Gethenians as a representation to mainstream audiences. In all, is it fair to say that a representation of genderlessness among aliens—even aliens shown to be smart and empathetic, even aliens who are humans, just not from Earth—at all represents real peoples’ genderqueer identities and experiences? Or does it serve only to otherize people who identify as agender and genderqueer—purporting that genderqueer people are just ‘not like us’? It is genderqueer readers who know best how Gethenians represent them, or productively connect with their experiences, or not.

Not all genderqueer-identifying readers agree that *Left Hand* functions as “a breath of

fresh air,” to use Beecroft’s phrase. Morgan Dambergs, in fact, does not count *Left Hand* as a positive representation of either genderqueer people or genderqueerness in general. First,

Dambergs comments on the importance of media representation:

I think that lack of representation has a lot to do with why it took me twenty-one years to find out that non-binary identities exist, and why it’s only been in the last six months that I’ve finally accepted my own genderqueer identity as real and something I’m allowed to express. (2)

Now, they turn to *Left Hand*:

When you’re a human being who is deeply uncomfortable with the idea of having to choose between being exclusively male or exclusively female, and your first introduction to the idea of a genderless society is from the point of view of a human who can’t wrap his head around how anyone could ever be truly genderless, it’s pretty, well, alienating. [...] As far as I knew, there was no human experience comparable to how the Gethenians lived. Since my biology and society were not and could never be like the Gethenians, the genderlessness of Gethen life never amounted to more than a pleasant thought experiment for me. (2)

Dambergs sums up their point by calling the Gethenians “too alien for me to find identifiable” (2). Their critique is evidently two-fold. First, a problem for them lies in the fact that the ‘agender’ characters in *Left Hand* are, despite being fully human, aliens, and they are not situated in Earthly reality. The second problem is expounded by the plot itself, in that Genly is coming to the planet as a scientific-minded, prejudiced newcomer with no understanding of what it might mean to live without gender. Though Genly overcomes his ignorance, the fact is that that

ignorance is at the crux of the book and is pushed in the reader's face for the majority of the story. The reviewer at *Parallel Worlds Magazine*, though not personally bothered, also sees how Le Guin's partial framing of the Gethenians as strange aliens (from Genly's point of view) might be disturbing for readers: "Genly and others muse about how [lack of gender] affects Gethenian society and psychology for good or ill, and make some startlingly ethnocentric judgments... Even the Gethenian's part-time asexuality is perceived as a lack, their [sexual] cycles compared to those of non-human animals. Some readers might find this dehumanizing."

Indeed, the effects of making Genly the book's main character may come down hardest on people who identify with that which he calls alien. While feminist and other readers have criticized Le Guin for failing to live up to the book's idea through the use of the he pronoun and by making Genly so ignorant, and while Le Guin and others have responded by calling Genly a necessary vehicle for the mind-opening of more conservative readers, this is not ideal for genderqueer readers. It may result in a sense of alienation and otherization as one is, in one way, portrayed as alien.

The issue of alienation in *Left Hand* would perhaps not be so bothersome if *Left Hand* was not the only well-known piece of media dealing with human genderlessness *at all*, and if it was not one of the few well-known books seeking to 'play' with gender. As it is, *Left Hand* was published in the alarmingly non-recent year of 1969, and yet is still considered envelope-pushing today—which shows just resistant that envelope has been over the years.

### **Houston, We Have Another (Bigger) Problem: SF and General Media in Relation to Genderqueer People**

Representation does need to happen somewhere. Reflecting on the real value of SF as a venue for representation, Wendy Gay Pearson says: "In a world where so many of us are unable

to find a home, a place which is both materially and affectively livable, should we not all be able, at the very least, to find a home amongst the seemingly infinite planes of the imagination?" (3).

Because of its ability to involve the implementation of thoroughly 'unrealistic' situations and imaginings, SF may also be particularly useful in pulling apart social concepts like gender. As Brit Mandelo says in the introduction to her SF short story anthology *Beyond Binary*:

"[S]peculative fiction is the literature of questions, of challenges and imagination—and what better for us to question than the ways in which gender and sexuality have been rigidly defined, partitioned off, put in little boxes?" (3). Indeed, SF fills a void fairly well, and it often has intense value for many who are marginalized, as seen in this chapter.

It is unfortunate, though, that SF has historically been one of the only places where people have played with ideas of gender and sex. More realistic fiction these days features lesbian and gay characters, usually telling painful coming-out stories that are fully situated in our current reality. But fiction involving people with little-known, non-conforming gender identities seems limited to fantasy worlds. This makes sense if, as I have argued, queer gender identities are not seen as realistic, or indeed real at all. Now it seems that genderqueer identities are otherized and unacknowledged in a creative way: they are barred, in stories, from our current reality. This reflects Ott and Mack's characterization of ideology as flexible—able to co-opt resistance and funnel it into less threatening channels (132). That is, SF may not challenge readers as much as real-world stories would. In the process of commenting on the potential weight of queer representation in *Left Hand*, trans-identifying SF blogger Evelyn Deshane argues that in the case of feminist and queer SF, "people can disregard these books and what they say about gender a lot more readily because it's sci-fi, or fantasy, or even that it's too far in the future (and therefore not a conceivable threat or idea)." Sadly, in the end—as Damberg's

observes—*Left Hand*'s along with other SF stories' representational power may be undercut for some by the simple fact they are SF.

Even if one does (fairly) relish in the value of SF, feminist and queer SF continues to be a smaller-than-satisfactory pool. Damberg's rightfully asks the SF and fantasy community to "acknowledge our [genderqueer people's] existence, to no longer assume the gender binary is the default, to treat us in stories and in life as regular human beings rather than oddities or jokes or something purely alien." Mandelo continues: "The thing is, stories about genderqueer and sexually fluid identities are still hard to find [in SF], even in a field active with speculation on gender and sexuality. They tend to pop up here and there, scattered throughout magazines and collections, and in queer publications that get less attention from the SF readership" (3).

Moreover, Mandelo sees a need for SF to "represent a broad[er] range of gender and sexual identities, not only those exploring a [known] spectrum but also those who occupy spaces outside of it" (3). For instance, Deshane says she wants to see more "'realistic' portrayals of transgender people" even in SF/fantasy, "meaning that the stories [take] place in the 'modern day' that the book was written in." Alex Powell expertly articulates this need - for diverse representation that actually explicitly represents marginalized people - in an emotional statement:

I want to see people that are like me in media. I want someone where no one can tell what gender they are, and the watcher never finds out. I want characters that wear feminine clothes one day and masculine another, or mix and match them. I want characters that use other pronouns besides him/her. I want characters that dress a certain way and are assumed to be one gender, and when other people 'discover' that the character is a different sex than they thought...I want that character to tell them off for their assumptions. I want shapeshifters that change

gender when they change sex. I don't want characters that 'pretend' to be one sex or the other, I want characters that accept that they don't fit the binary and to just go with it. I want characters that will come out and say that they're non-binary.

(3)

Where general media is concerned, topics like gender and race must be addressed as a way to bring about both representation and discussion. Writing primarily about straight, white, male, gender-'normative' characters is a political act, even if writers view doing so as a neutral decision. Furthermore, simply including 'non-normative' characters in stories that tokenize, dehumanize and/or otherize them, or that to some extent fit into usual paradigms of normativity and gender expectations, is not revolutionary either. For instance, Brit Mandelo said that in putting together their anthology of SF short stories about genderqueer characters, they sought stories wherein "there is no tragic 'big reveal' ...no one is shocked by anyone else, and in the stories that feature physical discoveries, the lovers in question are always pleased and open to the wholeness of their partner's self" (3). While there is certainly a place for stories about queer people dealing with challenges related to their gender, sexuality, race, ability, and so forth, too many stories are focused on these challenges in a way that actually reinforces their normalcy and expectedness. In all, new stories must be conceived that are not bound by current rules with which readers are familiar. The present is not enough—and leaving the present in place by working purely towards 'inclusion' is also not enough. The whole, familiar story landscape but be overturned. Powell is right in her demands; the present situation, in general media as well as specifically SF, is not enough. To use Jose Munoz's chosen descriptor, it is toxic.

## Conclusion

As seen in Chapter 2: Launching the Subversive Imagination, *Left Hand* is just one of many examples of how media can influence people in ways that perhaps other social institutions simply cannot offer. Readers of *Left Hand* are the ones who determine its meaning, and the book is full of so many different possible meanings that it has many different possible uses. The conversations and controversies that surround *Left Hand* form a small, public place in society where gender is a flexible topic for discussion and exploration - as opposed to a rigid monolith. In other words, it serves as the door to a forum for changes and developments in individuals' thinking about gender. Media theorists have called the phenomenon in which one piece of media can produce many different interpretations 'polysemy' (Ott and Mack 56). More than simple this-or-that interpretations (such as good-or-bad), *Left Hand* creates a platform for thinking about gender in a new way. Its polysemic nature creates its value. Additionally, for many genderqueer people, *Left Hand* in its social context is a site where 'placemaking' can occur on an emotional or psychological level, that is, a new feeling of welcomeness, home, acknowledgement.

In sum, although the Gethenians are not meant to be our future, and although gender should not be eliminated, the discussions *Left Hand* makes immediate and possible, and the model of exploration it puts forward, creates a model for imagining a different reality when it comes to gender. It proposes a better future—a more open, free, breathable place for people both genderqueer and non-genderqueer. For instance, *Left Hand* shows that the meanings we currently fix upon gender are not inherent to humanness. If such a realization could occur on a large scale, it would allow everyone to express and live as ourselves more fully.

At the same time, the content of *Left Hand*, and therefore the platform for ‘placemaking’ it offers, is flawed. In significant ways, it does not live up to its seeming potential for making a difference. In trying to depict a different humanity, Le Guin failed to create for many readers a view of the Gethenians as unequivocally human and relatable and instead led some readers to view them as either non-human, not-fully-human, or not related to Earthly genderqueerness. This is partly due to the framing of the Gethenians through the prejudiced protagonists’ eyes. While no matter what she did, Le Guin’s depiction would have been inaccessible or failed to some, the commonness of this critique signals an important lack of value in the book.

Furthermore, *Left Hand* and its societal ‘place’ is partially infected by a reproduction of colonialist thinking, which hails back to racism. By coming to the planet of Gethen as an outsider and maligning the Gethenians, Genly’s character echoes the approach of non-normative, non-white/Western gender control. The book comes to undermine Genly’s prejudice but does not undermine the ideological dynamics present in Genly’s ‘mission.’ In general, the fact that the story is told from an Earthly, normative point of view instead of a Gethenian one to some extent otherizes the Gethenians. A more radical approach may have been to write the whole book from Therem’s point of view—the point of view of the person whose identity is a rejected and violated one in white-Western society. Alternatively, one might wish to remove the involvement of normative Earthly humans and the specter of normative gender altogether.

The question remains of whether *Left Hand* would have been anywhere near as successful, would still be in a public consciousness to this day, if it had been more effectively radical in one of the ways suggested above or in another way. Perhaps it had to have the flaws it does in order for it to be wide-reaching. Still, this necessity props up a mirror in which we can look at ourselves: unable to really explore gender without a framework of normativity.

Widespread positive praise of the book and its convincing world building has shown that it was possible for Le Guin to ‘get across’ a genderless humanity to many readers. At the same time, some people have not seen the Gethenians for their true genderlessness. Is this because of reader’s mental limitations, or Le Guin’s failures? Either way, the fact is that the book did not ‘work’ for many people. The fact that readers were able to overlay gendered traits onto ostensibly genderless characters shows how deep our insistence on gender runs. In all, it appears that stories like *Left Hand* need to be more radical to be truly effective in the way they aim to be. Yet, through *Left Hand*, through its readers’ reactions, through its existence as a social/societal element, gender is reworked into an idea that is flexible. An idea that can be played with. An idea that can be made alien and unfamiliar. An idea that can be questioned in fun, creative joyful ways.

### **Going Forward: A Complete Model for Speculative Writers, Individuals, and Society**

*I really hate the word ‘diversity.’ It suggests something other. As if it is something special. Or rare. As if there is something unusual about telling stories involving women and people of color and LGBTQ characters on TV. I have a different word: NORMALIZING. Which means it ain’t out of the ordinary. I am making the world of television look normal. You should get to turn on the TV and see...[someone] you identify with, anyone who feels like you, who feels like home, who feels like truth... So that you know on your darkest day that when you run (metaphorically or physically run), there is somewhere, someone, to run to.*

—TV Showrunner Shonda Rhimes (*Grey’s Anatomy, Scandal*)

The way our society deals with gender is poisonous. The way our society treats LGBTQ people is unacceptable. The way so many of us see humanity without (normative) gender as not humanity at all, despite the fact that there are real people who just do not experience gender—

that's nauseating. But just describing and condemning these treatments and ideologies does not have enough effect in ending them. As sociologist Jane Addams once said: "Action is the sole medium for ethics." In this final section of my thesis, I want to answer my earliest question: how can we imagine alternatives to our current gender system, in an effective, thorough and actionable way? How does *Left Hand* do this—that is, what model does it put forth for imagining alternatives? Here, I will propose how all the new knowledge and analysis I've dug up in the past eighty-or-so pages might be put into action.

Pairing SF with activism, at first glance, seems illogical. How can stories about far-flung, futuristic, fake societies make a difference in our grounded, present, and agonizingly real one? How could *Left Hand*, whether as a story or a social phenomenon, have a real effect against the goliath that is systemic social power? As I have argued, the answer lies in its ability to help us imagine alternatives. Stories themselves can have a role in the formation, maintenance, change, spread, and dissolution of social power, due to their abilities to—first—promote new, subversive ideas, and—second—to create a welcoming, positive, empowering space for the people who are rejected by greater society. These two 'powers' that stories have can merge in the public sphere and create useful tools for resisting ideologies with the help of two parties. These two parties of people are writers of fiction, especially SF, and individuals who are able to consume media.

First come the writers. Almost all fictional stories imaginable could easily be written to address one or ten pressing social issues: race, gender, colonialism, ableism, sexism, or any other brick in the house of human power. Combine that fact with the fact that stories are able to have power in people's lives—positive, negative, or otherwise—and it becomes the case that authors who choose not to address these issues are actively participating in the exclusion and marginalization of the people who suffer under current societal regimes.

I have a few recommendations for writers of future works of SF. First, do not be afraid to broach the topics of gender, sexuality, race, and other identities. Take on the ‘challenge,’ if it has to be viewed as such. Second, when taking on this project, be sure to take a holistic or intersectional viewpoint—that is, realize that the usefulness and impact of broaching the topic of gender is limited if race and other identity factors are not addressed at the same time, because on Earth, identities never occur singularly. Third, for the sake of those readers who never see themselves represented, make connections to Earthly identities explicit: either write characters that explicitly take on familiar identities such as asexual and genderqueer, or else *thoroughly, actively, and clearly* subtract patriarchy, white supremacy, and other systems of oppression from the story world. Leaving these systems unmentioned or ‘implicitly’ subtracted means leaving them in place in readers’ minds.

Next come us media consumers and potential consumers. Even when people take in stories without any conscious political thought in their mind (also known as ‘mindless entertainment’), the act of reading, watching, or hearing is still always political. Consuming means choosing one story, but not another. It means interpreting that story in some ways, but not in other ways. It means carrying forward the influence of that story in some ways, but not in other ways. Stories can do political work in people’s lives, and therefore throughout society, but not without willing eyes and ears. Judging from the reactions to *Left Hand* that I have described, it is my impression that if every citizen of the U.S. was given and forced to read a copy of this quirky book, our society could become more open-minded in the area of gender. Of course, only individuals can control what stories they choose to consume, how they interpret them, and they carry them forward. But every person should take advantage of stories for their transformative—and/or empowering and comforting—help, if at all possible. I propose a challenge for all media

consumers: see, understand, appreciate and embrace the power of fiction to challenge one's beliefs.

The potential and value inherent in SF is difficult to understate. While *Left Hand* is just one book, SF as a genre is a behemoth. Add together books, movies, comics, and art, and SF pumps millions of dollars every year into the U.S. economy. SF stories like *Left Hand* contain significant potential political power to bring about a better future for genderqueer people—not just through people's readings, but through community and discussion that build around those readings. Because the SF genre is not usually associated with 'serious' academia and gender theory, it can be a vital exploratory tool for readers who may have never thought critically about gender or sexuality before. Certainly a long-winded textbook or academic article on the subject of gender might be unappealing to many. But through SF, the topic of diversity in sexuality and gender can be broached for the everyday reader in a way that is accessible, intense, and fun. As Patricia Melzer asserts, gender theorists who ignore SF are missing the chance to "utilize the genre as a forum to broaden debate and bring it outside academic and activist circles" (263). I agree with Melzer that SF is a fascinating and useful lens through which to look at gender dynamics in our society. Whether one is a SF writer, a queer theorist, a queer reader, or a straight cisgender person, the SF genre can be a place for creative thinking and discussion around gender. Stories like *Left Hand* can truly 'play' with subjects like gender and race, turning them into flexible concepts that can be changed. Stories bring joy and often plug right into people's hearts. This makes them the perfect tool for going about such play.

According to Jose Munoz, queerness itself is a horizon, something 'not-quite-here.' A queer futurity is a place of thought where the future holds any number of unknown possibilities, where the brutal limitations of our current reality are not inevitable. Moments of queerness,

glimpsed in the darkness, light up our hidden norms and reveal the possibility of having no restrictive norms at all. Queerness is like a defibrillator shock to the heart, a jolt that reminds us of other possibilities—other pasts, presents, and futures. Through *The Left Hand of Darkness*, a project is done, enacted by its author, its readers, and its social context. The dialogue and work done between these groups creates an idea of the future that resists present intractable ideologies: that white-Western gender cannot be touched, that it is inherent to humanity, that it cannot be challenged. The future of gender is instead vast expanse of possibility, a cliff that dares one to jump off, a groundwork free of the limitations of our current reality.

In this thesis, I have answered a number of questions but perhaps have posed even more. Zhenya Bourova muses that despite its (many) shortcomings, *Left Hand* has garnered huge amounts of interest and analysis, perhaps not because of what it has to say about gender, but because of “the questions it leaves unanswered—and the questions it inspires” (3). Indeed, gender as a social issue is a tangled ball of yarn that may never be undone. But certainly, looking at it through the lens of an SF book is a new approach, and new approaches to complicated subjects are nearly always useful.

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