Dialogism and Dialectics in Ursula Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*

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Certification of Approval

I certify that I have read Dialogism and Dialectics in Ursula Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Lisa J Haugen, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Art in English: Literature at San Francisco State University.

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Abstract

Informed by Bakhtin’s work on carnivalized literature and the dialogic imagination, as well as Baudrillard's work *Simulacra and Simulations*, this project considers how Le Guin's use of poetics creates contrasting or dialectical forms in a paradigm of organic cooperative dialogue and a radical acceptance of synthetic negations that can also accompany dialectical processes. Through dissimulations, or fictions, which preserve truth, Le Guin exposes the logic of forms which lead to simulation as well as fosters expanded paradigms in touch with “the real.” This project begins with an analysis of Le Guin’s sentence-level poetics, how she offers a model of participation with patriarchal norms as well as a co-occurrent model for a revolution of those very same forms. She uses both in tandem as a precursor, a sort of creative cradle, for transformation. The first chapter will also take up an examination of critical responses to the novel, revealing how even postmodern liberal critics tend to approach the novel with the same monologic paradigms they strive to reform. The next chapter will explore broader-level poetics in the novel's use of structure, genre, and time. Ultimately, the project aims to demonstrate principles of reading that allow for a dialogic rather than monologic application of dialectics: an approach that maintains synthetic binary processes—those naturally bound in form and time—in conversation with organic, multidimensional ones—those which are perpetual and boundless.
Preface and Acknowledgements

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As I worked on this project, I centralized my efforts around Audre Lorde’s culture-shattering assertion that “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House.” Thus, I set about the endlessly enjoyable, rewarding, as well as relentless work of discovering what new tools might be made available to us via radical literature such as Le Guin’s. So this project is indebted to Lorde and her socio-political insight, as well. This work demanded as much of me personally as it was an exercise of literary analysis, as far as “reading” through and overturning my own critical devices. I had to remain willing to take persistent strides out of my intellectual comfort zone, as well as keep my own humanity and the humanity of all others perpetually within sight. Fortunately, the novel lends itself to that both in form and content.

Finally, my endless gratitude to Ursula Kroeber Le Guin, for boldly and generously sharing the depths of her imagination, for knitting together fantasy and reality in healing ways, and for her insightful inscription in my copy of The Left of Darkness: “Hang in there.”
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Introduction

Well-known feminist and left-leaning proponent for social change, Ursula K. Le Guin’s fiction offers balanced and deeply nuanced perspectives on her political beliefs. While at times Le Guin’s perspectives may seem to contradict or fall short of the radicalism of her contemporaries, more often than not these “contradictions” reveal a political sophistication that stands fast in the face of bi-partisan ideological paradigms that continue even today to plague not only the field of feminism but all branches of the liberal front. Le Guin’s radical awareness of inclusivity, for example, touched upon not only feminist and racial ideals, but also what we recognize today as post-colonial and non-ableist perspectives,¹ even before they became more commonly considered topics in our own contemporary scholarly discourse. And while postmodern critics such as anarchist Lewis Call and Marxist Frederic Jameson indubitably recognize Le Guin’s radicalism, there are as many who raise doubts about the lasting value of her seemingly dated literary politics.

Le Guin’s writing career began in 1959 just as the great American socio-political movements of the sixties and seventies, most notably the Civil Rights movement and second-wave feminism, were picking up early momentum. Le Guin’s authorship was initiated with these historical shifts, and the persuasive tides of their context—both clashing and synergistic—had considerable influence on her works. Her responsiveness to these movements does not take the form of passive participation or mimicry, however, and she seems to contradict the espoused

¹ For example Le Guin’s novella *The Lathe of Heaven*, and her short story “Vaster than Empires and More Slow;” see works cited.
values of both as often as she agrees with them. For example, though an intentional work of feminism, *The Left Hand of Darkness* features only one female character—a tertiary one who plays no apparently direct role in the action of the story. It also applies the universal “neutral” masculine, “man,” “he,” “his,” for beings who are both female and male. And though the novel is heavy with themes of socio-political antagonism, isolation, and exile, Le Guin consistently reinforces the essential connectedness of her disparate and oppositional-seeming protagonists even where connection may seem to undermine her revolutionary goals.

This radical interconnectedness serves as an ultimately irresistible, uplifting force that reflects the “tend[ency] to value unity” asserted by Ellen Peel as a characteristic of second-wave feminism (*Politics, Persuasion, And Pragmatism* 176), specifically differentiated from third wave’s focus on diversity. Ultimately, though, Le Guin’s feminism even prior to the third wave exhibited a strong sense of dialectical balance of both diversifying and unifying factors that, left unreconciled, necessarily ruptured much of feminist thought in the late 20th and early 21st century. Le Guin was ahead of her time in the sense that *The Left Hand* positions both unity and diversity as an essential dyad, rather than a split pair of diametric and hierarchical opposites. In this way, the novel maintains binaries themselves as natural, essential, and diversifying while at the same time challenging and subverting the paradigmatic separation and exploitation that often accompanies binaries in hierarchical structures.

The publication of *The Left Hand of Darkness* not only corresponded with the rise of second-wave feminism and the civil rights movement, *The Left Hand* was also situated in the context of rising political protest to the US involvement in the Vietnam War, a fact reflected in Le Guin’s description of the novel as a “thought experiment” (*LHD* ii) in which she “was
interested in writing a novel about people in a society that had never had a war” (*Is Gender Necessary? Redux* 11). Whatever the subject, the theme of the day seemed to be dominated by layers of binary division, even among radical movements themselves. For civil rights it was the considerable difference of paradigm exhibited by figures such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and the Black Power movement championed by Malcolm X. While both sought to overturn and transcend the fundamentally dualistic divides between self/other, white/black, light/dark, each had a different ideological approach for relating with and navigating the divide, thus creating layered divisions and oppositions within the overarching movement. *The Left Hand of Darkness* and its exploration of multidimensional duality mirrors the divisions among these movements.

Yet another major contributing factor to the novel’s motifs and design is its situation within the rapid rise of “New Wave” Science Fiction. The new wave embraced formally liberal postmodernism, an engagement with the humane or “soft sciences” and social justice themes. This came after the ebb of the more conservative and “hard science” focus on war technology which characterized the “Golden Era” of the 1950s. Informed by the fullness of her historical context, Le Guin’s negotiation of contradiction took the form of exploring the essentially dynamic interplay of dialectics and their accompanying binary oppositions through the creation of story elements and metaphors that expose unifying structures, even while she maintains the integrity of deconstructed binary pairs: for example, light and dark are unified in their mutually interdependent creation of meaning (*LHD* 260-61) by nature of being in dialogue with one another. In Le Guin’s novel, this complex and varied historical context very much steeped in fractures and cleavage is illustrated by the ideological and formal, and perhaps even temporal divide between the two countries, Karhide and Orgoreyn—which, according to the novel’s
primary narrator, are on the brink of “achieving the condition of war” (49) due to increasingly divisive political tensions.

Le Guin’s work recognizes the vital difference between dialogic cooperation, and the monologic exploitation that characterizes literal warfare and its more subtle socio-political forms. And even while The Left Hand astounded many audiences and critics, making Le Guin the first female author to be awarded both the Hugo and Nebula prizes for science fiction, many others found it lacking or considerably problematic for a variety of reasons. Whether or not postmodern critics have found the novel sufficiently feminist or decolonized, there is no denying that The Left Hand of Darkness had a deeply persuasive impact, successfully carrying the ripples of deconstructionist thinking to the modern audience perhaps most alien and remote to its critical ideals.

**Second-Wave Feminism and Le Guin**

Where deconstructive approaches can often falter or halt completely at the brink of contrasting divides, the evolution of dialogic paradigms remains a crucial step for feminism to move beyond the monologic paradigms that ensnare traditional patriarchal thought. In Dancing At The Edge of The World, Le Guin reflects that the “groundswell” (7) of second wave feminism influenced and added buoyancy to the formation of The Left Hand of Darkness: “I didn’t see how you could be a thinking woman and not be a feminist” (7). So it’s perhaps unsurprising that the characteristics of second wave feminism can be found in both the structures and themes of the novel. While pro-Left Hand critic Ellen Peel’s analysis of feminism centralizes the unifying factor of a “rejection of patriarchal patterns” (48), feminism’s second wave is more often critically recognized not for unity, but for a foundational split in contradictory approaches to
enacting sought-after changes. A situation made visible perhaps only in contrast to feminism’s first wave, one that saw a diversity of approaches unite with the common goal of women’s suffrage. Second-wave feminism had no such uniting goal. While black feminists tended to identify the second wave’s divide as primarily racial, with self-centralized white feminists ignoring women of color entirely, scholars additionally note that liberal feminism and radical feminism were distinctly delineated approaches among white feminists. Their disparate ideologies diffused any commonality of focus like that which gave the first wave its apparently successful crescendo. This divisive trait among all types of feminists from all kinds of diverse social perspectives, carries over into third-wave feminism, too. Peel does acknowledge that feminism expresses itself through a diversity of forms (50), and so, like Le Guin, and unlike many other feminist scholars, Peel also seems to recognize the paradigmatic possibility of “unifying” and “diversifying” features as cooperative and interdependent, rather than simply oppositional, even without the necessity of a unifying goal.

Nevertheless, the domination of division remains, even today, as it did in the sixties and seventies. To better understand the nature of the ideological rifts that exist today, we might turn to the past and examine those of second wave feminism, articulated by Voichita Nachescu in her article *Radical Feminism and the Nation*. Her extensive essay covers both the history and the divides between white women and women of color, but also that between the liberal and radical feminists: “on the one hand, liberal feminists created hierarchically or bureaucratically organized associations […] their method of pursuing feminist goals was through legislation, the courts, and lobbying” (Nachescu 31). Liberal feminists sought a form of assimilation whose basic principles mirrored those of traditionally patriarchal society. In contrast, Nachescu draws attention to the
radical feminist movement as inspired directly by the anti-integrationist principles of Black Power and that it took shape as diametrically opposed to the structure and ideology of liberal feminism: “loosely structured as informal groups [...] radical women were adamant about their overarching anti-establishment ethos” (31). In summary, while liberal feminism utilized existing political structures to organize campaigns for extending men’s rights to women, radical feminism sought to redefine what was considered the scope of politics altogether. They sought to raise awareness of what rights and roles women may or may not want, rights that male-centric politics and the liberal feminists who sought to participate had not yet considered. If the first wave’s impact was to allow female participation in politics, liberal feminism participated wholeheartedly, unquestioningly, in the formative structures and organization that rose from strictly male leadership, even if it challenged patriarchal norms by asserting female rights to equal participation against patriarchal resistance. Radical feminism, on the other hand, sought to uproot the patriarchal foundations of political power entirely, as the presumed basis for sex-based subordination and oppression.

And so, Ellen Peel’s description of all feminism as a “rejection of ‘patriarchy’” (48) takes different shape according to the formal aspects of differentiated movements. Liberal feminism historically rejects not the patriarchal structures themselves, but female exclusion from them. Radical feminism more fully rejects patriarchal models of government entirely. According to Kathie Sarachild’s *Consciousness Raising: A Radical Weapon*, “the dictionary says radical means root [...] and that is what we mean by calling ourselves radical. We are interested in getting to the roots of problems in society” (qtd. in Nachescu 29). What liberal feminism
identified as the root of the solution of their problems, radical feminism identified as the problem itself.

Though Le Guin does position patriarchy as problematic, and in fact demonstrates not only patriarchal bias but monologism itself in any form to be practically lethal, she also doesn’t necessarily reject it, either. Instead, she embraces and works with rather than against the reality of it, based on the principle cited in *The Left Hand of Darkness*: “to oppose something is to maintain it” (153). In terms of the novel’s feminism, this radical acceptance in fiction does something more than many of her contemporaries could, using political means. For example, where radical feminism sought, as a group unifying focus, to “overthrow” the class systems of oppression (Nachescu 37) with its focus on the “the personal is political,” the main characters of *Left Hand* focus not on overthrowing either of the oppositional governments at all, they focus instead on connecting first with each other, as mutual “aliens,” and then connecting with a diversifying force for paradigmatic change known as the Ekumen. As we will see both in the historical records of Gethen and the main characters’ own story arc, individuals need only choose a more radically acceptant, cooperative direction themselves, and the relatively narrow or oppressive governments they accept rather than reject outright eventually follow suit. The personal, by virtue of being personal, becomes literally political, a fact that the main narrator Genly discovers in his time as envoy among the Gethenians: “alone, I cannot change your world. But I can be changed by it. Alone, I must listen, as well as speak. Alone, the relationship I finally make, if I make one, is not impersonal and not only political: it is individual, it is personal, it is both more and less than political (*LHD* 259).” Thus, paradigmatically expanded individuals needn’t expend energy opposing, rejecting, or vying for equal participation with any
government, and neither are they dependent on governments or political parties to enact change. Instead, individuals in the story are empowered to be with one another in a more dialogic paradigm, regardless of the governments around them. Political revolution follows in the wake of their personal choices as a matter of course.

In the most plain terms, individuals are—potentially—personally involved in a creative dialogue with political systems themselves, one which need not imagine political systems or political bodies as dominant relative to the individual who desires to change them: the political is but a reflection of the personal, and where the individual can shift their own personal paradigms from oppositional codependence to cooperative interdependence the corresponding political reflection must follow. This is a very radical approach to the idea of political change. Rather than place distinctive forms, such as patriarchy and feminism, in opposition to or essential rejection of one another, Le Guin imagines them in creative dialogue—even while she simultaneously maintains the historic reality not only of their oppositional positioning, but also the real fallout of the violence that erupts from conflict. And unlike most mainstream feminist discourse, the structure and motifs of the novel recognize that divisive oppositions arise from both sides of a conflict as a matter of historical patterns: though likely the source of monologic paradigms, participation in them is not exclusive to patriarchy. It is exercised by feminists as well.

Subsequently, Le Guin’s focus on the male perspective is perhaps one of the most paradoxically radical features of the novel as she brings the harms of patriarchal bias for the narrator himself into focus. In so doing she directly counters the traditional feminist belief, or bias, that patriarchy *benefits* males. She does so without compromising the real of historically male universal self-subjectivity and its bias against the female. Le Guin engages this male
narrator in more dialogic and feminist environments that bring bias itself to light on both sides of an ideological divide. That is to say, both in terms of patriarchal bias, but also, for example, the Gethianian bias against single-sexed individuals and those who are in perpetual rather than cyclic sexual potency. Thus, though *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a work of feminist science fiction, it is as much an implicit critique of dialectically monologic feminism as it is a critique of the patriarchal constructs the second wave had posited itself to reject.

**Putting Theorists Into Dialogue**

What is perhaps most concretely feminist about the novel is what many feminists seem to think Le Guin got wrong: the biologically male and female Gethenians. As the most definitive illustration of the dialogic dance of unified binaries, the Gethenian form both preserves the duality of human sexual dimorphism and unifies it corporeally. More than a dialectical synthesis of the antithetical sexes, the creative form of the Gethenian allows Le Guin to successfully deconstruct socially projected gender associations without a compromise of the integrity of the basic binary of reproductive categories themselves (egg-bearing female, sperm-bearing male). The Gethenian humans’ fictional biology becomes an extended metaphor for the dialogic unification of those characteristics deemed “masculine” or “feminine” as all essentially and wholly human, incorporated in a single body whether it be male or female: distinct forms dialectically paired and dialogically unified. In Baudrillardian terms, the Gethenians are a dissimulation that preserves the real against which the simulation of gender characteristics can be played. In his 1981 essay *Simulacra and Simulations*, Baudrillard defines dissimulation as a feigning or pretend that “leaves the reality principle intact” and simulation as “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal […] substituting signs of the real for the
real itself; programmatic, [a] perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes” (166-167). A simulator speaks and behaves as if the truth simply doesn’t exist. Where dissimulation “implies a presence,” simulation “implies […] the absence” of the real (167). Baudrillard thus draws a nuanced distinction between the relative “poetry” (166) of the abstractions and metaphors of fiction—of intentional, cognizant pretend—and the reality-obfuscating dysfunctions of socially orchestrated and enforced denial.

As Baudrillard outlines, simulation “begins with a liquidation of all referentials - worse: by their artificial resurrection in systems of signs, which are more ductile material than meaning, in that they lend themselves to all systems of equivalence, all binary oppositions and all combinatory algebra” (167). Essentially, where there are binary pairings which can be positioned and argued dialectically, there runs the probable risk of generating simulations with them. My theoretical argument is, first and foremost, that all binary forms are both dialogic and dialectic, and thus multi rather than unidimensional. Dialectical processes end unidimensionally as they seek an end to the opposition of the thesis and antithesis in the form of a synthesis. Dialogism, however, establishes the dialectical argument, which seeks a synthetic end in time, as simultaneously eternal and organic. One cannot do away with simulation by attempting to do away with binaries, as deconstructionist efforts often do, because they are real.

Interestingly, as a guard against the dangers of simulation, The Left Hand of Darkness is set on a veritable “Winter” world, where forms may be crystalized², and thus safely put into

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² In fact, Fredric Jameson’s reading of the novel explores in part the role of “winter” as an extended metaphor which suggests impermeability, enabling a more absolute maintenance of boundaries and resistance to assimilative processes, in contrast to, for example, the literary anxiety of assimilation (or a liquidation of boundaries) in hot and damp jungle climates. See works cited.
interplay without the risk of the “liquidation of all referentials” (167) of which Baudrillard speaks—rather than liquidate truths, Le Guin allows more than one truth to stand alongside others: such as casting the secondary narrator Estraven as both unwaveringly loyal, and as a “traitor.” But Le Guin will also not neglect the ways in which societies and individuals do simulate, liquidating and recasting referentials. As the dynamic interplay between fact and fiction holds a place of central importance in Le Guin’s novel, The Left Hand also explicitly examines both the effect of simulation and the subsequent role of dissimulation’s ability to reveal the truth, often through reversal, where “the real” has been ideologically compromised by the dissolutions of simulation.

Put simply, the Gethenians are themselves of course a fiction, a form of pretend play that preserves the real: those truths about the fundamental multiplicity of human nature that are liquidated socially and politically by enforced gender codes—simulations which threaten and obscure the whole of what it means to be human, whether male or female. The dynamic interplay of fact and fiction and fiction’s creative power to uplift the truth from socially projected illusion is a central and cohesive principle of Le Guin’s poetic artistry and literary prowess.

In addition to Baudrillard’s work on simulation and dissimulation, I’ll be reading through a Bakhtinian lens, as Bakhtin wrote extensively about dialogism. Mikhail Bakhtin’s work in the 1930’s on the Dialogic Imagination not only reconceptualizes the framework of time in which we position literary discourse, it also defines the novelistic form itself as stylistically composed of discursive layers in essential dialogue with one another. Each layer of discourse is an internally unified element which both contextualizes and is contextualized by the whole of the novel itself. The structure of novelistic discourse is both dialogic—diversifying—and
simultaneously unifying. In “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin draws distinctions between monologic and dialogic forms of criticism and insists that monologic forms of analysis cannot encapsulate the depth or breadth of the novelistic form. As Bakhtin himself puts it, “the traditional scholar bypasses the basic distinctive feature of the novel as a [dialogic] genre; he substitutes for it another object of study, and instead of novelistic style he actually analyzes something completely different. He transposes a symphonic (orchestrated) theme on to the piano keyboard” (263). The substituted object of study is, at least formally, a simulation, not the real of the text.

In The Problem of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, Bakhtin describes monologism as “the [set of] principles behind the entire ideological culture of recent times […] everything in them that is essential and true is incorporated […] and deprived of its individuality” (81). One way to see monologism at work is when a subject is split into a “thesis” and its corresponding “antithesis,” and rather than recognizing the other and itself as diverse aspects of one whole, the thesis is simulated to be the whole, and the “other” is simulated as separate from itself—detached and estranged. This unifying or assimilating principle as it exists in structures such as patriarchal hierarchy and colonialism, which do not tolerate diversity, has been studied at length in the postmodern period. But often enough, such studies do not recognize the ways in which they too operate and analyze with an essentially monologic approach. I aim to recognize the ways in which The Left Hand offers multidimensional perspectives that transcend the monologic reflex, even while it recognizes and critically portrays monologism at work.

Bakhtin’s work on carnivalized literature has also informed this project. I am most interested in the ways that carnival as a layer of discourse which is in dialogue with the rest of
the novel creates an opportunity for paradigm shift often overlooked by our own contemporary forms of reading and critical analysis. Because “carnival is a place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life” (Bakhtin 123) becomes possible. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin will explore and extend this “new mode” of interrelationship in a way that allows it to transcend its temporal segregation from “official life,” or “the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships” which generate the collective simulations that govern our lives, including the divisive codes of gender identity.
Some Words about Pronouns

That’s What [S]he Said

At the time that Ursula K. Le Guin composed The Left Hand of Darkness, the grammatically correct way to refer to indefinite individuals or collective groups of human beings of any sex was with the “neutral” male pronoun. Though she played with other options, Le Guin ultimately decided to go with the grammatically neutral male pronouns to refer to the male/female Gethenians who occupy most of the book. This allowed the text to read more smoothly than invented pronouns would have for its (primarily male) audience, though the pronoun itself would create an awkward contradiction. Even so, that very contradiction served as a way of inviting subversive moments which poke decidedly back against the grammatical standard, moments that reveal the real female lurking beneath the simulation of “he” as the natural, the neutral, the monologically all-encompassing human being.

Le Guin’s choice to use masculine pronouns to signify the Gethenians nevertheless remains one of the most controversial and frequently cited shortcomings of the work itself. For example, in an early review of the novel, Joanna Russ cited the use of all-male pronouns and the “masculine” portrayal of the Gethenians as its biggest downfall despite an overall positive estimation of the novel as a piece of artwork: “put [masculine pronouns] together with the native hero’s personal encounters in the book, the absolute lack of interest in child-raising, the concentration on work, and what you have is a world of men” (Image 215). I so utterly disagree with Russ on this point it cannot be overstated, even while I can accept the basic premise that it is radically valuable to centralize the “women’s sphere” and this sphere is more marginal to The Left Hand than what was historically known as the men’s sphere. Even so, the novel’s offerings
of radical and feminist approaches to childrearing and family structures actually merit a study all their own. And part of this thesis’ work is to demonstrate the ways in which marginality is in dialogue with, rather than a subordinate relationship to, what is more front-and-center. Russ’ analysis of Le Guin’s text, examined in the light of her own book *How to Suppress Women’s Writing*, is decidedly suppressive, and blatantly follows the infamous “She wrote it, but…” dismissive pattern indicted all over that work’s 1983 cover art:

In response to the heaping criticism that the Gethenians subsequently seem more male than female, Le Guin herself retrospectively owned it as a shortcoming, too:

if I had realized how the pronouns I used shaped, directed, controlled my own thinking, I might have been “cleverer” [“at *showing* the ‘female’ component in *action*”].
Unfortunately, the plot and structure that arose as I worked the book out cast the Gethenian protagonist, Estraven, in roles we are culturally conditioned to perceive as “male” \textit{[italics hers]} (\textit{Dancing} 15).\textsuperscript{3}

Le Guin’s acknowledgement here indirectly implies that critical perspectives of the Gethenians as “too masculine” are as informed by socially conditioned views of gender as her fiction may be. Examples of stereotypical monologism and its artificial systems of referentials abound in many analytical treatments of the novel’s depictions of gender. But even Russ’ comments make plain that it is as much the critics who are not “cleverer” at imagining “he” and “she” beyond their own social conditioning; nor considering that perhaps \textit{she} is not biologically destined to behave as socially conditioned. By Russ’ explicit estimation, “\textit{she}” \textit{must} be interested in raising children and \textit{not} concentrate on work, or else she \textit{must} be a “\textit{he};” that a \textit{she} must erase any other possibilities for herself, or otherwise refrain from doing what a \textit{he} is both entitled and expected to do.\textsuperscript{4}

Le Guin herself, in her later estimations, either ignores, undermines, or else doesn’t recognize that her depictions of Estraven, as a person with a sometimes-female or at least partially female body, in roles typically imagined as only “manly” therefore dialogically disrupts

\textsuperscript{3} Le Guin originally published “Is Gender Necessary?” in 1976, the same year she added an introduction to the novel, largely in response to the heaps of criticism which seemed, to her, to misunderstand the point of the novel. She then republished the essay ten years later, with parenthetical responses to her own defenses, admitting that over time, “I was getting uncomfortable with some of the statements I had made in it, and the discomfort soon became plain disagreement” (\textit{Dancing}, 7).

\textsuperscript{4} I do think that most of literary criticism stems from evaluations based on both personal and communally established aesthetics: it isn’t so much that Le Guin’s work is too masculine to be feminist, rather that feminists at the time were, for the most part, rejecting masculine aesthetics and so not able to see or appreciate the dialogic interchange and balance between masculine and feminine aesthetics and their radical unification in both male and female forms.
socially conditioned views of gender. Not only does her use of the male pronoun for the male/female Gethenians draw attention to the artificiality of applying the masculine pronoun universally toward females, it also allows an extension of “male” roles and privileges (such as the ability to be a king) to be fictionally extended to them. And, even while it does tend to place Estraven in what we monologically consider “male” roles (though recent decades have, for example, seen some leaps in the role of females in politics), she often reflexively places Genly in what have traditionally been cast as “female” roles—such as when Genly becomes a veritable damsel in distress who must be carried bodily, over-the-shoulder, out of a work camp. In so doing, she reveals the assignment of gender roles to be more arbitrary than historically believed. Furthermore, it invites a direct, discursively utterable awareness in the other non-Gethenian characters, who draw meta critical attention to the fact that they are referring reflexively and artificially to beings who are not actually male, “man I must say, having said he and his” (5). Through these characters’ self-aware perspective, the novel’s readers are encouraged to notice and begin to question the ways in which the pronoun as a universal is habitual rather than real, since grammatically, a “he” and “his” may actually refer to a woman. The pronoun is thus recognizable as insufficient and inaccurate in its universal application even outside the context of the novel. Through radical participation with a traditionally oppressive form, or more plainly, by accepting the experiential reality that most women in the United States were still predominantly living antithetically in the male shadow rather than denying it, Le Guin was able to successfully subvert it.

In writing this thesis, I have joined the crowd of scholars who have had to grapple, alongside Le Guin, with which pronouns to apply to the female/male Genthenians. The story is
primarily focused through Genly’s male-centric perspective—even those parts he did not write himself, he presumably translated—so when quoting directly from the text, I will use the masculine pronouns as they appear. In my own prose, I’ve decided to add the feminine pronoun markers in brackets alongside the masculine Le Guin employs, as a sort of structural exercise of dialectics, or dialogism. In this way I hope to preserve the sense of historical oppression and erasure the “neutral” masculine universal represents—the feminine markers are my own secondary insertion—without centralizing either my addition, nor the historical form. They appear side-by-side, or hand-in-hand, if you will.

What this construction amounts to is a sort of dissimulation that the Gethenians are actually females who have been linguistically cloaked—protectively concealed—with the mantle of patriarchal self-centralization. Dissimulating rather than simulating, I of course do not mean to suggest or make an argument for this as the only way, or even the best way to read the Gethenians. I do believe, though, that it’s a very useful way to read them because it brings to light what the language of the novel (and that of western culture) hides in the proverbial shadows of the dialectical imagination: female power and privilege. Man gestates within Woman. Without her, he could never have made any kind of art, nor built any kind of civilization. Without her, he cannot even be anything at all. Knowing that, we can begin to appreciate the role and the potential of both, interdependently and essentially linked.
Chapter 1: Critical Simulations—Feeling Blindly Through *The Left Hand of Darkness*

Though many critics of *The Left Hand of Darkness* acknowledge the novel as a groundbreaking work of progressive feminist science fiction, many find it nevertheless lacking in its attempt to depict a culture free from the constraints of gender imposed by society. Many such critics often repeatedly pick out similar aspects of the text for their analyses; namely, those which seem to best reveal its paradigmatic limitations. Among the most often cited are its seemingly tragic application of the universal generic “man,” “he,” and “his” to the bi-sexed Gethenians; its apparent lack of recognizably feminine professions, pursuits and pastimes; the seemingly botched homosexual underpinnings of the novel’s love-story arc; and its inclusion of an earnestly “objective” scientific report riddled with gendered bias. Whether critics fault Le Guin herself or not for these apparent shortcomings of imagination, or whether they decide that they exist as blatant satire or critical social commentary, there’s a persistent and sizeable general vein of belief that the novel does little more than intentionally or unwittingly recreate the patterns of patriarchal domination and exploitation that it seeks to circumvent. As feminism is almost universally defined as an essential “rejection of patriarchal patterns” (*Politics* 48) as Ellen Peel explains, it’s no wonder many critics reading *The Left Hand* with a feminist lens express caution, indignation, and occasionally despair at the novel’s participation with them. Le Guin herself tended to agree with this often-discontented majority, even increasingly so over time.

While I agree that the novel does, on many levels, participate in patriarchal patterns, I also believe that *The Left Hand of Darkness* deserves a reassessment for exhibiting far more paradigmatic complexity than is often generally recognized when examined through critical lenses that underplay its stylistic sophistication. I aim to develop an understanding of how the
novel’s duality creates an expanded model of discourse, applying binoculars where feminism and postmodernism’s focus on hierarchy often offers only a monocle. Most importantly, I examine the ways in which postmodern applications of criticism tend to fall short in their estimation of the novel’s depth and potential. Relying on a conceptual model grounded in simulation rather than an understanding of the nature of fiction itself, a performance of postmodern analysis often necessitates distortions and direct misreadings of the text. In order to begin to analyze *The Left Hand of Darkness*, it must first be understood as a self-consciously dialogic work of feminist science fiction which both relies on and complicates the conventions of the novel, the genre, and other narrative forms.

The poetics housed within Le Guin’s prose help us tease out what is happening in the narrative in terms of the logical patterns of simulation and the real. The poetic structure in the passage examined in this chapter, for example, offers clarity to balance with confusion or illusion in the prose. That *The Left Hand of Darkness* plays intentionally with illusion, perception, and the sometimes-steep inadequacy of language to fully express truths is made apparent from the novel’s early declaration that “Truth is a matter of the imagination” (1). The text demonstrates that often enough, “truth” is comprised of imaginative layers, either simulative or dissimulative, where multiple realities coexist simultaneously. In this way, the novel can acknowledge both the harmful patterns of patriarchal misogyny, as well as reveal healthier models of patriarchal interrelationship. Additionally, since truth is actually objective rather than subjective, this early declaration that “Truth is a matter of the imagination,” establishes that the question in the narrative is more about whether or not the narrator’s, or even the reader’s, enculturated imagination is sufficient at any one point in time to grasp the totality of the truth than it is about
describing, labelling or putting a definitive pin in truth itself. And yet it is also a novel very much about discernment and the process-in-time of moving from confusion and the limitations of imagination into clear articulations of truth. The narrator Genly’s polyvocal inclusion of many other voices alongside his own indicates his awareness of his own limitations to access and articulate the whole truth. Thus, as a holistic entity, the novel never denies that truth is an objectively real, graspable, concrete something, even when the narrator flounders. As the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child, and in *The Left Hand of Darkness* it takes quite a bit more than just a village but a whole universe, with all its diversity, to raise the truth.

In the 1976 introduction to the novel Le Guin locates such truth—or the real, to use Baudrillard’s term—in both expressive language, the language of fiction, of lies (iii), as well as in the objective designs of numbers and mathematics: “Pythagoras knew, the god [truth] may speak in the forms of geometry as well as in the shapes of dreams [fictions]; in the harmony of pure thought as well as in the harmony of sounds; in numbers as well as words” (iv). We might say that poetry is a form that incorporates both language and mathematics, one composed of sounds, counts, harmonies—and words. Therein, according to Le Guin, lies the crux of the artist’s challenge, for “it is words that make the trouble and confusion. […] Our philosophers, some of them, would have us agree that a word (sentence, statement) has value only so far as it has one single meaning, points to one fact which is comprehensible to the rational intellect,

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5 Genly’s subsequent description of a pearl (an objective, yet nevertheless cultured, fact) as subjectively alterable goes a step further in exposing the fundamental limitations in the culturally informed perspective and imaginative scope that initiates the novel and its unfolding—presumably, the reader is meant to be seduced by Genly’s declaration of limited vision and participate; perhaps in order to eventually flush out of hiding their own subjectively encultured limitations of imagination.
logically sound, and—ideally—quantifiable” (iv). She is describing the ontological monologism that abounds in early modern thought, the monologism and singularity of expressive form the novel will disrupt in various ways, such as the use of the word “traitor” in the novel to also signify someone who is loyal. The novel is relentlessly multidimensional, even where it embraces monologism and dialectical relationships as an undeniable form of reality. And though, monologically conceived, language and art, and math and science are often exiled from one another, existing in two seemingly disparate worlds, alienated from one another, even oppositional.6 And yet, here, they are undeniably analogous, too. Mathematics has syntax; poetry and narrative forms follow equations and deal systematically with variables.7 Language in numbers is the transcendent work of poetry: a haiku transmits mindful presence not only by its subject, its words, but also in its numerical form—one needn’t be culturally Japanese at all to grasp the difference in an experience of time and being itself between the haiku form and iambic pentameter—and, concurrently, the form tends to draw the subject. In terms of this particular novel, form and content go explicitly hand-in-hand as both interdependent and mutually creative—in fact they form the two hands that allow the reader to navigate the dark spaces where one-eyed monologic simulation obscures the imagination, allowing the truth to be nevertheless renderable.

6 And often literally segregated in terms of geographics and economics within the Academy. Even “Interdisciplinary Studies” tend to dance within their categorically own set, rather than venture to connect more boldly. Astronomy and Romantic Era Literature, for instance.

7 An excellent response to student questions about why, if they are only going to be English majors, should they ever take college-level mathematics—and, vice versa, why should anyone at all ever who isn’t a language major learn about literature and poetry? Why bother understanding the English department as more than a token sidekick for the propagation of the Industrial Sciences?
Before getting into a more macrocosmic metacontextual application in this project’s second half, in this chapter we will hone in on a microcosmic level and look very specifically at Genly’s own storytelling, especially where his more linear and monologic narrative mode creates channels that are altogether too narrow in scope to bring the truth to light, albeit self-consciously so. In such conditions he is only able to compose a simulation, one which we might call, à la Baudrillard, a terribly inaccurate map (*Simulations* 166). While it offers clarity about Genly’s culturally-informed sexual biases, his version of “truth” does nothing toward rendering the terrain of the Gethenian culture more legible—computable. First, we will look at the confusions and illusions inherent in the prose of Genly’s self-critical introduction to his own sexism, then we will look at the relative clarity offered by the poetics in the same passage. And then, having extrapolated linguistic equations which make the mechanism of simulation and prejudice more discernible, we will turn to the postmodern application of critical literary scholarship of the novel, for which Genly serves as a sort of objective, “true” mirror.\(^8\) Not only does Genly’s sexism expose simulation to be misleading, obfuscating, and dangerous within the estranged context of this story, it also reflects the same for our own postmodern critical culture, which simulates itself as existing on a “real” level of sophistication beyond the kind of perceptive limitations plainly exhibited by Genly. Finally, we will explore how the passage also offers the remedy to such simulations by nature of its poetics; an essentially dialogic composition.

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\(^8\) A “true” mirror does not offer a reversed image, like a regular mirror, but the actual image. The experience of looking into a “true” mirror is bizarre and estranging for most people, accustomed to seeing the reversed image of themselves in a mirror, rather than a true one. Even today, most of us are largely unacquainted with our “true” image.
The Noman In The Mirror: Plot Synopsis

Set in a fictional alternate universe/future, *The Left Hand of Darkness* recounts the events leading to the planet Gethen’s addition to the Ekumen cooperative (known in earlier Le Guin stories as “The League of Known Worlds”) and is told primarily from the perspective of the Ekumenical Envoy to the planet, a dark-skinned Terran (Earth) male named Genly Ai. Ai incorporates ten other chapters alongside the ten of his own telling, chapters which include records: myths and stories from various Gethenian cultures, field notes from one of the Ekumen’s early secret investigators, and journal entries from what may be considered the novel’s second protagonist. This second hero is a Gethenian named Estraven whose high political position and strong interest in the Ekumen makes he[r] a powerful ally, though Genly’s relationship with he[r] is ambivalent through the first half of the novel. In an elevated spin on the by then common sci-fi trope of human-meets-aliens, Genly is the first human from another world any of the Gethenians in the novel, including Estraven, have been made deliberately aware of; thus the novel explores a justice or balance in mutual rather than one-sided estrangement that is reflected in the polyvocal balance of its structural composition.

Unique among all other human beings within the scope of the Ekumen’s knowledge, which includes eighty-plus fictional worlds, Gethenians are multisexual: both female and male together in one body and unlike any variations of human dimorphic sexuality on record. They are not, as many critics point out, simply hermaphroditic or androgynous, though these are the terms

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9 In *Winter’s King*, which relates the story of one of King Argaven’s ancestors, rescued from psychological torture by members of the Ekumen and taken to live and learn off-world, in a sort of university. This story predates the events of *The Left Hand*, and most prominently, uses the pronoun “she” for the Gethenians rather than “he.”
the investigators in the world of the novel—like the novel’s critics—grapple with trying to unsatisfactorily apply. Rather than being born either female or male permanently, with corresponding fixed dimorphic characteristics that observably distinguish once sex from the other, Gethenians each possess a latent set of both male and female reproductive organs. They are sexually latent for most of the month, with no sexually dimorphic distinguishing features. Once every three weeks they enter an intense period of sexual arousal, potency and physical transformation known as kemmer. During kemmer a Gethenian will involuntarily assume either the female or male role, and their partner will responsively assume the opposite role, also involuntarily. As copulation occurs (or doesn’t), kemmer recedes and so do sexually dimorphic differences—unless one is impregnated, in which case female sexual characteristics, such as a widened pelvis and enlarged breasts, remain during the course of pregnancy and lactation. Throughout their lives, Gethenians will be in both roles many times, without established biological patterns or preferences. Except when in kemmer, pregnant, or breastfeeding, Gethenians cannot be distinguished by sex. The culture also doesn’t sublimate the sexual drive the way many of our own earth-cultures do. Being both all-consuming and also only temporary, in Gethenian culture kemmer is accepted, even revered, and socio-structurally accommodated.

The alien planet to which Genly has been assigned as Envoy, named “Winter” by the first Investigators, is in the midst of its ice age, with only one main habitable continent and archipelago. In a sense, “Winter” as a signifier for the planet and culture definitively suggests a

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10 In addition to heterosexual couplings, kemmerhouses also allow for homosexual coupling—though Le Guin did not consider this possibility until after she’d written the book (Dancing 14)
set of formally objective creative limitations\textsuperscript{11} that exist on the planet itself, limitations which may be dialogically—and dialectically—drawn out as both analogies and foils for Genly’s own cultural limitations.\textsuperscript{12} The novel will explore the limitations, those that are true and serve as invaluable boundaries for experience, and those which are bounded only by the perceptive imagination.

The Gethenians are a technologically comfortable race of beings whose culture includes many recognizably modern conveniences—including radio, electrical lighting, both ground and sea-based motor vehicles, portable stoves, and at least one high-tech cold-weather tent. It remains nevertheless less advanced\textsuperscript{13} in comparison to the Ekumen; they’ve never developed a flying vehicle, for example. Presumably, having never been driven by the impetus of war, the societies of the planet have not experienced the kind of revolutionary technological frenzy that led to the rapidly exponential development of technology in our own world. Instead, their inventions have focused around making life as practically convenient and comfortable as they could manage. Whether this relaxed, relatively easy pace is due to the planet’s glacial climate, the inhabitants’ unique biology, or some other factor entirely, the novel certainly questions but doesn’t attempt to answer definitively. It does offer plenty of evidence that the Gethenian people are not necessarily peaceful by nature, but rather passionate and prone to temper and conflict—they are no strangers to small-scale violence. The novel is staged with the two major countries of

\textsuperscript{11} one of multiple latent possibilities, i.e., spring, summer, fall.

\textsuperscript{12} The analogy also allows us to conceive of the sexes themselves as less about biological determinism as about creative limitation—unique and distinct pathways to mutual enslavement, or mutual liberation.

\textsuperscript{13} Here is a perfect place to examine whether or not one is either assuming or assigning a positive or negative value in relation to an objective term such as “advanced.” It is neither better than nor worse than. It simply is.
the world’s main continent, feudal\textsuperscript{14} Karhide and bureaucratic Orgoreyn, poised on the brink of an unprecedented large-scale conflict.

Not surprisingly, Genly’s difficulties as the story unfolds are rather multidimensional. Not only is the land rife with rising political tensions exacerbated by his presence, he’s also challenged by gender biases that complicate his ability to reconcile his enculturated assumptions and resulting actions with an the informed recognition of the fuller truth of the Gethenians’ humanity he’s gained through the Ekumen. He’s also deeply challenged by the extremity of his isolation among the Gethenians. Their preference and bias toward their own form, in a sense, mirrors and amplifies his biases. And though at first suspicious, Genly does eventually find an ally in Karhide’s Prime Minister, Estraven, after [s]he has been exiled from h[er] own land. Through the scope of his relationship with Estraven, Genly comes not only to a greater understanding of his friend and the Gethenian people, but also of himself and his role as Envoy; the innate interdependence of all relational dynamics. The novel nevertheless does not attempt to depict a character who has miraculously overcome all limits of perception and bias altogether—and in fact decidedly positions ignorance and the unknown as ultimately yet another necessary factor interdependent with knowledge and expanding consciousness.

\textsuperscript{14} “Feudal” is an approximate descriptor. In the same way that “androgonous” isn’t an entirely accurate term for the Gethenians, “feudal” is not really accurate for Karhide, either, especially important to consider in light of the non-existence of war on the planet, and the manipulative means by which Tibe, the king’s cousin, attempts to gain power. There are no vassals nor provision of soldiers at the king’s disposal. The collection of domains remain rather disparate and largely self-governed. The monarchy thus resembles that of modern England more than feudal Europe. That the king has power and exercises it is nonetheless a primary crux of the narrative.
The Ai That Won’t See

It isn’t surprising, then, that the first chapter—indeed, easily the first half of the whole novel\textsuperscript{15)—decidedly highlights ignorance and the unknown, even while engaged in plot-bound sense-making. On one hand, we are introduced to Genly as a literal representative of the extrasolar dialogic real to a planet which has, until his arrival, been completely immersed in its own relatively monologic isolation: a simulation of singularity. On the other, Genly is a veritable ambassador for patriarchal monologism in the face of the Gethenians’ immutable and organic internal dialogism. Each is faced in the flesh of the other with their own hitherto unknown yet utterly evidential reflection. Potentially, eventually, even inevitably, this allows each an opportunity for expanding the plane of their understanding, or as Genly phrases it, for “the augmentation of the complexity and intensity of the field of intelligent life. The enrichment of harmony […]. Curiosity. Adventure. Delight” (34).

That Genly is simultaneously aware of and also obtuse about his own dimensional limitations is at the heart of the simulations that play out especially in the novel’s first half and ultimately unravel as the narrative shifts around its crux:

\begin{quote}
My efforts [“to see the people of the planet through their own eyes” (12)] took the form of self-consciously seeing a Gethenian first as a man, then as a woman, forcing him into those categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential to my own. Thus […] I thought that at table Estraven’s performance had been womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit. Was it perhaps this
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{15} This almost deceptively implies that a neat and absolute division exists in the novel. It does not.
soft supple femininity that I disliked and distrusted in him? For it was impossible to think of him as a woman, that dark, ironic, powerful presence near me in the firelit darkness, and yet whenever I thought of him as a man, I felt a sense of falseness, of imposture: in him, or in my own attitude towards him? His voice was soft and rather resonant but not deep, scarcely a man’s voice, but scarcely a woman’s voice either . . . but what was it saying? (12)

With this passage Genly sets monologism, as a first stage in deconstructive processes, nude in front of a mirror. The sexual binary, or sexual dimorphism, which exists together in a Gethenian but separately for Genly, must first be “deconstructed” or split to better reflect his own split subject position.16 Then the sexes are conflated with polarized, non-sex-based traits. Finally, Genly maligns those traits he’s unwilling to identify as his own—those which, if owned, would threaten his simulation with exposure—and constructs such traits as the feminine “other.” He then imagines those othered traits as belonging to Estraven, who is conveniently at least part female, rather than himself. Thus impeded by his own antithetical split experience of both his own subjectivity and the sexual body, he is unable yet to reconcile the ontological truth of the Gethenians. His own context, derived in part from an objective and biological real (male as morphically distinct from female—he is male, not female), and in part from cultural simulations (masculine and feminine traits conflated with sex and perceived as mutually isolated in relationship with biological sex), is a multi-layered context that the Gethenians do not share.

16 It is important to note that he is not actually, fully, deconstructing them. To do so would require a dialogic (rather than split) understanding of the relation of parts within a whole, an understanding he hasn’t yet gained but will begin to as the narrative progresses—Genly’s holistic understanding is thus almost entirely latent at this point in the novel.
Equally estranged by Estraven as Estraven is by him (as we will later discover), Genly runs his dialectical wheels, trying to arrive at a monologic synthesis he can accept, relate to and thus understand. This internal argument primarily takes the form of sexual prejudice that offers no actual comprehension, but it does enable him to hide his projections as such, subsequently precluding from his own awareness the dialogic reality that informs the novel as a whole.

Here, not recognizing the real dialogic coexistence of polarized traits within one form, he remains, as it were, ignorant of his own shadow, and so denies it. Thus, when he relates that “Estraven’s performance had been womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit […] [yet] it was impossible to think of [Estraven] as a woman, that dark, ironic, powerful presence” (12), he reveals his own projected associations with sex. “Woman” is conflated with the non-sexed character traits “lack of substance, specious, and adroit;” and “man” conflated with the non-sexed traits “dark, ironic, powerful.” Tellingly, Genly aligns femaleness with abstraction and maleness with a concrete sense of reality. Himself, a “man” is real, solid, and tangible, the thesis. And the other, “woman,” is abstracted as insubstantial. Unreal. Antithesis. “Specious” functions similarly, both in its invocation of insubstantiality and the way it pairs dialectically with “irony:” both are dissimulative, but irony is more overtly so, and does not attempt to hide itself. His reflexive impulse to blame negative characteristics on the feminine other, such as when he says, “Was it perhaps this soft supple femininity that I disliked

17 The novel is, overall, one about the existence and integration of the psychological “shadow,” though Le Guin wrote it before ever having read any of Jung’s works.
18 “Irony” is arguably an exception that disturbs the neat division I identify here—though even an abstract concept such as “irony” invokes dissimulation rather than simulation—even if irony lies, it is aware of doing so, and so preserves the real. The word’s resonance with “iron” also offers its abstraction the character of solidity.
and distrusted in him?” rather than on his own inability to reconcile shortsightedness with the larger perspective he is aware of, offers an acute\(^{19}\) depiction of the inner workings of discrimination generally, and insight into the ways in which gender coding specifically works dialectically to generate a simulation that insulates and synthesizes the self—in this case aligned with maleness—against the perceived opposition of the female other. Additionally, attributing “lack of substance” as “womanly” offers a definitive glimpse of the subjective fracture of patriarchal bias, in that it imagines femaleness as something projected rather than distinctly embodied. Unlike Estraven, Genly lacks an experience of recognizing those traits within himself which may be categorized as “feminine,” and so his subjectivity is relatively fractured: his perceived masculinity is real and concrete, his femininity a detached specter that resides \emph{elsewhere}.

Thus imbalanced, it’s no wonder that Genly’s attempt at dialectical synthesis fails to render his host, far more sophisticated and compassionate than he imagines, intelligible. Not only does Genly fail to see Estraven accurately, he also fails to recognize himself accurately. Though he is objectively and concretely male in form (or genre, we could say), his concepts of masculinity and femininity are practically dissociated. Ultimately the Gethenian form itself proves that male, female, masculine and feminine all coexist simultaneously in tandem—a multi-dimensional dialogue that Genly is having difficulty comprehending: “but what was it saying?” Since we know that Genly understands and can interpret the word-data-units of Karhidish

\(^{19}\) Acute, and often critically examined. The passage I examine in this section appears frequently in literature about the novel.
speech, this question suggests that his attempt to thrust projection, “forcing [them] into those categories so irrelevant to [their] nature and so essential to [his] own” (12), obscures rather than elucidates meaning: it prevents the successful reception of more vital information than the words alone. Further, his question suggests that there exists more vital information than can be provided by the words alone. In fact, one of the most illuminating sections of the larger passage quoted above comes at the end of the longer, twisting, curving sentence that concludes with a question. It brilliantly illustrates the dialogic embodiment of form and content that is pervasive in Le Guin’s fiction. Finding no sense, nonsense, after the preceding series of monologic dialectical convolutions, he arrives at the end of the train of thought jumbled in confusion: “I felt a sense of falseness, of imposture: in him, or in my own attitude towards him? His voice was soft and rather resonant but not deep, scarcely a man’s voice, but scarcely a woman’s voice either . . . but what was it saying?” (12). The first phrase connects Genly’s earlier reflections in the larger passage with the words “falseness” and “imposture” to the performance and artifice he decidedly aligns with femininity, the other, and therein with Estraven. More minutely, the word “imposture” indicates pretense, pretend, and deception; but it’s also derived from the Latin impost- or imposed upon, to impose, and echoing Genly’s earlier use of “forcing” irrelevant context. The word “imposture” indicates that projection is an abstraction thrust one way or another from a dialogic state of suspension or flux into a fixed monologic state.

If abstraction or projection is being cognitively thrust, turning attention to the rhythm and structure of each clause can provide further clues about its motion, its direction. The rhythm in the phrases is created by the commas and parallels across the colon. With them, Genly’s lingering doubt is drawn out, his questioning of his own perception emphasized by hinging the
final two phrases. The momentum already generated by the length and complexity of the proceeding lines subsides in the pause-and-swing around the colon. It is the timely “pause-and-swing” action of reversals that ultimately resolves the various conflicts in the novel as a whole. It’s in poetic moments like this where we can find a sort of mathematics at work in narrative, particularly this narrative, which utilizes interstitial material to establish cultural patterns and equations that inform the novel’s main narrative arc, its curves, its exponents, its solutions, and its variables. In a sense, Le Guin’s use of syntax establishes a logical equation that will contextualize and inform the problems and the patterns in the narrative as it evolves, one that seeks to balance both dialectical and dialogic processes. Dialectical reasoning negotiates the contradictions among categorical differences by positing them as a problem to resolve. It must, or it cannot synthesize. Formally, the dialectical process must come to an end, a solution. Dialogism, on the other hand, offers a form of equation in which there is no end, no problem, no opposition; only distinctions in concert. Together the two processes generate the harmonics of the narrative. These harmonies embrace conflicting cultural formalities (both those of Gethen and of Earth) and seek to bring them into coherent conversation with a third dialogic variable, the Ekumen, a mediating and simultaneously generative cultural form.

Thus, the passage can be read both dialectically and dialogically. The first clause in the hinged phrases draws its focus to the subject, “I” and two verbs, though one is not used as a verb: to feel, to sense. “Sense” is used as a noun, and as such is also defined as a “feeling” or a “sensation,” both of which arrive as data from the act of sensing or observing. “Sense” also connotes with perception of the concrete—the sensible, tangible, rather than abstract, world. We could also simplify the clause, subject-predicate-object, to say “I sense falseness.” And if this
first clause pinpoints the source of disparity, the ambiguity in the subordinate clause proposes two possible interpretations: that the falseness lies either in Genly’s subjective attitude, or in Estraven as a subject. There are two possible logical constructions: mirroring (dialectical) or analogy (dialogic). Making a mirror image across the colon links the subject with the 2nd indirect object, and the object with the 1st: (I) pairs with (my attitude) and (falseness) pairs with (him). In this logical construction, the self, the I, the subject and the attitude align, while the other (him) is associated antithetically with the falseness: The “I” is true, the “him” is false. However, making an analogous construction groups them differently, as it places the subject with the first indirect object and the object with the 2nd indirect object: (I) is to (him) as (falseness) is to (attitude). In this logical paradigm, the self and the other are both true, and it is the attitude, the projection, that is false. Most importantly in this passage is that the felt sense is brought into dialogue with these differing mental processes. In addition to historically sexist divides, there has been an equally divisive relationship between the mind and the body/feelings. This divide perpetuates the sort of split-consciousness exhibited not only in Genly’s sexist reading of Estraven, but also in this phrases’ conundrum with negotiating his physical body and its sensations with his mental perception. Genly cannot make sense of the words because his mind is applying dialectical logic in opposition to the more analogous logic of his body.

And so, getting swirled up in his simulative cerebral activity and faced with an irreconcilable dialectical puzzle, Genly thus returns to assessing sensory data, by focusing on the physically detectable tonal qualities—the embodiments—of Estraven’s voice: “soft and rather resonant but not deep, scarcely a man’s voice, but scarcely a woman’s voice either.” Estraven’s physical presence there in the room with him objectively, unshakably, “powerful[ly]” proves that
both male and female are simultaneously and organically concrete—and at the same time, they have both become similarly abstracted because they are “scarcely” tangibly detectable: Estraven’s sexually specific body is in a latent phase. “Man” can no longer serve as the logical, concrete thesis counterpart to an abstracted, antithetical “woman” because man in this case is no more distinctively present than woman. Neither has the equation simply been reversed, with woman repositioned as concrete and man as abstract—such a reversal would indicate mirroring to be logically “true;” and followed to its logical conclusion, ultimately false, as a mirror image is never really a true image: when one is fixed as true, the other must be fixed as false. Rather, the two terms have been revealed as both analogous and paradigmatically non-oppositional. Genly’s sensory systems are more reliable than those of his internally divided mind, and he has yet to bring his own body—which, again, has both masculine and feminine traits he cannot fully recognize as such—into a dialogic rather than dialectic relationship with his mind.

Furthermore, as both terms, “man” and “woman,” have left their concrete positions temporarily and logically vacant, this allows the paired abstractions “masculine” and “feminine” to occupy them as both concrete and abstract—sex-based but also sexually unfixed. “Soft supple femininity,” for example, becomes recognizable as concrete without also compromising it as essentially an abstraction. “Soft” and “supple” are concretely tactile qualities but neither is concretely fixed to the female body. Soft and supple are qualities that concretely, definitively exist in the male body as well. This is true of the two terms’ oppositional counterparts, “hard” and “rigid,” which also concretely exist in both the female and male body, though we are primarily (if not completely) conditioned to perceive them as belonging to the male form more
exclusively. But we also cannot fail to recognize that feminine and masculine, as qualifying terms, do have a concrete and direct relationship with the basic dimorphism of the sexes that are partially, but not completely, yet directly related to characteristics of each correspondent sex role. Receptivity, flow, nurturance, cyclicity and intuitive inwardness are often associated with femininity and have tangible aspects that relate to the female body, especially in terms of the female reproductive role. And, while a male may not produce milk he may certainly nurture offspring in other ways. So we can understand that femininity is something real, and something untethered to sex. Even the concrete biology of each sex must be understood in more unified terms, too, engaging both feminine characteristics and masculine. For instance, the fundus, a muscle in the uterus which contracts and builds both bulk and strength during labor, during birth pushes and expels the baby out of the womb—the mechanism by which it functions is often what we tend to associate with the male reproductive role or even masculinity. Also, labor is active, not passive—though it was, and often still is, imagined to be so. Finally, when not in a fertile or birthing phase, the structure of the cervix is relatively phallic.

Without any kind of sexual binary or meaningful contrast, the terms themselves would be not only indistinguishable but also senseless. In this way, these two terms become recognizable as a sort of unified dyad that signifies both the concrete and the abstract in tandem and exists in each individual, analogous to the way that a Gethenian biologically combines both male and female sexual biology as well as sexual latency and potency within each individual. It is only

20 Kantian descriptions of the aesthetic are extremely useful in this case, as Kant emphasizes the essential detachment of aesthetic qualities (such as “supple”) from formal associations (e.g., the woman’s body as an object upon which the quality “supple” depends). This in turn makes analogy and dialogic interplay possible.
when they are assumed to be diametrically split, opposed, and fixed to sex that they enable
simulations. Simulations in turn generate distortions, such as neglecting the masculine aspects of
female reproductivity and so misperceiving it, and the woman’s role in it, entirely. Or, imagining
that sex roles unidimensionally represent all of what a human being really is, instead of only one
dimension of many. Throughout the beginning of the novel (and arguably to some degree all the
way through to the end) Genly remains personally distorted, unable to conceive of neither
femininity nor masculinity nor himself as a significant dyad rather than monologically isolated.
Grounded in his own subjectivity, he cannot recognize Estraven as one, analogously, either. And,
able to see Estraven clearly, he cannot hope to really see himself.

The novel hints that Genly is in fact denying and projecting some of his own less-
desirable traits as “womanly” and therefore outside of or detached from himself. The chapter is
sprinkled with examples of Genly’s own specious adroitness. One such example occurs when he
addresses Estraven, feigning sincerity, but signaling his actual sarcasm to the audience: “‘I’m
sorry that your kindness to me has made trouble for you’ [I said to Estraven]. Coals of fire. I
enjoyed a flitting sense of moral superiority (15).” Unaware of Genly’s duplicity, Estraven
answers honestly: “I’ve made trouble for myself […] by an act that had nothing to do with you”
(15). Genly’s own use of irony is impotent and lost on his Gethenian host, who assumes a mutual
positive regard that does not yet exist. A further example of so-called “femininity” can be found,
where Genly’s own sense of lacking substance features in the post-dinner scene, when he has a
fleeting moment of cognitive dissonance: “my own explanations [about my presence on the
planet] were preposterous. I did not, in that moment, believe them myself” (18). It is as if, imagining the subjective viewpoints of others, he thus loses touch with his actual reality: he is without a doubt another kind of human being who came to their planet on a starship. But, insecurely anchored as a result of his simulations, he loses himself and his own objective reality to the perspective of the Gethenians, for whom his actually alien existence is largely (but not completely) unintelligible, or “preposterous.” Furthermore, the moment links back to the logical puzzle in the larger passage above: his own explanations, those regarding the nature of femininity, his own actual behavior, and about Estraven too, are in fact, false.

As a sort of proverbial final nail in the coffin of his monologic masculinity, in the third chapter, Genly trips and stumbles over misapplied “charm and tact” in a long-awaited, hard-earned audience in which he tries to persuade Karhide’s king to forge an alliance with the Ekumen (34); “he looked at me savagely. In trying to flatter and interest him I had cornered him in a prestige trap. It was all going wrong” (38). Thus every “feminine” term he had applied toward Estraven is revealed as the novel progresses to be a quality he actually expresses himself. In many ways, Genly’s perpetual non-recognition of his own internal imbalance of suppressed femininity and overexpressed masculinity parallels the rising conflict between Karhide and Orgoreyn. He is as much a “pawn” (16) in his own simulative game as he is theirs. His internalized split, hinged on insecurities and fears that in turn parallel the macrocosm of the planet’s brewing political tensions, is focused on externalizing blame to conceal the real source

21 The passage continues: “I believe you,” said the stranger, the alien alone with me, and so strong had my access to self-alienation been that I looked up at him bewildered.” (18-19)
22 Though he imagines himself a pawn in a political game he believes Estraven to be playing, he actually is a pawn in Orgoreyn’s political game.
of conflict, which lies within. As events unfold, we learn this to also be true of both Karhide and Orgoreyn. Le Guin will extend the hinge metaphor from the longer passage above into the third chapter, when Genly tells king Argaven, “it doesn’t take a thousand men to open a door, my Lord […] the Ekumen will wait for you to open it, sir. It will force nothing on you” (39-40). Not only does the phrase ironically echo his own metalinguistic admission of “forcing” irrelevant categories, but it also ironically parallels the very condition he himself is in upon leaving Estraven’s home—he is as much a native of his own body to whom Estraven is serving as “Envoy” as the other way around: it doesn’t take a thousand Gethenians to open a door, only one. Not yet drawing very whole analogies, these ironies are presumably lost on the Genly-in-time of the narrative, though they might not be on the Genly-narrating-in-retrospect. Either way, the logical conundrum he faces in the above-examined hinging phrases is like the door he refers to in chapter three: swung one way, it closes. Swung the other, it opens.

Hence, the passage also functions as part of a larger introductory framework of meta commentary about Genly’s own limited but also multiple perspectives. The next chapter will cover more about his metacontext. Here, I refer to his context in time with the narrative. Having already been initiated into an analogous perspective via his connection with the Ekumen, he cannot help but “self-consciously” recognize the objective fact of a conceptual blind spot that causes him to mirror his own self-distortion outward. He understands that though many types of humans exist in many types and forms, biologically and culturally, they are all humans: simultaneously diverse and unified. He fully comprehends this even though he cannot yet cognitively penetrate the critical simulation he creates which casts Estraven as an “other” to judge negatively in order to preserve himself in a dialectically positive light. As the story
unfolds, he will need to embrace the corrective vision that mutually perceiving analogy with Estraven can provide. More simply put, he can’t figure out how to stop holding a door shut that he is aware he wants open—namely because he’s blind to the fact that he is the one holding his own door shut. He doesn’t recognize that Estraven has already opened this metaphorical door on the Gethenian end.²³ In a reversal Genly can’t see, he imagines his door, like the Ekumen’s, open; and Estraven’s as shut. His projective discrepancies will reconcile as he expands paradigmatically through the course of the story. As he begins to open his own door, he’s able to see Estraven more wholly through the threshold of his previous imaginative limits—and Estraven can see him more clearly too: “Mr. Ai, we’ve seen the same events with different eyes; I wrongly thought they’d seem the same to us” (196-197).

Notably, the name “Ai” and its invocation of the singular “eye”²⁴ and [I] juxtaposes with the plural “eyes” in both that phrase and the longer passage examined above, when it refers to seeing a Gethenian “through their own eyes” (12). Monologically, Genly is observing with only one “eye” or “I” open at a time: “seeing a Gethenian first as a man, then as a woman;” whereas using both eyes simultaneously would offer the depth of perception he wants to achieve. Without it, a relationship with Gethen itself is unnavigable. This tunnel-vision is probably most easily illustrated with the often-discussed grammatical designation of the Gethenians as “he” throughout the novel, matching Ai’s own masculine referent, thus erasing their also-essential femaleness. But Genly is also pretty explicitly aware of the deficit in his own language, “man I

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²³ This awareness comes, for Genly, in chapter 15 “To the Ice” and 18, “On the Ice.” It happens for Estraven earlier, in chapter 14, “The Escape:” “‘The fact is,’ I [Estraven] said, ‘that you’re unable, or unwilling, to believe in the fact that I believe in you.’” (199).
²⁴ A correlation commonly covered in scholarship on the novel from a variety of angles
must say, having said *he* and *his*” (5); and the limitations of his singular perspective: “the story is not all mine, nor told by me alone” (1). Rather than take his own perspective for granted, he augments it with multiple narrative voices: though he has yet to overcome it, he is on some level sensitive to his own more dialectically split bias. More perspectives offer a broader scope than he can hope to achieve alone. The novel’s explicit polyvocality and introspectivity cannot help but remind readers that in addition to Genly and Estraven, they too bring perspectives, an “I” and their own relationship with singular or plural “eyes” to bear.

**Critical Misconception: Feminist and Postcolonial Monologism**

It is that dialogic relationship between perception, the real, and the simulations created by the limitations in Genly’s experiential perspective that creates the novel itself as both a liminal and seminal space—a portal through which something new can emerge and simultaneously also that which passes through the threshold from old into the new.25 In this way, the depth and dimensionality of the novel is multiplied. On the meta-contextual level, Genly is aware of the objective cause-and-effect relationship between ignorance and distortion. Rather than signal complicity in the distortions presented, the word “thus” in the passage examined in the previous section signals a self-aware transition from the broader meta-contextual light of his understanding, into the acknowledged shadows of simulation which also inform his narrative: he presupposes his bias. In a sense, Genly presents his distortions as the vehicle for remedying his own ignorance—and through his example, potentially that of others who willingly identify with

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25 Symbolized in the opening scene of the narrative proper, with the procession and ceremony of setting the keystone in the Arch of the River Gate: the arch and the keystone are centralized as a portal, with Estraven as the portal through which the Arch enters the landscape. The arch and the ceremony are symbolically seminal, and they are liminal.
his simulative tendencies. More than just presenting a two-dimensional straw-man representative for historical patriarchy and its oppressive biases that the rest of the novel strikes down oppositionally, the novel centers Genly and his ignorance alongside his willingness and ability to overcome it as part of a multidimensional organic dialogue; one that in a sense builds its own arches and moves through them of its own volition, experientially and formally transcending its own content.

There are, however, a large volume of critics who, primarily because of Genly’s obtuse sexual bias and projection, completely miss this self-aware and self-corrective dimension of the novel, and so find it to be lacking, not radical enough, or otherwise problematic. Added to that is a list of critics who appreciate the novel for its radical or critical accomplishments, but nevertheless also misread or misunderstand Genly’s role in it. The latter is the group with which I’m most concerned. *The Left Hand of Darkness* was among the first American novels in the postmodern period which treated not only the subject of gender and sexuality but also racism and colonialism in ways that were radically critical of historical patterns; and one whose genre also allowed it to reach a wide-spread, mainstream, largely white male heterosexual audience. That Le Guin wrote for exactly just such an audience and nevertheless made feminist values an intrinsic part of the text must be taken into consideration when analyzing the ways in which it actively participates in patriarchal dialectics while dialogically subverting them. The novel overall is about exploitation, sex discrimination providing an excellent example. Rather than simply positioning exploitation dialectically in terms of the one who exploits and thus benefits

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26 This assertion draws heavily on Ellen Peel’s analysis of feminist literary persuasion in *The Left Hand* and its potential effect on the reader in her work *Politics, Pragmatism, and Persuasion.*
from exploitation, and the ones who are exploited and are harmed by it, Le Guin frames it dialogically: they are distinct and they are also analogous. Widespread across many cultures and taking many forms, the novel ultimately reveals exploitation to be always a form of self-exploitation: self-destruction. Self-ruin.

Even more importantly, it reveals that while certainly not desirable, universal, inevitable or necessary, not all forms of exploitation are immediately recognizable to those who employ them, even to those who want to recognize and avoid them—and how readily, alarmingly, facts are distorted so that exploitation is masked, and justified. Le Guin’s may have been one of the first science fiction novels that offered a comprehensive, sophisticated enough perspective on the basic structures of exploitation itself to offer readers of all kinds the tangible possibility of an alternative, even if this possibility lay presently out-of-grasp for many. By an alternative to exploitation I mean, simply, alternative ways of relating to one another that are mutually creative and empowering. What I also want to suggest is that, like Genly who cannot grasp what Estraven’s words convey, those critics who grasp hardest after justice in the wake of exploitation are those for whom it is most out of reach. Like grasping a slippery bar of soap, their readings and analyses most often miss the mark, distort the text, and thwart their own aims. In this sense, Genly, with all his bias, misunderstanding and awkward projections, serves as accurate reflection for the otherwise open-minded critics who read the text earnestly and deconstructively but nevertheless monologically; but with one major difference: Genly (and Ong Tot Oppong, the novel’s other non-Gethenian narrator) unequivocally also demonstrate self-awareness of doing so. Critics rarely do. In a sense, Le Guin reveals the vulnerably ignorant underbelly of what it means to be any kind of human with an essentially dialectical mind; and it is this ignorance and
vulnerability in the human characters—and, subsequently, according to some, Le Guin—that critics exploit as a weakness. Contextually, this drive to exploit the weaknesses of colonial patriarchy especially is understandable; much as Genly’s drives in conditions of extreme isolation are understandable: even if they are objectively unjust, and he must ultimately overcome them to find success. I believe that what such critics react most strongly to is not seated in any objective analysis of the novel or its characters, or even the cultural repressions and exploitations the novel may critically or uncritically exhibit, but rather the underlying objective reality that exploitation itself, as a structure of relating to others, is revealed through Genly especially to be far more pervasive than most critics themselves would be willing to consider.²⁷ In other words, he is more like them than is comfortable. Such critics look into a true mirror, one they do not recognize, and reflexively reject and “other” what they see. Thus, the critical methods they employ are themselves short-sighted, repressive, and ultimately self-negating: analogous to what they criticize.

For example, in her essay “Of Pregnant Kings and Manly Landladies,” Mascha Lange identifies “instances in the novel which prohibit, interrupt, and/or challenge intersex intelligibility” (120) without recognizing that she has generated a simulation of the Gethenians as intersex in order to do so. Not only does she thus interrupt and challenge intersex intelligibility herself in the process, but also that of the Gethenians as a fiction, as well as a more comprehensive intelligibility of the novel itself. Likewise, in Mona Fayad’s essay on critiques of representation in The Left Hand, Fayad distorts crucial dialogic elements of the novel that

²⁷ —a cat’s literal footnote.
contribute toward its feminism and its postcolonialism, especially as she misreads the Ekumen as an essentially colonial force and the novel’s only female character as a merely parodic puppet of the colonizers. Fayad thus undermines her own often keen insights by focusing monologically on a single discursive layer, rather than considering the ways in which the critical breadth of the novel is exhibited by its Ekumenical characters.

While it might be one thing to argue that Le Guin fell short of being sufficiently sensitive to her own assumptions, as some critics do, it is a distortion, a form of co-optation—an act of colonization—to argue she intentionally, critically depicts the fictional Ekumen as a colonial force itself. The novel establishes instead that the Ekumen was formed in dialogic response to past-historical colonialism and represents a considerably expanded and improved paradigm of interrelationship. Most importantly of all, Fayad’s framing fails to recognize the ways in which the narrative makes very clear that Gethen is not devoid of its own cultural atrocities, including forms of violently enforced assimilation and conformity. Gethen is not at any point in the novel portrayed as an antithetical native force subverting a colonial one, even though Estraven’s dialogism often subverts Genly’s own lingering oppositional dialectics. The novel plays with antithetical reversals, though, such as when atypically sexed bodies—typical by our own

28 Le Guin herself tended to agree with such assertions as she contended with more and more critical response to the novel over time.
29 In fact, one could directly counter Fayad’s assertion that the Ekumen diametrically undervalues the Gethenians as a race and her subsequently reflexive defense of the “elaborate political, social, architectural structure of Erhenrang” (Fayad 66) with evidence from the text. Like, for example, Estraven’s own observation after rescuing Genly from a forced labor farm: “Mr. Ai, you overestimate us seriously. We are not a sophisticated people” (LHD 195). From Estraven’s native perspective, Genly as a representative of the Ekumen has a higher, more idealized concept of the Gethenians than a well-grounded one.
30 Though I would agree with the assertion that Genly’s overwriting of the Gethenian material with the masculine he does actually represent a form of “master narrative.” Only, he understands it as inherently problematic.
measure—are referred to by the natives as “perverted” in chapter 5. Both Gethen and the Ekumen are established as each one whole, each its own self-contained thesis/antithesis. And so, each as a whole must negotiate dialogically rather than dialectically with one another. That is one of the core narrative tensions for the novel: will Gethen choose to overcome its own dialectically oppositional perspective to enter into a dialogic relationship with the Ekumen? Will the officials in the government overcome their reflexive fear and rejection of the alien other to see that they too are a part of a larger whole, whatever the differences among them? Neither the Ekumen nor Gethen are relatively privileged, even though cooperative interdependence (demonstrated both by Estraven and by the Ekumen) is certainly highlighted as more desirable than exploitation.

In another example of critical co-optation, even with critics whose general readings offer a positive bent, Craig and Diana Barrows’ exploration of *The Left Hand* as “Feminism for Men,” near-comically misreads aspects of the text, replicating many of the very cultural conflations of biological sex and gendered traits the novel exposes and subsequently unravels. The essay highlights the necessity of considering Le Guin’s work in the context of the male audience she primarily wrote for, as well as considering her positive relationship with men in her own life31 as evidence of her non-oppositional stance toward men in general in spite of the book’s strongly feminist slant. And it also unwittingly demonstrates the entirely hopeless notion of a feminism that is “for men,” rather than for human beings which might be either male or female. It does underline the divide that an oppositional approach to patriarchy generates, a divide Le Guin’s novel did arguably seek to bridge. Barrows’ general assertion, that Le Guin wrote to reach her

31 Presumably, Barrows’ have not read Le Guin’s essay “Moral and Ethical Implications of Family Planning” (in *Dancing*)
audience with a feminist message that was palatable and encouraging of male receptivity, is overall well-supported by the text itself. That the novel is persuasively feminist, and that it is successfully so for a predominantly male audience, is at the heart of Ellen Peel’s astute and nuanced reading of it. Her reading, though it too relies somewhat on forms of simulation, makes the misreadings in Barrows’ article all the more dissatisfying, even if they may have perhaps innocently yet nevertheless accurately illustrated how the text was potentially (mis)perceived by the majority of its audience, despite Le Guin’s poetic and compositional skill. It also helps shed a little light on the root of what some feminist critics found so objectionable in their own misperceptions about the novel overall—Barrows’ reading reveals that “feminism for men” is hardly feminism at all.

In sum, reading the Ekumen and Gethen, or Genly and Estraven, or any other dialectically paired terms in the novel as if they are hierarchically positioned is misleading and creates gaps in what critics are able to comprehend and articulate about the text as a whole. In Barrows’ case, this causes additional foibles such as reading Estraven’s rescue of Genly as due at least in part to “sexually based motives” (Barrows 92). While the presence of sexual attraction between the two characters is certainly arguable and easily supported by the text, the novel explicitly concerns itself with bringing the relatively latent but nevertheless powerful creative contents into a more multidimensional dialogue with the duality and the reality of human sexuality. It does so because of the ways the monologic focus on sexuality—humans as sex itself and little more—has historically distorted how humans perceive and relate with themselves and with one another. Genly’s cultural difficulties with fostering a relationship with the people of Gethen is created in large part by his over-identification with his own sex. Likewise, critics tend
to over-identify with the theoretical constructs they bring to the text. Even critics who recognize
the radical and subversive feminist and postcolonial qualities of Le Guin’s work may still fail to
fully grasp the whole of what it is doing, and thus perpetuate a simulated version of the novel
that matches their own dialectical rather than dialogic relationship with deconstruction itself.
Like Genly, they see with one eye, and one eye blind.

Poetic Justice

Though it may be what critics have expected it to do, or faulted it for not doing
effectively, Le Guin’s novel doesn’t neutralize dialectic binaries nor duality, including sexual
duality, at all. But it does alienate, without exclusion, the cultural context, or the mental
framework, which cannot self-relate both dialectically and dialogically, and so cannot wholly
and collectively grasp what a human being is in addition to, for example, sexual duality—which
is to say, it alienates our own cultural context. But it does, through the relationship first between
Genly and Estraven, and then between Gethen and the Ekumen, befriend and expand that
alienated context, rather than reject or negate it. Further, the Ekumen as a collective and its
pattern of relationship with Gethen, through which Genly is the focal point, offers for our own
society a sort of latent cultural model that brings multiplicity into cooperative, creative dialogue,
rather than remaining entrapped in a paradigm of domination/subordination and exploitation. It’s
a cultural model that, the novel suggests, will come into potency for Gethen, even if slowly over
time. For instance, when Genly reminds king Argaven that as a result of negotiations with the Ekumen, Orgoreyn will become partners with Karhide rather than adversaries\textsuperscript{32} (294).

The novel seeks justice in the balance and acceptance of both dialectic and dialogic realities, recognizing that even two dissimilar realities may exist side-by-side; distortion may exist alongside clarity, betrayal alongside loyalty, knowledge in the body alongside ignorance in the mind, etc. This balancing principle is illustrated by Estraven’s remarks after [s]he rescues Genly from the Pulfen work farm, and Genly, out of authentic confusion, inadvertently insults h[er]: “my temper broke, and I must stare at the ice-knife which lay close by my hand, not looking at him and not replying until I had controlled my anger. […] I said to myself that he was an ignorant man, a foreigner, ill-used and frightened. So I arrived at justice” (196). Though [s]he is angry and feeling murderous, another simultaneous possibility exists, another way of relating with Genly and his arrogance, as well as his cultural misunderstandings. Estraven chooses which path [s]he will personally walk: vengeance or justice; mirror (I am right, he is wrong) or analogy (we are both right, the attitude or perspective is wrong). And though vengeance was h[er] first instinctual or habituated response, justice was latently present as well, latent until [s]he brought it into fruition: justice is potent. So too are non-exploitive paradigms of relationship present, even if latent, alongside exploitive patterns. As demonstrated by Estraven, this requires a balanced dialogue of the feeling body and the mind.

\textsuperscript{32} Acknowledgments to Sandra Dodd, from whom I learned this phrase. She learned it from La Leche League. The very idea that mothers might be in a cooperative rather than a submissive or authoritative relationship with infants and children is in itself both radical and revolutionary—without any direct political involvement.
In Justice is freedom—the open door: freedom from the self-inflicted prison that a pathological attachment to either emotional or mental monologism becomes: a prison that in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is simultaneously imaginary and real; and neither Genly nor Estraven, nor the planet Gethen as a whole, can escape alone. As demonstrated in Le Guin’s poetics, justice and the freedom that accompanies it are always latent where injustice is present, including the many various injustices of patriarchal oppression. By the end of the novel, the king who had initially rejected Estraven’s endorsement of Genly agrees to meet with the Ekumen’s landing party and begin the process of alliance. This swing of the opening door is hinged directly on the injustice of Estraven’s exile and death—a death which is anticipated by the myths and narratives of Gethenian cultural history from which Estraven personally was not free. It isn’t just Genly; all of us (including Estraven) are to some degree entangled in the sometimes difficult to discern patterns and narratives of the past: they can be like narrow trenches that guide our feelings and thoughts, and, they can be harmful. The language, the words, the system of referentials might change but the density, the substance, the poetic patterns—the real remains.

It’s as true for feminism as anything else. In her essay *Race for Theory*, which I will cover more comprehensively in this project’s concluding chapter, Barbara Christian explains that even Black theorists and feminists have exhibited a tendency toward the monologic, or “monolithic, monotheistic” (58): “our context today is such that an approach that desires power singlemindedly must of necessity become like that which it wishes to destroy. Rather than wanting to change the whole model, many of us want to be at its center” (60-61). Though *The Left Hand* certainly calls into critical question the repressive dominance of male self-centrality, a monologic dominance that Christian points out needn’t be fixed only to white males, it doesn’t
position centrality itself as inherently problematic. At the beginning of chapter 18, “On the Ice,” Genly recalls his many weeks travelling with Estraven and being isolated together in their tent: “we are inside, the two of us, in shelter, at rest, in the center of all things. Outside, as always, lies the great darkness, the cold, death’s solitude” (LHD 240). They are at the center, but without an attitude of superiority: in fact, the scene recognizes that the center occupies far less of the whole scope than what is outside. Neither are they entirely subordinate victims: their self-centrality has a profound and positive influence on planetary events. Christian does elaborate, too, that the power of dominance is definitively different from empowerment itself: “one must distinguish the desire for power from the need to become empowered – that is, seeing oneself as capable of and having the right to determine one’s life” (61). In the scene where Genly is grasping after trying to describe and understand Estraven as both a male and a female, he is essentially attempting to seize power over their dynamic because his ignorance is far from empowering. He finds Estraven’s power, which is quintessentially self-empowered, something to distrust (15-16).

Ideological cooperation—that is, the power to control other people’s thinking and perception through an enforcement of conformity—is what we as a culture often seem to be after, and the main reason there are such steep divides between ideological groups and a persistent battle for power and recognition. Ideologies don’t have a door open to the possibility and the benefit of variety; they cling tight to their own truths. With feminism more specifically, it is certain that our estimation of patriarchal patterns and the social possibilities that might emerge from them may change considerably if we were to free ourselves from the assumption that only men possess the capacity for masculine thought patterns and masculine expressions of energy. Likewise, our collective estimation of feminism might change if we (men and women alike)
were to more openly recognize that men too express femininity. Such a recognition is not the same as conflations of the physical body. Biological sex roles remain the same but our imagination expands; and the creative possibilities in terms of art, culture, and sociopolitical interrelationship can dramatically expand as well.

And though many people are, more generally, more open than ever before in history to relaxing stringent ideas about gender conformity, it is also true even today that many others on two disparate sides of an ideological divide have buckled down and insisted that gendered characteristics are *the* absolute definition of a human being. In *Eros and Civilization*, Herbert Marcuse explains that

> liberation is the most realistic, the most concrete of all historical possibilities, and at the same time the most rationally and effectively repressed — the most abstract and remote possibility. […] repressiveness is perhaps the more rigorously maintained the more unnecessary it becomes. (xv, 4)

As we become more capable socially of sustaining more freedoms for more people, more people cling even more tightly to simulations that perpetuate unfreedom. The more Estraven was both willing and able to help Genly, the more he rejected h[er]—that is until he became utterly dependent on h[er] and found that [s]he did not take advantage of the fact, but rather, “he was the only one who had entirely accepted me as a human being […] and had given me entire personal loyalty and who therefore demanded of me an equal degree of recognition, of acceptance”
Though Genly had at first been unable and unwilling (12; 248) to see Estraven beyond his socially conditioned notions of gender, by this later point in the novel, he is able to do so: “I saw then, 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” (248). Once having the freedom of mutual recognition, the pair (or Genly, at least) no longer depend(s) on the recognition of Gethen society to accomplish their aim—nevertheless that recognition does follow, even if for Estraven it did not follow until after h[er] death.

So, if anything, *The Left Hand* at least artistically proves that it really doesn’t take most of society, buckled down and resistant as they may be, to enable change. It only takes a few. Or even, just two. Even if just metaphorically, or poetically, it takes an open door and at least one person on each side willing to come together in the middle: not to assimilate or even compromise, which would suggest a breach of integrity, but to recognize each other distinctively and yet also analogously; and just, start talking. As a whole, the novel might stand as symbolic for the individual, too. The “I” that each of us represents. How many of our own internal doors are closed, or open? How much of our own duality, sexual and otherwise, are we able to recognize and work with? I do believe it is quite possible that at some point in the future we might see a sort of second Renaissance; a blooming of depth and dimensionality both in society, in art, and in human relationships. It won’t take an entire cultural or political overhaul to get there—it starts inside individuals, with their own evolving and expanding self-perception. As we

33 Considering Genly’s journey from biased projection and lack of internal/external recognition to his realization of mutual recognition and independence as the novel reaches its climax through the lens of Hegel’s “Independence and dependence of self-consciousness: Lordship and Bondage” is something I would have liked to do, too.
gain a broader estimation of ourselves and others, society will unfold along with us. The poetry is, after all, in the person—and we are all people.

But for now, half-blind participation in historical patterns is perhaps exactly why we continue to walk in reflexive circles, referring to things such as “Modern,” or even “postmodernism,” “postcolonialism,” or “antiracism;” “post-truth,” “posthumanism.” The terms are reflective of dialectical or assimilative processes, suggesting our arrival at some culminating end, somehow, using the same tools and referents that built the systems we’re trying to critically analyze and deconstruct.34 It’s a way of imagining that we can escape in time and in language what we can’t escape in matter and space. What is, now, distinct from what was, then, can still be difficult for our dialectical minds to recognize, grasp, define, and bring out of synthetic darkness into creative life and light of words. In a sense, “modern” and the prefix “post” become yet another set of social illusions, a simulation which obscures the truth that what was, then is still very much what is, now. “Anti” works similarly. But what else could we do, yet?

And perhaps we have arrived at some kind of end, one that comes before another beginning we can’t define yet, even if we sense it. Like Genly at the onset of the novel, we’re still very much in the dark of what else could be, even while we do recognize that we are somewhere else, on some other layer of spacetime than we have been previously. But still, the ideas with which we describe our world are for now largely caught up in forms of reflexive signification. What else could be has, as of yet, no distinctive name. Whatever can be, whatever the future is already made of is latent and we will most certainly understand today differently in

34 Audre Lorde, *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House*; see works cited
retrospect than we can possibly understand now. Nevertheless, it is, whether we see it or not. Le
Guin both reflects that dialectical half-blindness back at the audience, as well as offers poetic
means for beginning to feel out, if we can be dialogic readers, the truth of what is, and what can
be, even in the dark.
Chapter 2: Dialogic Dissimulation—Synthetic and Organic Relationships in *The Left Hand of Darkness*

If simulation is monologic because it denies the possibility of any truth other than itself, then dissimulation is by nature dialogic, because it puts truth into dialogue with fiction. In the 1976 introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin writes that “the only truth I can understand or express is, logically defined, a lie. […] I am describing certain aspects of psychological reality in the novelist’s way, which is by inventing elaborately circumstantial lies” (v). Her first statement is itself a lie, but we might recognize it with a mild degree of sophistication as being something more like a playful exaggeration: of course there are truths she can understand and express without the vehicle of fiction; at the very least, she made a career publishing not just poetry, stories and speculation, but also non-fictional writings. We might go ahead and acknowledge, though, that “dissimulation” is a fancy, philosophical word for “lie” or “fiction,” though this reduction does strip from the word its essential connection with truth, or the real. In some ways, Le Guin’s statement reflects truths we recognize about certain aspects of society, gender coding for example, that are in effect a set of elaborately circumstantial lies that are simulated to be the truth—not recognized as the fictions they are, these codes liquidate and replace a whole system of signs and referentials regarding biological sex.

Gender codes are in essence socially enforced lies about how males and females experience and express themselves in the world. These lies are built upon—or perhaps an exploitation of—the real, or the truth of human dimorphic sexuality, and the fundamentally dialectical duality in all human beings that psychologically distinguishes “self” from the “other,” or not-self. We can call social simulations, such as gender coding, a dominating force that creates
itself as the thesis, and individual experiences as antithetical and subordinate in an attempt to synthesize collective social cohesion. Thus, the truth of what it is like for a human individual to relate with and express the various aspects of themselves is co-opted by the simulation, including those influenced by their own innate masculinity and femininity, and their biological sex. That is to say that the diverse and multi-dimensional truth of a whole person is first fragmented and then assimilated by the simulation, since only one (simulation) or the other (the truth) can be intelligible in a monologic paradigm. Simulations render truths unintelligible. The operant “truths,” then, are actually a form of fiction. The real truth is hidden under the dominant simulation, and the real of any individual (and subsequently, all individuals) is lost.

Patriarchal domination relies on such patterns of dialectical synthesis to achieve its simulations. When dialectical processes are applied to a thesis and its antithesis, for example, “he” and “she,” both the dominant and the subordinate term are subjected to a liquidation of boundaries. Baudrillard uses this term when he discusses simulation beginning with “a liquidation of all referentials” which are then reconstituted; an “artificial resurrection in systems of signs […] which lend themselves to all systems of equivalence, all binary oppositions […] substituting signs of the real for the real itself” (167). By liquidating the distinct boundaries between “he” and “she,” what really makes them both similar and different is lost. A hierarchical system of signs is thus enabled to reconstitute one simulated dominant form “he,” and its assigned (rather than real) characteristics; and another simulated subordinate form “she” and its assigned (rather than real) characteristics. Most simply, for example, “he” is recreated as a leader, “she” is recreated as a follower—thereby replacing the interdependent, dialogic reality of both which includes the dialectical opposition or contrast of their distinctive forms. This
liquidation of boundaries allows, for another example, the simulation of “he” as a universally neutral rather than biased signifier, one that disrupts the signification of the female—and the male as well, since the boundaries for both have been liquidated in order to synthesize an artificial system of signs. And so we find that the processes of simulation don’t actually serve either part of the pair—they are only simulated to serve or privilege the dominant term. Even the dominant term is subjected to the same fragmentation and synthetic reconstitution. And all terms, whether dominant or subordinate, are actually subordinated to the simulation itself. Subordinating all other potentially signifying content into the cognitive shadows, this artificial system of signs then becomes the one and only intelligible, discursively available reality. Put another way, “the machine conceals the machinations” (Le Guin, LHD 152).

But when we read fiction, we are in effect suspending two (at least) formally distinct realities as simultaneously “true” and in potential dialogue with one another. Both our actual lives, or the official world as we know it with all its rules, systems, and simulations; and the fictional world, a dissimulation, are held together in dialogic tandem. “Fiction” and “reality” as terms may still be in an essentially dialectical relationship with one another, but fiction tends to reveal that it has as much in common with reality as reality itself—and that reality itself as we experience it through simulated systems of signs may have far more ontologically in common with fiction than we often care to admit. So what is the purpose, then, in dissimulating except to somehow, by means of suggesting that two realities may be considered as simultaneously possible, to confront and make visible monologic forms of social order that rely on simulation? Simulation is essentially a lie, or set of lies, which render themselves unconfrontable by the insidious omission of graspable connections with the real, the territory of the truth. Fiction’s
creative potential, then, is also to test those lies, not only by means of creating another set of possible truths, but also by making untruth, a lie itself, intelligible and graspable.

In some ways, the previous chapter studied how Le Guin’s radical participation with the monologic dialectics of patriarchal paradigms in Genly’s construction of a suppressive simulation allowed her to simultaneously offer, through the sentence-level poetics of her fiction, a more dialogic paradigm—one which reveals the possibility of the simulation as false. This chapter, however, will take a look at relatively broad-scope poetics in order to flesh out the ways in which the novel subverts simulation with dialogic constructions that put fiction into conversation with presupposed facts. Primarily focusing on the novel’s metacontextual framework, especially in terms of the interrelational nuance that allows the novel to exist as simultaneously past-historical and future-historical, we will also visit its use of genre and genre disruption as forms of simulation-subversion. Exploring this simulation-subversion in even more depth, this chapter will then look at the novel’s dialogic relationship with time, one which both utilizes and upends the monologic simulation that time is only progressively linear, and only formally structured or intelligible as it has been used and described under historical patriarchy. Ultimately, I suggest that Le Guin composes a narrative that preserves poetic boundaries and the distinction of forms in order to liquidate the artificial signification of synthetic (monologic) simulations and reconstitute organic (dialogic) systems of reference. In so doing, The Left Hand of Darkness encourages an organic, dialogic rather than an exclusively synthetic or monologic approach to reading and perception itself—whether it be reading a story, a person, or reading an

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35 Keeping in mind that an organic system inherently remains in dialogue with the inevitable generation of synthetic systems, too.
entire culture—thereby enabling an expanded dialectical understanding of all traditionally binary forms that overturns simulations.

**Framed—Subversive Boundaries**

Let’s back up once more to the more traditionally monologic forms and their limitations already discussed, such as hierarchy, which create an ontological reality (or simulation) of essential domination, subordination, and normalized exploitation. If hierarchies (whether patriarchal or otherwise) depend upon a dissolution or disruption of boundaries in order to reconstitute and enforce their own artificial forms and systems of referentials, then in order to subvert their simulations and reestablish an organic system of signs, the artificial forms and systems must be themselves disrupted, and the real or natural forms allowed to regain signification. In *The Left Hand*, the inclusion of multiple forms in mutual interplay rather than hierarchically positioned, disrupts and subverts traditional hierarchy and its activity of dialectical synthesis. One very easy way of illustrating this principle, before looking at the novel’s structure, is in its use of black and white (or light and shadow) imagery.

Where dialectical synthesis (white=thesis, black=antithesis) creates many various (and dialogically useful) grays depending upon how much dominance one term has in relation to the other, the novel, on the other hand, preserves the interplay of the two dialectically contrasted forms as organic signifiers, inextricable, signifying light and dark, and even life and death.

36 Notably, the idea of black and white are typically used as a sign of moral rigidity, and the “gray” area between to signify moral flexibility. In this novel, though, the idea of a “gray” area becomes simultaneously suggestive of being ethically vague, whereas the interplay of black and white signify ethical clarity which arrives at a sort of living homeostatic balance that favors the evolution of justice.

37 As demonstrated in the novel’s 17th Chapter, “An Orgota Creation Myth.”
simultaneously. The most explicit example of this type of dialogic or interdependent signification occurs after Estraven has rescued Genly from Pulfen farm. Saving his life and helping him escape Orgoreyn back into Karhide, Genly and his mission for the Ekumen will ultimately “live” or succeed. As they travel through a volcanic field on the ice sheet, death remains in interplay with this affirmation of life: “we […] took off — down, north, onward, into that silent vastness of fire and ice that said in enormous letters of black and white DEATH, DEATH written right across a continent” (220). Here, Le Guin refers directly and explicitly to letters spelling out meaning, to the actual words on a page—the literal and mutual distinction between black and white without which signs or their meaning cannot be discerned, as well as foreshadowing the death that inevitably follows life: in this case, Estraven’s actual death. The novel puts both life and death, black and white, fire and ice, light and shadow, into mutual and perpetual conversation, without seeking a synthetic resolution, but also without excluding it. Life does not dominate or negate death and death does not dominate or negate life—rather, the two reaffirm each other through the interdependent dialogue of their unique forms. More simply, the creation of gray is the result of synthetic processes, and the dialogic relationship between white and black as organic and gray as synthetic allows all three together to compose a layered system of preservational diversity.

This dialogue between contrasting forms is itself contrasted with the monologic simulation that the novel is in dialogue with, illustrated a little further along in the pair’s travels.

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38 As discussed below, Bakhtin will extensively cover the organic co-existence and co-signification of life and death as well as other such contrasting terms in his introductory discussion of carnival, and carnivalized literary forms—it is how I can use “organic” as co-signifying rather than negating “synthetic.”
The weather changes and creates the effect of all light, all white, with no discerning shadows, rendering the terrain literally un navigable (265). The socially privileged “white” or “light” becomes insensible and even useless as a monochrome, without a visual dialogue between itself and its typically under-privileged counterpart, darkness. Thus “white” and “dark” are revealed as essentially interdependent—which both serves as a reminder of one’s reliance on the other, and also as a criticism of white dominance. However, we can reverse that monologic privilege and imagine this same terrain as all black or even all gray instead and achieve the same result. This scene is symbolic of all forms of binary reference which simulate the absence of their counterpart through forms of negation, of which patriarchal hierarchy is one. In addition to racial implications, the “white weather” (264) scene can be read as a poetic symbol for the use of “he” as a simulated grammatic neutral, where the female has been erased from signification, and the terrain of what it is to be wholly human thus rendered un navigable. In order for “he” to signify “neutrally,” the boundary that distinguishes “he” from “she” must be compromised. Wholly assimilated by the light and its refraction, the “white weather” offers no shadows, no delineating boundaries that mark the natural shifts and changes in the landscape. It is quite literally a monologic visual simulation drawn over the terrain and the travelling pair must stop and camp until the weather clears. So, in essence, while the binaries drawn upon by monologic simulations are themselves undeniably necessary to make any meaning whatsoever, it is the nature of the human relationship with these binary pairings, whether cooperative or exploitive, dialogically acceptant or monologically assimilative, that determines the depth of our perception and thus the depth and breadth of meaning we are able to make with them.
In dialogue, the boundaries of form and genre themselves, just like the distinction between black and white, become affirmative, resistant to exploitive assimilation. Even with its integral multiplicity, the novel itself is contained not only by its physical novel form, but also by the formal boundary of its fictional framework. The dissimulative barrier of the fictional framework contains the internal contents of the novel like a particularizing cell membrane within the larger generic structure of being a novel among many other novels. So even while the work will most certainly play with the dissolution of forms and multiplicities of meaning (such as the paradoxical correlation between the concept of loyalty and its dialectical opposite, “traitor”), as well as blur the lines between presumed fact and fiction, it does so within the protective confines of a boundary which by its very fictional nature “leaves the reality principle intact” (Baudrillard 167).

The frame story for the novel positions it as a sort of historical document composed by Genly, who had submitted it to the Ekumen in order to report on his dealings with the Gethenian people. Genly’s direct audience is, as the first chapter’s sub-heading declares, “the Stabile on Ollul,” a fictional member of the fictional Ekumen for whom he fictionally composed and compiled the report and to whom it was initially transmitted. The sub-heading also tells us that the record is “from the archives of Hain,” indicating that it was subsequently transmitted and received, and then fictionally accessed by other members of the Ekumen. It is unclear, undocumented, who is fictionally accessing these fictional archives, or for what reason—the

39 Hain is the seat of Ekumen. The Hain are the oldest race, likely the original race, of all the human cultures (including our own ‘Terran’ human race) that Le Guin’s “Hainish Series” novels and short stories tell about. The Left Hand of Darkness is one of this series.
fictional reader is obscured, allowing us to either speculate about them or imagine ourselves to be them. We are, however, also accessing the “document” as real readers in a non-fictional context. Thus the story is composed in a manner that allows its narration to address both these fictional characters in a fictional, future-historical position with a set of assumptions based on a relational paradigm different from our own, and to address us as present-day readers. So, it speaks both to our current selves as we read the novel from our current perspective, whatever it may be, and to the future selves we presumably could be\textsuperscript{40} after finishing the novel, after having participated with this fictional future-perspective and its distinctive paradigmatic differences. Accordingly, the novel creates the reader itself as a temporally multi-dimensional rather than unilateral individual, even while it maintains a solid boundary around its fiction, as well as the fictional past and future. Consequently, readers are thus from the onset invited to take a dissimulative approach to their own reality along with the fictional reality of the text itself, and thus a dialogic rather than monologic stance toward the paradigms of human interrelationship that the novel treats.

Structurally, the chapters of the novel, this fictionally archival document, are divided between Genly’s narrative, Estraven’s journal entries, and other archival documents which are labeled with citation-like subheadings, similar to that in the first chapter. These subheadings identify what sort of document it is, its origins, and where it was accessed: Their citation style-genre mimics that of a non-fictional context. For example, the second chapter, first of six

\textsuperscript{40} Samuel Delany explores the ways in which Science Fiction has a relationship with reality distinct from other literary forms by means of the subjunctive tense; see works cited.
interstitial chapters, is sub-headed: “from a sound-tape collection of North Karhidish ‘hearth-tales’ in the archives of the college of Historians in Erhenrang, narrator unknown, recorded during the reign of Argaven VIII” (22). It simultaneously participates with non-fictionality and represents a disruption of it by nature of being actually fictional. And like all the interstitial chapters, this one disrupts the linear narrative flow of the novel’s events while still participating dialogically with its creation—like the main narrative thread, it is about sexual taboo, exile, the extremities of traversing the dangers of an ice field, as well as eventual reconciliation and death. The themes, motifs, questions, and answers raised in each of these “documents” invariably interweave, inform, influence, and contextualize the unfolding narrative, establishing them as not simply interstitial, but also as essentially interdependent: while disruptive, they don’t simply interrupt or oppose the narrative linearity of the novel, they are a part of its deliberate construction, past participating with the formation of the present and the future. The events that unfold in the relative future of the main narrative thread often do so according to patterns laid out by the past-historical records, so that past and future are in dialogue via their relationship with the present moment of the narrative itself. At the same time, the novel structurally preserves boundaries between these historical artifacts and the main narrative thread, much in the same way that it preserves boundaries between Genly’s own narrative and Estraven’s. Like organs in a body, these multiple forms in dialogue themselves comprise a cohesive whole.

In addition to dialogic layers of narrative interplay, the novel is composed of layers of genre in interplay as well. The first line of Genly’s narrative introduces the basic anchor for the novel’s metanarrative framework as well as the dialogic nature of genre itself. It prepares the reader for the ways in which layers of generic discourse will converse as the novel unfolds: “I’ll
make my report as if I told a story” (1). The novel is both a report, an objective relation of data, a debriefing with a specific set of cultural assumptions and associated discourse; and it is a story, a subjective narrative presentation of events unfolding in time and all of the many historical forms and associations that accompany it. It subverts the monologic and dialectical opposition between the terms “story” and “report” without denying the modes of either—it puts the two forms into mutually inextricable dialogue. Furthermore, “I’ll make my report as if I told a story,” indicates dissimulation: Genly is pretending to tell a story, while actually delivering a report—or its opposite, pretending to make a report while actually telling a story. On one hand the phrase can be read as a sort of ironic twist that reflects critically on genres which represent themselves as purely objective, suggesting that since any form of delivery made by a subject is inherently subjective, subjectivity itself is therefore unavoidable, and so perhaps more honest—nearer actual objectivity—when embraced rather than denied. Further, this is actually a fictional story pretending to be a non-fictional report, one that meta-reflexively examines the illusions and distinctions between objectivity and subjectivity itself: it calls into question the monologic ideology that positions forms as singular and separate rather than interrelated and plural. To put it another way, the gesture suggests that storytelling itself, though subjective, may in some ways be more actually revelatory and objective than simply reporting data and facts without providing more subjective context; in short, objectivity stripped of subjectivity is potentially simulative. It suggests that data is rendered more intelligible with the interconnected structures of a narrative which lend it depth and dimension—narrative structures which we as subjective human beings cannot help but also create, even if we do so in the dark. There is more field of exposure, too, when more of the story is laid open for intelligible observation. It therefore lends itself more
fully to critical scrutiny and objective review than something which denies and omits the operable structures of story which informed the gathering and the interpretation of data in the first place. Genly’s inclusion of historical records suggests he is attempting to make more objective sense of, more than anything else, the existentiality of his friend’s suicide/death: though fictional, they are data.

Alongside this perspective is the reality that objective truths, while certainly discernible, are not concerned with or altered by subjective perceptions nor the narratives spun about them—no matter how objective these subjects believe themselves to be, as the novel will demonstrate repeatedly. So, even while Genly says in the next clause, “Truth is a matter of the imagination,” the novel also reveals that a fact, a text, an artifact fixed in time, does not change according to how it is interpreted or what is said about it, so that Le Guin is not simply disrupting but actually affirming that objectivity and truth do exist—what she is disrupting is our perception, so that we may question incongruencies in what we recognize as subjective versus objective. Only our perceptions change in ways that carry us further or deliver us nearer a functional relationship with objective truths, or what Baudrillard posits as the territory of the real over which simulative maps are drawn. The human dissimulative relationship with this territory of the real is one distinguishing feature of science fiction’s uniqueness as a genre: that it discursively combines the

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41 Much later in the novel, Estraven relates the details of their trip across the Gobrin Ice Sheet to the villagers they encounter. Genly recounts, “she ‘told it as only a person of an oral-literature tradition can tell a story, so that it became a saga, full of traditional locutions and even episodes, yet exact and vivid’” (277). Genly’s description of Estraven’s storytelling suggests that what is often considered an archaic and primitive mode is potentially more wholly, multi-dimensionally expressive than our more modern scientific or even straight journalistic forms. Or, there are distinctions among the forms, all of which offer dimensions of the real, the truth.

42 Perhaps most poignantly illustrated by the novel’s treatment of foretelling, and the Karhidish tale “The Nineteenth Day.”
objectivity of science\textsuperscript{43} and the truth-preserving dissimulations of fiction, as well as the various other socio-cultural discursive layers of modern novelistic forms.

**Temporal Disruption And Estrangement**

The dialectical cognitive separations, and suppressions, that work in our consciousness and in our participation with simulated systems of signs within our societies, are perhaps even more pronounced today than they have been historically. That is, at least, part of Baudrillard’s prevailing argument: due to the rapid increase of industrialism and the socio-political systems which have sprung up to protect and perpetuate it, allowing for endless replications and permutations of generating substitutions for the real, substitutions are further and further removed from the real itself (166-177).\textsuperscript{44} People’s ability to have sensual contact with the real itself has been dramatically reduced, and even hidden by the seamless mass proliferation of real objects; and they are arguably more susceptible than ever before to the persuasion of simulation.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin describes the now-lost medieval practice of carnival as one which creates a space for paradoxes and to be concretely observed and experienced by people in their real lives. Essentially, carnival served as a disruption to the

\textsuperscript{43} However problematic in human practice scientific objectivity may ultimately be is, for now, beside the point: it is an earnest attempt by irrevocably subjective beings to discover cooperatively and systematically what is objectively true in their world.

\textsuperscript{44} I’m not sure I agree with Baudrillard that it’s actually worse, or very different, now. Or perhaps it is, but at the same time, the machinations of social simulation, and the physical and social manifestations of them, have at least become far more tangible and visible than they have ever been before in human history. And the resources to recognize them far more widespread than in the past, too. I’d even go so far as to say that the discomfort someone like Baudrillard expresses may have more to do with a sensitivity to the ever-approaching and inevitable dissolution of such systems of simulation—which are inherently unsustainable in and of themselves—and the consequent radical changes in perspectives as well as individual and collective living that are co-immanent. All of us fear and resist change, to some degree, even when the changes are ultimately desirable. From beginning to end, *The Left Hand* is all about exactly that.
monologic simulations of medieval society. According to Bakhtin, carnival is a form of being, one existing within firm temporal boundaries that separated it from the “normal” order of everyday life. He describes it as essentially dualistic: “it strives to encompass and unite within itself both poles […] opposites come together, look at one another, are reflected in one another, know and understand one another” (176). In this way, people were routinely exposed to a major form of concrete disruption to the social simulations which governed their lives. And though Bakhtin argues that the Renaissance saw “a deep and almost total carnivalization of all artistic literature” (130), he also notes that in European culture, “beginning with the seventeenth century, folk-carnival life [wa]s on the wane” (13). Even though art, by Bakhtin’s measure, has often retained features of carnivalized forms, culture itself has lost this tradition of the total public reversal of everyday life. Even where it is still practiced, festivities have “lost their former significance and their former wealth of forms and symbols” (131).

So we could argue that one of the primary roles of novelistic fiction itself is to keep alive the traditional sphere of bringing contrasting forms into co-signifying dialogue. Best illustrated in *The Left Hand of Darkness* by the symbol or form of the female/male Gethenians, such carnivalized motifs abound throughout the novel, including many aspects of the parade scene that opens it, and in the union of star-crossed lovers & their mutually opposed Domains in chapter nine (very much a retelling of Shakespeare’s *Romeo & Juliet*). Bakhtin acknowledges an essential split experience of medieval reality, wherein “official life” and “the life of the carnival square” (129) are “separated by strict temporal boundaries” (130). One could not, by

45 It is in this chapter where we perhaps see most clearly “opposites come together, look at one another, are reflected in one another, know and understand one another.”
law, bleed into the other. A little like our own temporal experience of reading a fiction, then walking away from it back to our “real” lives, the two forms, carnival life and official life were delineated and distinct, one precluding the other: one cannot, usually, read fiction at the same time as one goes about the other tasks of life. Another way we might describe it, then, is that one is simulated as natural and ordered, the way things rightly are or ought to be, while the other is simulated as unnatural, disordered, bizarre, other: “life turned inside out” (122); as contrasted with recognizing both as simultaneously and paradoxically—perpetually—real, natural, and mutually true.

Bakhtin writes at length about “the possibility of simultaneous co-existence” disrupting traditional monologism in Dostoevsky’s work; and in *The Left Hand of Darkness* Le Guin specifically disrupts our traditionally ordered view of time, and our sense of temporal boundaries with it. Thus the novel allows for a simultaneous and co-occurrent rather than split experience of these two otherwise antithetical states of “carnival” time (increasingly located in what Bakhtin calls carnivalized literature) and “official” time. She does this not through a process of assimilation or even total dissolution but through a dialogic process of both acknowledging and thus preserving distinctive forms and disrupting monologism through the inclusion of other forms. The Gethenians, for example, may be both male and female in one body, but they are only

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46 Though perhaps audiobooks have made a blending of the two much more possible—but mostly because we have grown ever more capable of multitasking. I’m not sure I’d qualify truly dialogic thinking as multi-tasking, but on the other hand, maybe that’s precisely what it is; or what it might amount to for many.

47 Notably, even the Gethenian female/male form participates with delineated cycles of time in its kemmer/somer cycle, in much the same way that I hope to demonstrate that Le Guin’s disruptive use of time will also participate in ordered and delineated cycles.
sexually potent in one form at a time, and only sexually potent periodically, thus both the
distinctively male and distinctively female forms are not disrupted themselves, and neither are
the forms of latency nor potency—each maintains their referential boundaries—but simple
dialectical opposition itself is disrupted by their dialogic inclusion in one form. We could say
that her preservation of forms in interplay allows for a simultaneous suspension of a relatively
carnivalized state—existing in temporal tandem with “official” life, rather than cut or split off
from it. In so doing she reveals the multi-dimensional experience of reality that is always
present, yet traditionally lost to the fragmentation, separation, and isolation of unidimensional
societal simulations, that which is demonstrated in the very split delineated by Bakhtin.

In order to examine Le Guin’s disruption of temporal boundaries that allows for this
simultaneous suspension of carnival and official time, we must continue to peel back the
metacontextual layers that frame it, which involves a dialogue between the main protagonist’s
relationship with time—one which closely but perhaps not entirely resembles our own\(^{48}\)—and
the Gethenian relationship with time. As previously discussed, the novel is composed of a
narrative thread of events told by two different narrators. This linear narrative thread is also
interrupted every few chapters with past-historical interstitial material, much of which comes in
the form of legends and stories from the Gethenian homeworld. But even before any of these
temporal interruptions occur, we learn at the onset of the narrative that there are two ontological
concepts of time in interplay, because the Gethenian relationship with time is different than

\(^{48}\) Genly has experienced a sort of space travel that for us is akin to time-jumping—and we have not. So even
Genly’s formal relationship with time is not precisely the same as our own.
Genly’s, and presumably unlike any other found among other worlds in the Ekumen. Where our own typically patriarchal relationship with time is describable as past-oriented, privileging the past and its historical forms relative to the present and the future, the Gethenians are relatively present-oriented. Genly describes the present-centrality of the Gethenian temporal relationship thus: “it is always the Year One here. Only the dating of every past and future year changes each New Years Day, as one counts backward and forwards from the unitary Now” (2). Where in Terran-human estimation all historical points exist with fixed temporal boundaries, relatively static, and quantitatively progressive, Gethen-human temporality exists in relative flux, with the past and future flexing around the present. The present is “unified” rather than split from past and future—even while past and future remain discursively distinguished. This Gethenian model of conceiving and recording the passage of time completely defies the modern western linear methods, which would likely be the only manner of relating to time familiar to the novel’s predominantly American audience. So in the most plainly antithetical terms, the Terran relationship with time as naturalized by Genly’s own familiar relationship with it may be perceived as relatively ordered, while the Gethenian relationship with time may be perceived as chaotic and disordered and thus the source of a relative sense of estrangement.

The Gethenian relationship with time cannot be so simplistically reduced, however, as it involves a dialogic relationship between order and disorder. The system of dating, relying more on stable, predictable cycles which turn around a central now than our own system of perpetual and unboundaried forward linear progression is therefore a relatively fixed, ordered, and self-
boundaried system even while it centralizes a unified present moment. The Gethenian dating system is described more fully at the end of the narrative, attached and contained in an orderly, comprehensive appendix. According to this appendix, “Every New Year’s Day (Getheny Thern) the year just past becomes the year ‘one-ago,’ and every past date is increased by one;” correspondingly, the “next year being the year ‘one-to-come,’ until it in turn becomes the Year One” (302). The system is both other than our own, loosening the concept of time both historic and future as fluid and shifting rather than fixed and yet it still participates in familiar linear ordered forward progression and backward regression; all while maintaining a fixed form, its own genre, if you will. Though it is most certainly different, rather than being simply antithetical, the Gethenian temporal system can also be considered as analogous with Terran systems of keeping time and distinctively dating the past, present, and future.

Additionally, the Gethenian present-central structure relies more on descriptive qualities and a sort of homeostatic balance rather than a fixation on accumulative progressive quantity: “being invariable, the days of the month are generally referred to by name, like our days of the week, rather than by number […] many of the names refer to phases of the moon [and] the prefix od- used in the second half-month is a reversive, giving a contrary meaning” (LHD 303). The term “invariable” implies more fixedness than it does disorder or chaos, even while the fixed system has built into it the sort of carnivalized disorder of reversal—what moves forward or is born also must move backward and die before moving forward, being born, again. With the use of the “-od” prefix, reversals, paradox and contrast thus become poetically or grammatically synonymous, co-occurrent with their counterpart concept, each implying the other in a continuously renewing cycle. It also combines both the concrete in the naming of days-
experienced-in-time and also an abstraction which informs the nature of days (according to their descriptions). Rather than being only one or the other, or even strictly oppositional, the names infer one another. In this way the entire Gethenian concept of “official time” is more like what Bakhtin describes as “carnival time:” “an entire language of symbolic concretely sensuous forms […] all carnivalistic symbols […] include within themselves a perspective of negation (death) or vice versa. Birth is fraught with death, and death with new birth” (PoDP 122-125). The reversals, though chaotic relative to our own system of forward linear progression, become a form of order, too: a negation that infers affirmation and renewal. Additionally, the focus on moon cycles is linked to an acceptance and participation with both femininity and the normalizing rhythms of the self-ordered land, a sort of familiar agrarian centrality that stands in contrast to an estranged modern time-keeping which is more industry-central and impositional—relatively removed from an acceptance and participation with the land.

Unlike our own historically patriarchal model, detached from the feminized land and relatively unboundaried, a potentially chaotic system of forward quantitative progression, the Gethenian system is held by land-bound natural cycles, where whatever progressively adds up quantitatively or even qualitatively is then subtracted again, like the phases of the moon, so that the system balances back to a unitary one, whole, or “now.”

In many ways, the appendix, through its relative balance and order, reveals by contrast the relative disorder and imbalance in the relentlessly progressive Terran system of time—which is, in its own way, also ordered and balanced (we could easily create an appendix of our own

50 The insanity of daylight savings is a good example, as we use the clock to try and defy the natural lengthening and shortening of days, the seasonal waxing and waning and waxing and waning of sunlight.
The appendix’s inclusion as marginal or supplemental, when positioned alongside its relatively unifying importance in the text overall, both in terms of estrangement and in terms of the contrast and analogies it offers for our own relationship with time, ultimately subverts traditional hierarchical barriers among different forms or different types of content. The appendix is part of the multitude of other such “supplemental” materials without which the story itself would be incomplete. More than a simple afterthought, the narrative as a whole is interdependently related with and informed by the appendix and these other actually intrinsic marginal supplements, rather than hierarchically related. The appendix as a non-narrative form isn’t only antithetical or oppositional to the form of the narrative itself, but rather, both forms are in dialogue with one another. They reinforce one another formally and contextually and both contribute equally toward the novel’s overall poetic structure of estrangement, inclusion, and analogy. So too, the fictional relationship with time represented by the appendix and our own “official” relationship with time are positioned dialogically, rather than oppositionally, even while they adhere to distinctive, or diverse, forms.

The appendix as a tool of familiarization allows the reader to include an understanding and calculation of Gethenian time alongside their own measures of time. And like other features of the novel which reverse or reposition estrangement, the appendix suggests that from the Gethenian perspective, our own relationship with time is relatively estranged. Even further, by enabling our dissimulative participation with it, “The Gethenian Calendar and Clock” can create our native sense of time as estranged from an internal, or self-localized, perspective. This sort of dissimulative, vicarious, experiential self-estrangement occurs not only relative to time but also applies to other cultural/physiological norms. Genly experiences it most profoundly when his
fellows from the Ekumen finally land on Gethen: “they all looked strange to me, men and women, well as I knew them [...] they were like a troupe of great, strange animals, of two different species; great apes with intelligent eyes, all of them in rut, in kemmer” (296). Genly shares their biological dimorphism but through participation and familiarity with the estrangement of the Gethenian form, he becomes self-estranged. Thus different forms are presented as simultaneously familiar and estranged, without being fragmented and isolated in their relative positions as only either familiar (thesis) or estranged (antithesis).

**Unified Narrative Stability as a form of Disruption**

In contrast to Bakhtin’s descriptions of carnival life and official life as separated and boundaried by time, in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, time is both disruptive and a unifying, boundless quality through which different and distinct relational forms come into dialogue—all of which predates, presupposes, and also informs the narrative act. Dialogue as a metaphor is a useful one, since it requires that the parties involved take turns to listen and speak, even while each has a simultaneously constant stream of living, breathing responsive *being*, and consciousness, at play. That is how time operates in the novel, with different layers, different streams, or channels, perhaps, of time-relationship taking turns to speak their part. Genre works similarly, allowing different generic forms to alternate, take turns, speak their part, and participate together in a mutually informative dance. But how can it possibly be that the main narrative thread, relatively future-historical, influences those artifacts from the past which patriarchy would consider monolithic: stable and fixed—unfluid? Quite literally, Le Guin composed the past-historical accounts as she wrote the novel—they are all mutually informed. The novel offers an additional explanation, though, in chapter 12. An excerpt from a Gethenian
religious text describes “the Center of Time. [...] in the Center there is no time past and no time to come. In all time past it is. In all time come it is. It has not been nor yet will it be. It is. It is all” (162). Here, time is not a linear phenomenon but a non-linear one. There is no distinction between past and present, though past and present exist formally and are the essential building blocks for narrative itself. Instead of assimilating or negating one another, these two distinct formal relationships with time—linearity and non-linearity—exist as an organic binary pair upon which the composition of the narrative itself depends: past and future are both together the mutually informed portal through which the “unitary Now” passes.\(^5^1\) Furthermore, time as an organic structure doesn’t negate synthetic processes, either, for the synthetic products of this dialogic nature of time, besides being manifested in the systems of dating themselves, are also manifested in another form of technology: the time-jumping starships that brought Genly to the planet, and the ansible device which allows him to communicate instantaneously with other members of the Ekumen, despite their interstellar distance from Gethen. The synthetic products enter into the narrative as interdependent aspects, or discursive layers, in dialogue with organic aspects or layers. Once more we have another metaphorical extension of the Gethenian’s symbolic body: diverse binary forms (synthetic and organic) that come into conversation within the space of one unifying form: the narrative itself.

Similarly, the novel as a unifying form brings multiple genres into dialogue, genres which we may classify along a binary axis as either “soft” (in terms of the novel’s anthropological, spiritual, and psycho-social slant) and “hard” science (such as with the novel’s

\(^{5^1}\) Le Guin’s later novel, *The Dispossessed*, will explore the simultaneous linearity & non-linearity of time much more directly.
use of advanced technology and understanding of basic astrophysics to achieve some of its main plot points); or even “fictional” forms (myths, for example) and “non-fictional” forms (such as “report,” “appendix,” and “field notes”), as already noted. Both fictional and non-fictional forms of discourse are simultaneously present,\textsuperscript{52} mutually informing the narrative that emerges. In the fictional metacontext of the story Genly is a self-aware narrator, making compositional choices that reflect a set of values about interdependent relationships with time and genre, as well as the multiplicity of voices he brings into dialogue and how they all interrelate with each other. Informed by his own context as a representative of the Ekumen, and writing for that fictional audience who likewise presuppose it, he chooses the cooperative interdependence of multiple forms and voices—and so makes that same dialogic paradigm available to the non-fictional readers. In a sense, Genly sets an example for the mostly male audience most likely to read the book at the time of its publication, one that both participates and veers considerably from the monologism inherent in the hierarchical patterns of historical patriarchy—patterns which effect that audience as deeply as anyone else. Both Genly’s own reading style and his compositional style prompts the story’s readers to approach, tentatively or wholeheartedly, the process of making sense of the world with a more inclusive, open mind—even while he also serves as a model for some of the cognitive challenges that non-fictional audience will face as they strive to do so.

\textsuperscript{52} In this case we are of course talking about the form as distinct from the content—the combination of non-fictional forms with fictional content would be an example within an example of binary opposites in dialogic interplay.
On a final note for this chapter, I would like to take a look at some of the comments made by Lewis Call on *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Call’s “Postmodern Anarchism in the Novels of Ursula K. Le Guin” involves an investigation of how the political philosophy of anarchism—which certainly informs this novel and many of Le Guin’s other works—shifted from its more modern expression in response to the era of postmodernism and how Le Guin’s works reflect this shift. After recognizing that it is not enough to reduce Le Guin’s work as simply dialectical (90-91), he declares the novel “relentlessly experimental and fragmented. It has no narrative center. [...] the cognitive effect of [its] radical narrative strategy is disorienting . . . destabilizing” (91). I only partially agree with this assertion, first because my own experience of the novel was not at any time destabilized—each successive chapter added depth and clarity to that which preceded it, whatever its genre or linear relationship to the whole. Secondly, it overlooks Chapter 12, “On Time and Darkness” as a narrative center. The chapter does admittedly occur a little off-center, a structural component that reflects Le Guin’s description of the dynamic rather than “motionless” masculine/feminine balance in the world of Gethen, which is “at the moment of the novel, [...] wobbling perilously” (*Redux*, 12). At its poetic center, the novel gives us a binary pair: ordered linear time and its opposite, a unified field of no-time/all-time. The two forms co-exist in dialectical tandem without synthetic resolution—dialogically—and thus serve to stabilize each other and the progression of narrative. This relatively central chapter echoes and refers back to the “unitary Now” (*LHD* 1) described at the novel’s onset. In a way, the narrative stability of *The Left Hand* stands in direct contrast to the essential fragmentation so central to postmodernism, even while also participating with it.
So when Call continues that “the discourse of *Left Hand* can never become totalizing or totalitarian, for such a fate would require more unity and stability than the text actually possesses” (91-92) we can see that Call, focusing more monologically on the fragmentation in the novel’s forms and subjective perspectives, has overlooked the comprehensive and unifying elements that weave these fragments and perspectives into an interconnected, cohesive, and stabilized whole. Further, Call has equated unity and stability with totalitarianism, thus precluding the possibility for a model of interrelationship which can be both unifying and non-totalitarian—such as the Ekumen. Yet, I agree utterly with Call’s statement that “Le Guin’s postmodern anarchism is a sustained challenge to conventional modes of radical thinking” (91), including Call’s own, and believe that *The Left Hand of Darkness* delivers structural and poetic elements that invite even the most radical of readers to investigate and question the interrelationships that govern their own thinking.
Conclusion: The Sensible Real

“For me literature is a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/know is. It is an affirmation that sensuality is intelligence, that sensual language is language that makes sense.”

—Barbara Christian, “The Race For Theory”

During her final round of confirmation hearings in late March of 2022, Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson was asked by Senator Marsha Blackburn, R-Tenn., “can you provide a definition for the word ‘woman’?”

“Can I provide a definition? No. I can’t.” Jackson responded.53

Jackson followed up her initial statement with, “I’m not a biologist,” suggesting that an external expert, a scientist, is more qualified to linguistically identify and define her body, and those of other women, than she. It also suggests that though she claims not to be able to define a woman, she can define a biologist well enough to draw a distinction between one and herself and posit that such a person could be the one to offer a definition, demonstrating her unequivocal recognition of basic categories. To be perfectly fair, Justice Brown Jackson’s nomination was met with considerable conservative protest and prejudiced harassment. She was under an inordinate amount of pressure during these hearings, probably more than any other Justice had ever been before her. And yet, if she herself cannot sensibly recognize a woman and then render this recognition with communicable language, how can she confirm that she is not in fact, as Christian puts it, hallucinating rather than in touch with a tangible reality? Or that a “woman”

53 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BWtGzJxiOUN; see works cited, “Sen. Blackburn asks Supreme Court nominee to define ‘woman.’
specifically, is something more concrete and substantial than a mere hallucination? She is, after all, able to recognize a “biologist” as something concrete. And though, as I have explored, *The Left Hand of Darkness* does play with multiplicities of meaning and the layered rather than singular dimensions of words and the concepts they define, all of this play is well-rooted in bodies: fictional, textual, historical, tangible—and it does acknowledge absolutes, such as death. So while both Jackson’s evasive and definitive statements invite further wordplay, they also must be rooted in tangible truths. If a “woman” is in question, so is a biologist. Being organic, and thinking, being *biological* as well as logical, might *any* person then be described as a “biologist”? And wouldn’t that then qualify Jackson to read, assess, and interpret her own biology well enough to utter words about it? For Jackson doesn’t assert that the word is inherently undefinable, only suggests—or perhaps *dissimulates*—that it isn’t within her scope to do so.

How is it that a woman of such prominence and clearly well-earned prestige like Ketanji Brown Jackson could possibly feel unfit, neither able nor qualified to define her own sex? To provide a definition of sex that makes visible, for starters, the fact that she is only the fifth woman ever to be nominated to the Supreme Court, compared to a staggering 110 male nominees? She’s also the third-ever black person to serve as a Supreme Court Justice. No Asian, Pacific Islander, or Indigenous people have ever sat on the Supreme Court. And while generalized classifications are certainly only part of the picture and have been historically used as both a means and justification for exploitation and oppression—an understandable reason for

a deep-rooted fear of acknowledging them—it is however undeniable that being able to objectively define these distinctive formal types of people makes injustice, imbalance, discrimination, and prejudice inscrutably visible. It also allows us to discern with more clarity the discrepancies and differences in the way bias and discrimination (and whatever premise it is based on) affect specific groups of people in uniquely specific ways. And, to return to the above, it allows us to objectively recognize and track the more diversifying trend in Supreme Court nominees as it has emerged in recent decades, all of which is vital information for any kind of meaningful dialogue about, well, justice—the purported aim of the law; whose role it is to linguistically and practically define the terms by which people are permitted or not permitted to engage in society.

In her introduction to *Politics, Pragmatism, and Persuasion*, Ellen Peel confronts the conundrum of definition with an integrative approach to deconstruction and structuralism: “I see deconstruction as primarily critical, a double-edged sword that can hurt you as well as your opponents [...] [e.g.,] if ‘women’ and ‘subordination’ are drained of meaning, it is hard to fight the subordination of women” (xxii). Distinctions do matter: blurred lines, liquidated boundaries, these are the breeding grounds of simulation. Because of her ideologically conservative context, the essence of the question posed by Senator Blackburn is recognizably rooted in a fear of the

55 The importance of which is highlighted by those people who claim racial difference is invisible, that they “don’t see race.” Such willful ignorance is used as a simulative shield to obscure and deny real racism. It follows that an unwillingness to “see sex” is likewise just as evasive and potentially dangerous.

56 Shortly after writing this, the news broke of a leaked Supreme Court’s draft ruling, one that is set to overturn the monumental Roe v Wade (1973) decision which established a woman’s right to an uncriminalized abortion as constitutional. Though it is often framed as progressive to open up (liquidate) the definition of “woman” to be more inclusive, this very recent event makes the paragraph that follows ever more poignant, ever more crucial.
loss of codified gender differences and a set of fundamental assumptions that tends to position
women as relatively inferior to men. That in turn makes the question and its intent easier to
dismiss or otherwise lose in the darkness of political bipartisanship; merely yet another means of
quibbling with liberally inclusive values and pushing a regressive conservative agenda.

But real, visceral fear of the inability or unwillingness of a woman in such a position of
d power to unequivocally take personal responsibility for having both the wherewithal and the
authority to offer a clear definition of her own sex can’t be overlooked, either. It is perhaps just
as bad as only being willing to see sex in terms of socially enforced gender codes: both ways of
“seeing” are a form of confusion, and both are equally limited—only one acknowledges itself
openly as limited (and justifies those limitations with fear-based rhetoric), while the other does
not. The stance of inclusivity and its concurrent practice of obscuring or conflating definitions is
often established as an ethically superior thesis against which the antithesis of exclusivity is
pitted.

To take a more deconstructive and dialogic view, we might keep in mind that colonialism
and slavery were forms of enforced inclusion—even while we can simultaneously recognize the
ways in which exclusion was also at play. Often, inclusive ideologies are only selectively so, and
actually quite adamantly exclusive. Exclusion and inclusion go hand in hand, they cannot be
separated: practicing one, we also inevitably practice the other. Even further, being essentially
simulative, an ideology of any kind always includes only its own Truths, its own imagination,
and excludes all others. Thus ideology takes a unidimensional view of matters, ignoring the
dimensional multiplicities that really do exist and remaining willfully blind to, or else justifying,
the exclusions inherent within the ideology itself. Essentially this controversial matter of
subjectivity and perspective brings us back to the hinged door at the beginning of The Left Hand: inclusive ideology holds its door paradigmatically shut against a radical acceptance of exclusivity, including its own. Ideology undermines the reality that mutual exclusion, that is, rendering a significant and meaningful difference between forms (such as that between the sexes) allows all forms to be more fully intelligible.

To put it bluntly, with the referentials, and so too the variety, liquidated, all discourse is locked in simulation. Subsequently, all apparent social change and even some expressions of diversity are also simulative rather than real. In one sense we might understand simulation as a form of latency. But when forms are distinguishable and recognized as mutual they can be brought out of simulation, into coherent, cooperative, and potent creative dialogue.

As quite clear from the “inclusion” of females within the overshadowing scope of “universal” masculine referents, to ignore differences between people is to deny the truth, the real. When we empower all people to signify independently, and so interdependently, rather than co dependently—dependency and the disempowerment that goes with it being one of the “Master’s” primary tools of mutual bondage (along with denial)—we allow for more stabilized and coherent creative dialogue. Such mutual stability would allow a powerful united stance with which to face the remains of historical hierarchies in our social codes and institutions—such as that which prevents Jackson from uttering a definition of ‘woman.’ The maintenance of a sensible, bodily-based discursive boundary⁵⁷ not only allows us to recognize the oppressions and needs of unique individuals, it also allows the paradigmatic door to swing open. The shut door,

⁵⁷ That is, to unite the body as a concrete entity with the abstractions of real discourse—the kind that prevents, for example, the treatment of women as mere chattel enslaved by nature of their reproductive biology.
as demonstrated not only by Genly but also by many of the Gethenian characters he encounters, including Karhide’s king, perpetuates fear-based division and confusion. It leaves us susceptible to simulation—we can talk all we like, but the real, the truth of the conversation remains unintelligible. We cannot understand nor see one another through the metaphorical shut door. The door swung open, however, allows for integration: a form of radical acceptance that in turn allows for creative transformation—the actual remedy to entrenched patterns of hierarchical exploitation.

Though it has often been misunderstood by groups of radicals seeking social change, integration is not the same as assimilation. Integration allows an ultimately unlimited diversity of mutually acknowledged forms to work together discursively—dialogically; and to generate greater, mutually beneficial meaning as well as concrete experiences of the self and others. It is represented in *The Left Hand of Darkness* by the cooperatively governing body of the Ekumen. Integration is one of many reasons it’s so important to include an understanding of Science Fiction as a genre when considering this work: it is by nature of bringing what we definitively refer to as literary art, and what we definitively refer to as science together, integratively.

And despite Le Guin’s eventual comments to the contrary, the novel *is* ultimately more about integration than it is about gender. In her earliest statements in response to the critical focus on the “‘gender problems’” in the novel, Le Guin protectively described it as primarily about “betrayal and fidelity” (*Dancing*, 8).58 Through the metaphor of human interrelationship,

58 She later amended the statement, saying “I had opened up a can of worms and was trying hard to shut it. ‘The fact is,’ however, that there are other aspects to the book, which are involved with its sex/gender aspects quite inextricably” (*Dancing*, 8)
these words can be understood in terms of simulation and the real. The liquidation of referentials inherent to simulation is a betrayal of the real, a fidelity to the simulation. On the other hand, dissimulation, though also a betrayal of the real, remains nevertheless grounded in an essential fidelity to the real—so it may be considered an act of loyalty, especially in the case of art and fiction. So, in order to remain dialogic, we must understand the interplay and mutual value of both fidelity and betrayal, without losing sight of their distinctive differences. The Gethenian dissimulation, then, represents a form of fidelity to the real existence of both the male and female sexual form, as well as the innate masculine and feminine traits that exist, with varying levels of socially-governed allowance and formal expression, within all humans—even while, as a fiction, it is a sort of betrayal of the truth of human biological dimorphism. It is also a betrayal of socialized simulations that pin divisionary gender codes to the sexed body, one that has radical implications regarding the falsehood of the gender-conformist ideology that mandates, updates, and perpetuates such codes. In short, the novel reveals integration itself as a form of fidelity to the truth of the multidimensionality of forms (such as the body) and their essentially dialogic interdependence. This is in turn a form of betrayal toward more assimilative and reductive monologic patterns featured, engaged, and integrated within its pages.

The novel likewise supports integration in a multitude of forms, including but not limited to that of masculine and feminine characteristics within the human individual; the culturally

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59 Here we clearly see the potential for hierarchical value to be stripped from an attachment to the meaning of the words: fidelity is not necessarily higher or better (or more privileged, accept in the imagination) than betrayal, though as a social principle, fidelity is often not only valued, it is an absolute imperative regardless of what ideology is prescribed (whether it be labeled liberal or conservative, for example). How this interweaves with the discussion of Traitors and loyalty in the novel is another facet for exploration.
unhierarchical integration of both male and female as expressions of the diversity of human life untethered to gendered expectations; an integration of genres, and even of the Eastern and Western hemispheres. There we might draw an analogy too of a fertile union between the analytical and categorical, calculative logic of the left hemisphere of the brain, with the feeling, intuitive, holistic and creative right side of the brain—and do so safely without assigning either the East nor the West a fixed correspondence to left or right, left and right being always a matter of relative subjectivity even while they also remain fixed within the body. An integrative mind utilizes logic that is grounded in the feeling, creative aspects of human being: most formal poetry, for example, requires both a knack for counts and measures as well as creative flair—metaphor is an essentially holistic exercise that also relies on an understanding of categories. And, as more meticulously examined in this project’s first chapter, the novel is very much about a characteristically split subject position undergoing an integration of the feeling body with the thinking mind as the subject moves experientially—sensually—through a space and time populated with a multiplicity of spaces, times, genres, bodies, subjects, and perspectives. It thus becomes impossible to comprehensively apply the unilateral or two-dimensional logic often present in monologism without distortion: we must begin to recognize human beings, art, culture, music, mathematics—namely, all things—as essentially multidiimensional instead, and integration the process by which multiplicity is rendered increasingly, expansively, intelligible.

60 Referring of course to Le Guin’s practice of Taosim infused within the novel, as well as the similarities between the religious institutions of Karhide and Orgoreyn and other Eastern philosophical and religious beliefs
And, to be more completely dialogic—more completely just—even simulations are inextricably connected to the real they are designed to obliterate. They can, once we identify them, give us clues about the real they omit by nature of the binary reversals they attempt to sublimate and deny. The process of coming into cognizance of simulations as sources of potentially sensible data without being seduced by them enables a gradual paradigmatic expansion of considerable, but not impossible, magnitude relative to the current trajectory of our increasingly narrowed and divisive times: our times are not nearly so ideologically distant from their medieval roots as we tend to want to frame the progressive self of postmodernity. Our thinking wasn’t always so cerebrally restrictive, though. In “Historical Origins of the Mind/Body Split,” Richard Lind describes a delineating shift in the location of subjectivity in ancient western history:

A subjectivity experienced in the centric region of the heart,⁶¹ and in the body as a whole, began to be avoided in favor of the eccentric head as a new location of subjectivity. In ancient literature, for example in Homer’s epics, the heart and various other bodily organs were described as centers of subjectivity and organs of perception for spiritual experience and communion with others and the world. Mind and body were integrated. But also in the early historical record, as in the Old Testament, the heart and body were increasingly described as rebellious and rejected as impure. Head and heart, mind and body, became estranged. The body was judged an unsuitable, impure vessel for spiritual experience.

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⁶¹ These ancient ideas about the heart as a center of consciousness are actually now completely reconciled by medical science; “the heart sends more signals to the brain than vice versa” (Alshami, “Pain: Is It All in the Brain or the Heart?”); see works cited.
This change in the location of subjectivity presaged the later development of Platonic, Gnostic, Christian, and Cartesian distinctions favoring mind over and against the body (23).

Lind’s statement reflects much of the modern rejection and hesitation to ground theoretical ideology and abstraction in the actual lived, biological experience of the body: a closed door between the thinking mind and the feeling body. In a sense, the fictional existence of the Gethenians, their relatively embodied consciousness and their internal unification of the sexual binary allows us to see, perhaps with some pain, the ways in which the sexual binary in many of our own cultures has been, in comparison, a source of disparity, traumatic divisions, fragmentation and strife—even though it needn’t ever have been. Through dissimulation, the truth of human subjective fracture is made visible. The integrationism in Le Guin’s work is therefore less about doing something new as it is about restoring something old, something primary to human being: something traumatically lost. Something which, found and resuscitated, enables the generation of what we might find to be more remarkably revolutionary than our current histories have yet managed.

For oppression and exploitation are traumatic, and self-perpetuating. They recycle and repeat. Trauma is historical—ancestral. It happens both in time and is suspended outside of time, passed down genetically, and it lives quite literally in the cells, the concrete space, of the body. And though it is set in the future, The Left Hand of Darkness is as concerned formally and conceptually with the past and present; and how all three are essentially entwined: the events of

62 https://www.health.com/condition/ptsd/generational-trauma; see works cited
the past and the promise of the future dialogically inform the present moment—though we may simulate otherwise. One of the most interesting ways I can think of to frame the activity of simulation, one that reflects this dissociated loss of the body-conscious connection in exchange for the mind, involves the dialectical counterpart to what was described in ancient Greece—in the era Lind describes as characterized by a loss of body-consciousness—as *hysteria*, or the phenomenon of the “wandering uterus.” It was thought to be the cause of women’s emotional expressions, or emotional “excess,” especially those rooted in anger, grief, displeasure, or injustice—in short, anything that revealed her emotional intelligence and innate recognition of the harms of hierarchical oppression present in male/female dynamics. Itself a form of simulation, the invented condition became a justification for many things, including an exclusion of women from politics and philosophy. An attachment to her emotional life, one rooted in visceral, embodied responses (which men did not antithetically lack—only theirs were normalized and thus rendered less visible) and an acute hormonal sensitivity to the physical and social climate that differed from that experienced by males, rendered her unfit in the eyes of men to contribute to the work of building, shaping, and guiding society—instead of being a valuable partner, a second set of eyes/I’s, so to speak. These beliefs were well cemented even earlier than Aristotle laid them out more definitively for much of western civilization to follow; a blueprint for social construction that was divorced from a consideration for the deeper and more multiplicitous and varied intelligences of the body. In short, because it interfered with the strictly mental monologisms employed in the erection of western civilization, a woman’s way of relating to the world was effectively erased from its development.
So what might we call the dialectical counterpart to an antithetically unruly and wandering uterus? For Aristotle it seems to be the fixed phallus: a form of unwavering and emotionally detached rationalism that is essentially built upon synthetic processes and presumably can only be exercised by biological males. That is if we use mirroring logic, though. If we draw an analogy, we arrive at the wandering rather than fixed phallus and a congruent form of “disorder,” one that, detached from the physical body and its innate emotional responses to environmental stimuli, wanders away from the real of the sensual world and into the activity of simulation. And like “hysteria” in women, we might consider this sort of dissociation an understandable reaction to the trauma of being ideologically split and repressed by the categorization of “female” and “feminine” as not only hierarchically subordinate but also inferior. While it is not true that a uterus can wander, nor that emotional responses are a sign of illness, the physio-emotional difficulties affecting women as a result of traumatic subordination was real, and those who imagined that the uterus could wander were perhaps on some level sensitive to the reality of resulting dissociation in women, even if they were oblivious to its cause and unable to accurately describe its mechanism. And then in their ignorance, they solved this problem, via the activity of rationalism detached from the real, with more trauma, compounding rather than alleviating the root cause of women’s unhappiness—thus contributing further to their

63 This is by no means a far-fetched argument. Take, for example, King Missile’s 1992 tongue-in-cheek ballad-style alternative rock song “Detachable Penis” which relates the story of a young urban man in search of his habitually wandering penis. The song is dissimulative, rather than simulative, highlighting the fixedness of biology and the ungroundedness of the imagination.
own disordered relationship with the truth not only of their female counterparts but also that of their own socio-emotional climate.

For, as this thesis has explored, all human beings, analogous with the Gethenians, possess both masculine and feminine traits. All human beings are the propagation of both a female, an egg (which we might consider a material expression of feminine creative energy), and a male, a sperm (a material expression of masculine creative energy)—as they say, it takes two to tango. All human beings, therefore, have their own unique potential expression of both creative forms, even while they do not have material access to an embodied experience of the opposite sex.64 Thus the enforcement of strict ideological divisions between the sexes on the basis of biological difference and the resulting oppression and sexual exploitation of women, coupled with the consequent social coding of masculine and feminine expressions, has tremendous impact on men and women alike, because both are, in part, essentially feminine. Despite distinguishable, sensible differences, there is more that connects the sexes than divides them. As the story’s depiction of Gethenian sexual unification suggests, the sexes are interdependent with one another. Furthermore, it reveals that the simulation of division is rooted not in the dimorphism of sex itself, but in the traumatic dissociation of the mind from the body that inhibits the perception of whole rather than fragmented subjectivity; such as that which we saw with Genly’s early inability to recognize so-called “feminine” qualities in himself, nor the true interconnectedness

64 Although every human being on the planet shares in common the experience of being gestated inside a female body—we are all literally cultured with tangible femininity. It is an extricable part of who all of us are, whatever socially conditioning we are subjected to after birth.
of both sexes. His impulse was to separate and divide them along an axis of the imagined real and the imagined projected.

That someone like Aristotle, whose logic was foundational to western thought, was already working in an environment where body and mind, emotions and rationalism, were ideologically rent from one another in mutual exile (exile being one of the primary themes in The Left Hand) suggests that his entire philosophy might be considered more descriptive than inventive. It reflects the cognitive results of this traumatic cultural split, one that had already occurred; and was well-entrenched enough to articulate. This would be contrary to the stance of his having created something inherently new, though a dialogic reading acknowledges both description and invention as simultaneously true: he did after all arrive at a novel way of describing and consciously utilizing what had already been, even if he did not recognize it as distinct from what could be, which always involves multiplicity, instead of what monologically must be.

Whether such a split is either acknowledged or even recognized, both men or women might then suffer from the condition of a “wandering uterus” and a “wandering phallus” simultaneously—the two being mutually inextricable. We might describe Genly in the first chapter of The Left Hand as suffering from just such an affliction, and his entire journey as one that helps unite not only his understanding of the sexes as mutual rather than hierarchical, but also unites his cognitive and emotional life within the body of his one physical person. This emerges in the second half of the novel, where his shifting emotional connection with Estraven allows a correspondent shift in both his thinking and his ability to connect through a literal
dialogue of the minds. Both of these wandering organ conditions are of course only symbolic: part of the poetry of the person, and essentially a form of dissimulation—one which preserves the real. Sexual organs do not physically traverse the body (nor wander outside the body), but the emotional (related historically and simulatively with the female) and cognitive (related historically and simulatively with the male) life of a person may be unfixed from an embodied connection with the real. Dissociation is a real consequence of trauma, including events that have been common in most of global history such as war, famine, social repression, violent crime, and natural or human-inflicted disaster. And though Genly’s journey of at least partial internal reunification is enabled by a dialogic relationship with persons whose bodies and minds are relatively, if not completely, unified, even the Gethenian people are, at the time of the novel, manifesting the violent divisions indicated by the traumas of their own cultural history, also revealed in the novel.

Thus Le Guin’s inclusion of historical material sheds light on the ways in which historical trauma manifests itself in present-day narratives and events, offering analogies for our own. And simultaneous with sociopolitical fractures and divisions, the sexual binary in Gethenians remains nevertheless intact, thus excluding the sort of fracture of sexual binary present in our own world and suggesting that an inherently intact self still exists even if latent—all while maintaining an essentially dualistic (simultaneously inclusive and exclusive) structure. Subsequently Le Guin also excludes the necessity of viewing binary pairs themselves as the primary source of cultural cognitive disparity—a mistake common in deconstructionist thinking.

65 I am referring of course to the mind speech featured in Chapter 18, “On the Ice.”
The person is whole, it is the simulative systems found in politics and larger society (politics only representing one part of society, one that simulates itself to be the whole) that are fractured: even though society tends to project the opposite. In reality, trauma that divides the mind from the body is the source of disparity, not those binaries which are naturally present in the body and other organic forms. The wholeness of the person, the cooperation of feeling body and thinking mind thus become the stabilizing force which serves to destabilize simulations.

I’d like to finish off where I began, with Barbara Christian’s emphatic assertion of the power of literature to unite the sensual body with language and thus render one’s lived experience real. In her essay The Race for Theory, Christian expounds on the dangers of the western literary world’s monologic focus on philosophical abstraction at the expense of a more sensually grounded relationship with the human art of written expression. At least, this is her concern more generally. More specifically, her concern is with the ways in which the emerging theoretical trend, rising out of New Critical tradition and primarily focused on reflexive analyses of the reader/critic, remained completely ignorant not only of the literature of relatively marginalized authors, their art form, and the unique existence which these authors affirmed into being, but also of texts themselves as not just an object, but a subjective and sensual expression of a living, breathing, feeling author. She points out the privileged position of abstracted theory—particularly informed by western white culture, but increasingly picked up just as detrimentally by a wide range of diverse scholars, including black scholars, as they strive for academic visibility and recognition. This practice had subsequently, in her view, severely undermined the position of literary art itself, particularly that of black female authors. Authors (and specifically black female authors), she argues, are more than the “dead, irrelevant, mere
vessels through which their narratives ooze;” that their work is both intentionally and intuitively aware of power dynamics and grounded in organic intelligence—*not* “as disembodied as the angels” (56) that modern scholarship presumes it to be.

What she describes, in essence without naming it directly, is the phenomenon of simulation, where the signs utilized within the theoretical scholarship about which she writes are several times removed or abstracted with no grounding in the real: “critics are no longer concerned with literature, but with other critics' texts, for the critic yearning for attention has displaced the writer and has conceived of himself as the center” (Christian 52). She positions literary art as the real, not just marginalized but ousted; and theory as a simulation that overlays or overlooks this real. Her indictment conjures the image of a sort of superimposed narcissistic mirror within which critics could find a theoretical ideology reflected, often leaving the literature itself, and the vital expressions it contains, out of the picture. And then each new wave of young scholars is trained to do the same, and instructed in the latest mutations of theoretical, often also *political*, ideology. And so, the development of new theories and critical approaches to reading become variously interchangeable and ever-reinventing monocles through which the systemically favored eye of abstraction is allowed to see. Christian’s observations are precisely along the lines of what I’ve hoped to illustrate in covering various scholars and their sometimes appropriative use of Le Guin’s novel—appropriations made in the name of abstraction. There is always more to the story, as it were, than monologic applications of theory can uncover.

But Christian does more than simply draw a line between the abstractions of theory and the concreteness of sensual language: she recognizes them as united, integrated in the works of authors like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker:
people of color have always theorized - but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity? And women, at least the women I grew up around, continuously speculated about the nature of life through pithy language that unmasked the power relations of their world. My folk, in other words, have always been a race for theory - though more in the form of the hieroglyph, a written figure which is both sensual and abstract (52).

Her recognition of the integrative potential of literary art, when it’s rooted in the kind of dynamic multiplicity also exhibited by Le Guin, suggests that literature itself offers a more holistic, from-the-ground-up version of that which modern theoretical criticism seeks to obtain in a more hierarchically top-down, mind-over-body manner.

She does preclude, though, figures like Bakhtin, for example, whose highly abstract theorizing about the novelistic form are quite structural in nature and rose directly out of his studies of the conceptually dynamic and socially observant art of authors like Rabelais and Dostoevsky. Or Baudrillard, whose discursively dense and highly abstract elucidation of simulacra closely resembles some of her own, more textually-grounded observations. They too exhibit some blind spots, as does Christian herself. But each of these figures nevertheless offers, even from within the limitations of their own personal perspective, more of the picture many of us hope to be able to see better.
And without a relationship with the physical reality of the body and the tactile, observable, sensible world and the words we use to describe it, everything we did as scholars or as writers of fiction would be nothing more than gaslighting. It is for this reason that Le Guin’s own literature serves as much as a proposed theory of reading itself, perception and interpretation, as it does a work of fiction. In its persistent grounding in the realities and limitations of the mind, the effects of history, and the physical body—even while playing with metaphors made fictionally concrete—her distinction and integration of forms, voices, points of view, and its insistence on multiplicity, encourages us to explore a multidimensional rather than flat relationship with the world while maintaining a sensible anchor in unifying poetic structures. While it accepts and exposes monologic blind spots and the simulations that hide them, the novel insists that the real is tangibly focused in sensible structures, bodies—whether these bodies be made up of terrain, collections of individuals, a single individual, even words.

It reminds us, too, without contradiction, that even creative art and the language with which it is built may be divorced from the organic conversations of the body and co-opted by the conversations of the mind; that this is not only sometimes probable but common. Such a commonality is precisely why feminist scholars are able to recognize and deconstruct the detached and objectifying male gaze in Romantic era poetry, for example. It’s also what enabled Joanna Russ⁶⁶ to identify the ways in which femaleness in science fiction was so often prescriptive rather than truly expressive: the exercise of art didn’t prevent neither the exercise of monocular projection onto the female body, nor its objectification, nor the cookie-cutter

⁶⁶ From “The Image of Women in Science Fiction;” see works cited.
applications of socialized gender roles—whether written by men or women. A society’s art is a reflection of the social paradigms at play, and precisely why, to give another example, much of Russian art before and after the Stalinist period is so remarkably distinguishable.

Or, to bring the matter closer to home, why art such as Le Guin’s is radically discernible from, say, Robert Heinlein’s—even though they share not just a generic branch on the literary family tree, but also the more pervasive thematic simulation of universal male centrality. The latter (universalized male centrality, not Heinlein) might be described as a sort of parasite, a mistletoe, inhabiting the branch. But even parasites have their place in thriving ecosystems. Relative to Heinlein, however, Le Guin is far more critically aware of this simulated male universalism. And as we have already covered, even she admits in hindsight that over time her awareness of how it permeated her own language and imagination shifted from where it had been when she initially wrote the novel, though she may not have been aware of the ways in which this shift sometimes narrowed more than broadened her scope. Perhaps inevitably, self-centrality and the internalized divisions—the co-optations of the self by aspects of society—show up not only in the further abstracted exercise of theorizing about theory, but also directly in literary scholarship, and art. All are potentially subjected to forms of colonization.

All of which isn’t to say that literature, and theory for that matter, aren’t often vital as a means for uncovering more of the real, more of the self, and excavating it from beneath social simulations—even in the case of something like Romantic era males and their love poetry, which was, in its own day, a radically sensual, emotional (or we could say feminine) reaction to the (masculine) rationalism of the Enlightenment and its byproduct, the Industrial Revolution. For its artists it was a form of resistance and personal survival in a time that was as monologic, divisive
and contentious as our own. It also played a role in the birth of modern forms: Mary Shelley’s psycho-socially insightful and emotionally profound *Frankenstein*, for example, is often cited as the first work of science fiction. That the artistic act is a sensible form of self-affirmation and survival is precisely Christian’s most fundamental point, and quite literally the foundation of this entire thesis.67 For much like Christian declares, “what I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life. And I mean that literally” (61), Le Guin identifies the narrative act as an act of survival: “narrative is a stratagem of mortality. It is a means, a way of living. […] It asserts, affirms, participates in directional time, time experienced, time as meaningful” (*Dancing*, 39). Narrative is a creative body, an abstract yet living structure upon which our present lives, our histories, our futures climb, bloom, wither and die—advancing and receding, reseeding and renewing, over and over again. It affirms not just the possibility but the inevitability of change. Le Guin was alive when I began this thesis. Now she is dead. But her work lives on. Metaphorically, it continues to breathe: to inspire.

The organic biology of which all organic forms, including art,68 are and always have been composed, choreographed, is not a singular phenomenon but a dance with the environment, the terrain of our existence; both suspended and animated in layers of space and time. Such characteristics as race arise from the multiplicity of dances across the world and across time. They are a dance between the human body, the narratives of its genome, and the many diverse regions and climates of the body of the earth that give rise to adaptive genetic variations.

67 There was no escape from these alliterative strings. Succumb. Or reject. Or both simultaneously. As you will.
68 I don’t mean to say that the physical pages or material substance of literature is necessarily biological—but I do mean to say that the expressive impulse is.
Biological sex characteristics, being universally binary among every single race of human beings and all other mammals on the planet, are another part of that dance, the part that enables evolutionary creativity. We, unlike asexual organisms, do not produce clones.\(^{69}\) We produce, we generate diversity, very literally, by nature of our sexual binary. Art in all its many forms, including culture, is a direct expression of that creative diversity.

And narrative, according to psychologists, is healing: “research tells us that recovery from trauma is not a process that occurs in isolation, but requires a collective process through which the story and the intense pain is heard, witnessed and shared.”\(^{70}\) Not just the pain, but the “passion, insight, and beauty” (Christian, 51) that is the balm and the gift of the pain. That we intuitively know and seek its healing potential is probably why so many female readers felt cheated by the male pronoun in *The Left Hand*: it severed in the imagination of many half of who Estraven, the figure through which they might recover lost aspects of themselves, really was—the half that represented who they already know themselves and others like them to be. That made it more difficult to embrace, in either Estraven or even in Genly, those “alien” masculine traits which could also be theirs. It also very likely made actually feminine traits invisible, unintelligible to them. I can’t explain why, exactly, the male pronoun was less troubling to my own imagination—I have been no less steeped in a bodily experience of cultural misogyny myself. And in spite of the many pages of carefully-considered argument I have just exercised

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\(^{69}\) Except of course via simulation. But I grew tired of belaboring that point. Nevertheless, to be more thorough, dialogism includes the synthetic “clones” we produce with the dissociated mind.

\(^{70}\) https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/two-takes-depression/201401/why-your-story-matters; see works cited
鼓励一个更扩展的心态，我不会争辩这些女性的感情，
也不。莱因的“思维实验”（LHD ii），肯定将女性和男性带入
未开发的水域。在辩证思维和对对话主义的意识下，我们
将永远达到我们所知的边缘。我们将不断地到达
未知的地方，在那里，我们看到的只是我们所知的。这
是直到我们有勇气相信自己的感性，用双眼看
未知；我们的思想和心灵对话地开放。

失望，不满，愤怒——这些都是我们
身体内的直观反应，尽管它们不是每
个小说读者都体验到的，包括我。
但是，它们仍然是真实的。它们深深
地植根于我们的生活经验，甚至基因存
档的经验。我们的思维解释它们，分
类它们为“想要的”或“不想要的”，并
讲述一个关于它们的故事。这个故事
有意义，即使它没有。它是真实的。我们
是它的读者，它的编辑，它的角色；而我们
也是其原始作者。
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