

SEIZED  
BY THE  
LEFT  
HAND

TUESDAY SMILLIE

DUNDEE CONTEMPORARY ARTS

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BY THE  
LEFT  
HAND



## INTRODUCTION



It was from the difference between us, not from the affinities and likenesses, but from difference, that that love came: and it was itself the bridge, the only bridge across what divided us.<sup>1</sup>

The chapbook in your hand forms part of a multifaceted project called *Seized by the Left Hand*, unfolding across the winter months in 2019/20 at Dundee Contemporary Arts and inspired by the writings of Ursula K. Le Guin.

In our collaborative curatorial work over the past few years, Le Guin has appeared again and again as a guiding light of sorts. Her work constantly hints at new ways for us to think about how we might articulate our intentions together, and tenderly instructs us to use our imagination productively in order to hold space for other voices with care and compassion, whether within the architecture of a gallery or between the pages of a book.

*Seized by the Left Hand* takes as its starting point some of the particular ideas contained within Le Guin's 1969 novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Written fifty years ago, this masterpiece of feminist science fiction is set on an icy planet called 'Gethen' (which translates to 'Winter') whose inhabitants shift and change gender continuously throughout their lives. We as readers are

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told the story of Gethen from a human perspective through the eyes of protagonist Genly Ai, an envoy sent to the planet to attempt to convince Gethenian governments to join an interplanetary trade coalition.

The book had a profound impact on the sci-fi genre at the time of its publication and remains hugely relevant to the world around us today, posing serious and challenging questions about gender, sexuality, the environment, language, communication, power and empire.

We have been using *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a lodestar of sorts, attempting to invoke Le Guin's endlessly generous spirit to draw together a community of different artistic voices from all over the world. Within the galleries, we are holding space for a constellation of new ideas put forward by Sophia Al-Maria, Andrew Black, Harry Josephine Giles, Emma Wolf-Haugh, Isaac Julien, Flora Moscovici, Abel Rodríguez, Victoria Sin, Tuesday Smillie, Manuel Solano, Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa and Ming Wong. Further to this, a public programme of performances, talks, discussions and workshops led by musicians, poets, writers and thinkers such as Matthew Jarron, Quinie, Nat Raha, Nisha Ramayya, Sarah Shin, Mijke van der Drift, and Sgàire Wood is taking place to draw out fascinating discursive and performative possibilities within the project.

It would of course be impossible to undertake this work inspired by Le Guin without championing new forms of writing, poetry and storytelling and we are thrilled to be able to publish three new chapbooks as part of the project (one of which you are currently holding), containing texts by Tuesday Smillie, CAConrad and Huw Lemmey.

In the pages that follow, you'll find a razor-sharp essay by Tuesday where she embarks on a close analytical reading of *The Left Hand of Darkness* from a contemporary transfeminist position. In this piece she sensitively critiques the novel as a

'complicated and compelling cultural document', offering up important observations about certain failings within the work, but also noting that Le Guin throughout her life continually updated her politics and learned from previous shortcomings. In doing so, she managed to craft 'a model for how creative practice can and should be integrated into political work' – a model that we all ought to pay close attention to in the present moment.

In the other chapbooks, you'll find two further remarkable works: a text by CAConrad that folds prose and poetry together to articulate an intimate and powerful position of resistance to binary states within capitalism and patriarchy, and a beautiful short piece of memoir-fiction by Huw Lemmey that delves into the author's own past to create worlds within worlds.

We are humbled by and deeply grateful to Tuesday, CA and Huw for responding so generously to our invitation to write and for deepening and enriching, with their words, our enquiry into a novel so close to our hearts.

Along with everyone else in the project, these writers, much like Le Guin was throughout her life, are engaged in the vital act of radical imagining: crafting alternative spaces that hint at ways in which we all might better live, love and care for one another. We warmly invite you to step into these worlds with us.

Eoin Dara & Kim McAleese  
Co-Curators

1. Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, (New York: Ace, 2019).








## RADICAL IMAGINATION, AUTOCRITIQUE AND ACCOUNTABILITY:

### URSULA K. LE GUIN'S CONSTRUCTION OF GETHEN AND THE MODELLING OF CREATIVE PRACTICE AS A RADICAL TOOL



TUESDAY SMILLIE

Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a complicated and compelling cultural document.<sup>1</sup> Since being published in 1969, the novel has continued to capture the attention and imagination of politicised readers, while simultaneously being an ongoing target for socially situated critique. The world building within *The Left Hand of Darkness*; the configurations of society, of culture, and of human bodies, offers respite from the hierarchical constrictions and exploitation of human life on Earth. In building the fictional world of Gethen, Le Guin undertakes a number of politically charged investigations into markers of difference. These investigations focus on the particularities of gender and race, or rather, on their absence. *The Left Hand of Darkness* explores what a world could look like without these markers. Despite the potency of Le Guin's project, the novel has a number of limitations, particularly when read through a contemporary transfeminist lens.<sup>2</sup> The moments of imaginative and political failure are painfully problematic, re-inscribing the very hierarchal social structures Le Guin set out to unmake, as well as structures adjacent to them. Through these constrictions however, something else is made visible. A string of texts written by Le Guin, in constellation around the novel, capture a larger narrative. While the depiction of gender, the negation of racial hierarchy, and the absence of exploitation on Gethen first captured my attention, what holds my attention

is Le Guin's dynamic practice of radical imagination, and its interweaving with a rigorous process of autocritique. Such politicised endeavours were inevitably informed by Le Guin's social location, but they present strategies for ways of moving through the world that supersede the specifics of identity. By daring to dream another world and by being willing to take ownership of the deficiencies within that dream, Le Guin models a use of radical imagination as a critical tool for envisioning how the hierarchical social structures of our world can be remade.

## ● A TRANSFEMINIST READING OF THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS

I first read *The Left Hand of Darkness* late in my 20s. A latecomer to science fiction, the novel felt like a gift. The book comes early in the trajectory of Le Guin's career and focuses so intently on world building that it can be hard to become invested in the protagonists, a barrier reinforced by the blatant misogyny of the novel's primary narrator. Despite these challenges, I was thrilled to fall into a world of malleable gender, a world devoid of rigid gender roles and hierarchal stratification based on race. As a white, transgender woman who is suspicious of stable configurations of binary gender and invested in social equality, the rich world building of such a society was more than enough to capture my attention. The unique biological and cultural configurations of life on Gethen are present throughout the course of the story, but Le Guin does not exploit them as plot points. The un-gendering and un-racing of Gethenians serves as a backdrop, against which the novel unfolds.

In an essay reflecting on the novel from 1976, Le Guin refers to *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a "thought experiment," writing, "I eliminated gender to find out what was left. Whatever was left would be, presumably, simply human."<sup>3</sup> This leveraging of creative practice as a means of radical inquiry is central to the

text's ongoing potency, some 50 years later. She uses her writing as a means to reach beyond the constructs of gender and race, looking for the "simply human." In doing so, Le Guin models imagination as a radical practice, a means of feeling her way to another world. Despite the potency of this gesture and the text's ability to continue to engage the political imagination of artists and activists, *The Left Hand of Darkness* simultaneously presents a constrictive, heteronormative, deconstruction of gender, and a two-dimensional deconstruction of race. While Le Guin attempts to write her way beyond the social constructs of her world, this project is unavoidably informed by the social configurations she has been steeped in. Her positioning as a white, cis-gendered, straight woman inevitably influences her perception, and imagining of what is "simply human." These painful rearticulations of power configurations familiar to Earth, are numerous and varied.

It is easy to pick a 50-year-old text, read it through a contemporary political lens, underscore its deficiencies and dismiss its potency, but Le Guin's deployment of her creativity as a liberatory tool is powerful and as such, merits thorough critical investigation. The analysis that follows looks at Le Guin's construction of Gethen in *The Left Hand of Darkness* through a contemporary transfeminist frame. The essay then broadens in focus, encompassing the larger constellation of Le Guin's texts that revolve around the novel, in order to explore her self-reflexive reengagement with her work. By claiming *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a proto-transfeminist text, I point to the novel's contribution to conversations about gender, race, and identity, through Le Guin's imagining and the criticism of that imagining. These debates and Le Guin's willingness to participate in them rigorously and thoughtfully ultimately contributed to the development of the critical vantage point utilised throughout this essay.

## GENLY AI'S MISOGYNY

The first stumbling block feminist readers may encounter is that the novel's primary narrator, Genly Ai, a cis-gendered human male, and an envoy to Gethen from Earth, holds deep-seated misogyny. Throughout the novel, when Ai describes ungended Gethenians in an unfavourable way, these descriptions are couched in the feminine and when he describes ungended Gethenians in a positive light, they are presented as masculine.<sup>4</sup> This bias is made clear in the first few pages of the novel, narrated by Ai, "...and I felt that he was meant to overhear. Annoyed by this sense of effeminate intrigue I got off the platform and lost myself in the mob..." and later, "Estraven's performance had been womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit."<sup>5</sup> Ai's disdain and distrust for the feminine is caustic, making the novel difficult to access for female, femme, and feminist readers alike. While presenting a barrier to the enjoyment of the text, Ai's misogyny does not mark the novel as misogynist, though it does in moments provide a platform for such a social vantage point.

Le Guin's use of her narrator's social worldview is strategic; considering her audience, the readers of science fiction in the West during the late 1960s, to be presumably largely cis-men. Ai carries the sexist biases he learned on Earth with him to Gethen, but in doing so he also provides a bridge to Earth-bound, primarily male readers who may harbour similar sentiments. Ai's sexism, though irksome and potentially painful for some readers, is meant to make the ungended world of Gethen more accessible to similarly sexist readers. Encountering sentiments like "womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance" can be irritating and evoke painful correlations to women's and femmes' lived experiences, but this gesture of making an unfamiliar world more accessible to other misogynists and in turn inviting them into Ai's gradual political and emotional evolution is a strategic manoeuvre.

## PRONOUNS

Le Guin's rearticulations of sexed biological binaries and of heteronormativity are less strategic, and being unintentional, are all the more painful. Throughout the novel, Le Guin refers to ungended characters with male pronouns. The bulk of this gendered projection happens through Ai, whose upbringing on Earth steeped him in heteronormative, which is to say patriarchal, gender norms. The use of male pronouns for ungended subjects, however is not exclusive to Ai. In various retellings of Gethenian myth and folklore Le Guin also asserts "he" as though it were gender neutral.<sup>6</sup> In doing so, her socialisation on Earth presents itself. Le Guin builds a universe out of thin air, but cannot imagine inventing a singular, gender-neutral pronoun.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, this newly constructed world is presented to the reader through an outsider's anthropological frame, but despite Ai's narrative notes on religious practices, government, and social structure, there is notable lack of acknowledgement about the use of pronouns or the void of verbal and cultural gender signifiers on Gethen.

## BIOLOGICAL BINARY & HETERONORMATIVITY

The uniqueness of Gethenian biology is fascinating. On a roughly monthly cycle Gethenians go into heat, a stage they call *kemmer*.<sup>8</sup> Once in kemmer they develop distinct gendered and/or sexed characteristics. The formations of these characteristics are primarily influenced by their interactions and flirtations with those around them, preferably with another subject or subjects also in kemmer. Despite the malleability of Gethenian biology, and the stark contrast it presents to the gendering and sexing of human bodies on Earth (where the majority of subjects make very few comparable transitions),<sup>9</sup> Le Guin's deconstruction of gender ultimately rearticulates cultural norms painfully familiar to those dominant on Earth.



The sexing of Gethenian bodies in kemmer appear to manifest in a strictly either/or configuration. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the bulk of the information about kemmer is filtered through the field notes of an early envoy, Ong Tot Oppong.<sup>10</sup> Oppong's notes indicate that sexual partners only form in binary, heterosexual pairings adding as an aside, "(? without exception? If there are exceptions, resulting in kemmer-partners of the same sex, they are so rare as to be ignored)."<sup>11</sup> The implications for Gethenians here are twofold. First, while the biological cycles of Gethenians are markedly distinct in their fluidity, the resulting sexed bodies appear to present a much more constrictive range of potential than found on Earth. Le Guin's configuration of how sexed bodies can manifest appears to dispose of a scientifically recognised spectrum of sex and gender related attributes acknowledged (though not necessarily respected) on Earth, including chromosomal, philological, and hormonal variation.<sup>12</sup> Second, the writing of an either/or binary all but eliminates the potential for homosexuality.<sup>13</sup> Le Guin's constriction seems to only consider the pragmatism of producing children, and while reproduction is crucial to the survival of a species, so are the social bonds and connectivity that any sexual exchange can engender. Le Guin's pragmatic erasure of homosexuality disregards the commonality of homosexual exchange found not only among humans on Earth, but also throughout mammalian species and the broader animal kingdom.<sup>14</sup> Despite the queerness of Gethenian biology, Le Guin's experiment in radical imagining ultimately narrows to erase the queerness and diversity present in her and her readers' world.

## SOCIETAL INSTITUTIONS

The question of how human culture on Gethen is distinct from those found on Earth is complicated. Gethen presents some explicitly utopian aspects: there is no war (though the potential for the first seems to be brewing in the course of the novel),

and there is an overarching absence of exploitation: economic, environmental, sexual, or otherwise. Reference is made to communities being structured primarily around somewhat interdependent groups of people in the hundreds, referred to as *hearths*.<sup>15</sup> Overall however, the reader is offered very little insight into how families are structured, how child-rearing transpires, or how communities are configured.<sup>16</sup> Le Guin's imagining of how larger cultural configurations could or would vary does not reach into the structuring of governmental bodies. The two governments encountered on Gethen are a monarchy and a bureaucracy, forms of government very familiar to life on Earth. I do not wish to assert that a genderedless society would inevitably result in distinct governmental entities, but a society devoid of social exploitation and based primarily around relatively small communities of people would indeed construct unfamiliar governmental structures.<sup>17</sup>

## THE ABSENCE OF RACE

Le Guin describes Gethenians as brown skinned and the Earthling envoy's skin tone as somewhat darker. Beyond these assertions however there is little in the novel that explicitly engages questions of race. Le Guin's positioning here takes the shape of a post-racial analysis, naming her characters' brownness and then proceeding to write a world, and a narrative without reference to race. Given the overwhelming whiteness of science fiction literature in the West from the 1960s and 1970s, Le Guin's dismissal of racialised hierarchies through the omission of light skinned people presents a radically different world. Explorations of how this world is racially configured and how those configurations might mirror or diverge from cultures on Earth, however, is entirely absent. This omission serves as a declaration of race's irrelevance, but can leave readers wanting more.<sup>18</sup> Le Guin's socialisation as a white person likely limits the scope of this project, but constructing a future that is predominantly brown undercuts recurring, white supremacist

erasure of black and brown people from the future of humanity.<sup>19</sup>

## ● MODELLING SELF-REFLEXIVE AUTOCRITIQUE

My critiques of Le Guin's construction of Gethen have focused exclusively on *The Left Hand of Darkness*. There is however a constellation of texts by Le Guin, which revolve around the novel. Other renderings of Gethen include "Winter's King" and "Coming of Age in Karhide": two short stories, one predating and one postdating the novel.<sup>20</sup> Le Guin also wrote an analytic essay responding to criticism of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, initially published as "Is Gender Necessary?," then heavily annotated and republished as "Is Gender Necessary? Redux."<sup>21</sup> Through these texts, Le Guin simultaneously provides a window into her evolving politic, while modelling thoughtful, critical self-reflection for her readers.

## A CONSTELLATION OF TEXTS

The short story "Winter's King," which was also first published in 1969, preceded the novel and acted as a seed for the longer text.<sup>22</sup> "Coming of Age in Karhide," first published decades later in 1995, sought to address a number of criticisms levelled at the novel, many of which are touched on here, and reflects Le Guin's political evolution. Readers' access to life on Gethen varies in all three of these texts, but "Coming of Age in Karhide" provides the most generous window into Gethenian social structures. As Le Guin reworks aspects of the world she had created and the human culture on it, she simultaneously strives for continuity between the distinct tellings. This consistency is thoughtful and treats her earlier writings with care; she does not simply undo, or unmake the parts of previous texts that no

longer serve her, but rather seeks to build on their realities, with an attention to detail. At times this means suggesting or subtly pointing to a previous narrator's bias or unreliability, and in doing so Le Guin underscores her own fallibility as a writer and narrator, mirroring the autocritique she deploys in her analytic writing.<sup>23</sup>

Le Guin explicitly engages with the criticism of her novel, while simultaneously tending to her own evolving politic.<sup>24</sup> The progression of Le Guin's thinking can be most explicitly traced in the essays "Is Gender Necessary?" and "Is Gender Necessary? Redux."<sup>25</sup> The first essay, originally published in 1976, responds to early critiques on the novel levelled by second-wave feminists and patriarchy of the science fiction community alike. The opinions from these two subject pools were varied and at times contradictory. Many feminists, including Joanna Russ, took issue with the masculinist air of the novel and deemed Le Guin's depiction of her protagonists as masculine, while science fiction writer Stanislaw Lem found the destabilisation of gender deeply troubling.<sup>26</sup>

In the initial publication of "Is Gender Necessary?," Le Guin takes a staunchly defensive posture, guarding her construction of Gethen and its inhabitants. She opens the essay by attempting to distance herself from the politicised nature of the novel, stating that she "was not a theoretician, a political thinker or activist, or a sociologist. I was and am a fiction writer."<sup>27</sup> Le Guin goes on to assert that "he" is English's singular, gender-neutral pronoun, without naming the patriarchal power imbedded in such language. She writes, "I utterly refuse to mangle English by inventing a pronoun for 'he/she.'"<sup>28</sup> In "Is Gender Necessary?," Le Guin does concede that she could have been more creative in her formation of governments. Pointing to the social structure of the hearth, as I have above, she writes, "I doubt the Gethenian governments, rising out of the cellular hearth, would resemble any of our own so closely. They might be better, they might be worse, but they would certainly be different."<sup>29</sup> She does not

address the questions of biological binaries or of her enforcement of heterosexuality, though neither of these concerns were raised in the criticism of her work from the early 1970s.

Le Guin's defensive positioning makes "Is Gender Necessary?" a deeply disappointing document from a transfeminist perspective as well as from other vantages, though not an entirely surprising one. The antagonism of the criticism levelled against her was pointed. The science fiction writer Alexei Panshin, for one, called the novel "a flat failure" in a review from 1969, citing Le Guin's use of masculine pronouns.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the most prominent feminist voices in the United States during the early 1970s belonged to cis-gendered white women, who championed essentialist gender narratives. Through the novel Le Guin, herself a heterosexual, cis-gendered, white woman, presents a divergent feminist narrative, positioning gender somewhere closer to social-construction than essentialism. Such a departure from the party politic was part of what marked her for critical ridicule. Given her social location and the broader cultural context, it would have been remarkable if Le Guin had evoked a more radical deconstruction of gender, race, and identity.

In 1988, Le Guin returned to "Is Gender Necessary?" The resulting document, "Is Gender Necessary? Redux", clearly outlines her shifting politic and perspectives. Le Guin maintained the original essay in its entirety, but added extensive footnote commentary. In these addendums Le Guin does not directly comment on her attempts to distance herself from the politicised nature of the project undertaken with *The Left Hand of Darkness*, reflected in her assertion that she "was not a theoretician, a political thinker or activist," but the essay as a whole honours the socially situated significance of the novel. Le Guin does concede that new, singular, gender-neutral pronouns are needed in English, and highlights that prior to the 16th century, they/them/their were commonly used as genderless singular pronouns.<sup>31</sup> She goes on to apologetically acknowledge

that she locked Gethenians into heterosexuality, stating that this was based on a "naively pragmatic view of sex."<sup>32</sup> Countering this, Le Guin asserts, "In any kemmerhouse homosexual practice would, of course, be possible and acceptable and welcome...." In a society without concretely gendered bodies, it feels hard to imagine the grounds on which homophobia could or would substantiate itself. Le Guin's reflection on the matter is likely in response to more recent criticism of the 1980s like the article, "Again, The Left Hand of Darkness: Androgyny or Homophobia?" by Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana Veith, published just two years prior to "Redux".<sup>33</sup>

In neither the original text nor the "Redux" does Le Guin comment on the relevance (or irrelevance) of race in the novel. The essay largely responds to the novel's critics, and discussions of race, as far as I have seen, were not a significant part of this critical dialogue. Given this context, the omission is not glaring, but its absence in the critical reception of her work highlights the whiteness of the science fiction community at the time, and the whiteness of the most widely recognised second-wave feminist debates. Its absence from Le Guin's own self-reflection suggests the limits of her post-racial imagination.

"Is Gender Necessary? Redux" does not present a politic perfectly aligned with a contemporary transfeminist perspective, but as a strategy it offers cultural critics something far more useful. In her modelling of autocritique, Le Guin demonstrates a process of public accountability. This process allows space for external critical analysis to be thoughtfully considered, while honouring and owning the work that made such critical engagement possible. Le Guin underscores the limits of her imagining of life on Gethen, through a public platform where her readers can clearly trace and consider the evolution of her thinking. Through engaging her creative practice and her past works in public autocritique in response to her critics and her own evolving worldview, Le Guin presents an invitation to her readers to interrogate their own opinions and politics, cultivating

a dynamic field of critical self-reflection.

With the short story “Coming of Age in Karhide,” Le Guin implements a number of her conclusions from “Is Gender Necessary? Redux” and does so by building upon the world she’d constructed, instead of rewriting it.<sup>34</sup> Le Guin does not implement an invented pronoun, but rather manages to gracefully avoid pronouns almost entirely for Gethenians who are not in kemmer, identifying characters by name, and by familial or social relation. While sexual exchanges are almost entirely absent from *The Left Hand of Darkness*, “Coming of Age in Karhide” provides a generous window into a kemmerhouse as well as into the social structure of the hearth, depicting the communal process of child-rearing, and the interweaving of communities into networks of extended family. While heterosexual engagement is still given priority in the arc of Le Guin’s narrative, the story’s protagonist does partake in a homosexual exchange. “Coming of Age in Karhide” is not seamlessly congruent with a contemporary transfeminist politic, but showcases Le Guin’s willingness to thoughtfully engage with criticism of her work and her own evolving politic.

## THE UNSHADOW – HOW WE PROCEED

Late in the novel Genly Ai and Therem Harth Rem Ir Estraven, Ai’s Gethen-born friend and ally, attempt to cross the Gobrin Glacier. Extreme circumstances have forced them into this situation, and neither is certain they will survive. During their journey, the weather conditions produce a snow-covered expanse with light evenly reflected in all directions. Ai describes the difficulty of attempting to traverse the tundra without any shadows to indicate depth:

At first the overcast was thin, so that the air was vaguely radiant with an even, sourceless sunlight reflected from both clouds and snow, from above and

below. Overnight the weather thickened somewhat. All brightness was gone, leaving nothing. We stepped out of the tent onto nothing. Sledge and tent were there, Estraven stood beside me, but neither he nor I cast any shadow. There was dull light all around, everywhere. When we walked on the crisp snow no shadow showed the footprint. We left no track. Sledge, tent, himself, myself: nothing else at all. No sun, no sky, no horizon, no world. A whitish-gray void, in which we appeared to hang... We should have been making good time. But we kept slowing down, groping our way across the totally unobstructed plain, and it took a strong effort of will to speed up to a normal pace. Every slight variation in the surface came as a jolt – as in climbing stairs, the unexpected stair or the expected but absent stair – for we could not see it ahead: there was no shadow to show it. We skied blind with our eyes open. Day after day was like this, and we began to shorten our hauls, for by mid-afternoon both of us would be sweating and shaking with strain and fatigue. I came to long for snow, for blizzard, for anything: but morning after morning we came out of the tent into the void, the white weather, what Estraven called the Unshadow.<sup>35</sup>

This frustrated and fumbling attempt to move forward toward a shared goal echoes individual and community based efforts to confront systems of power. It resonates with Le Guin’s attempt to write her way to another world; it resonates with community based efforts to build a shared politic; and it resonates with movements striving to dismantle and restructure systems and institutions of power. We push forward not knowing exactly how to get there or where there even is. We are so steeped in the violence of our present cultural, socio-political circumstance that it can be hard to envision or understand what our end goal tangibly looks like, but we try with each step, not knowing where our foot will land. Sometimes we hit the unexpected stair, sometimes we miss; sometimes we use male pronouns for a

planet full of beautiful androgynons and get called out by our peers. We keep trying, because we are hungry for a just world.

For readers invested in unmaking social systems of power, Le Guin's use of creative practice as a tool of radical imagining presents a powerful example of how we might proceed. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, she deliberately negates gendered and racialised hierarchical social structures in an attempt to feel her way toward what such a world could be like. Throughout the constellation of texts around Gethen, there are painful moments of erasure and reinscription, both reflecting the social structures of Western culture and perpetuating them. While these imaginative and political failures merit critique, we lose much more than we gain by dismissing the work outright.

Despite moments within *The Left Hand of Darkness* that speak to gender fluidity, the absence of racialised social stratification, and the depiction of a human culture devoid of exploitation, Le Guin has not constructed a flawless utopia. Instead, she models how creative practice can and should be integrated into political work. Le Guin offers a model where fucking up and being called out by our peers does not mark the end of a project, but provides the opportunity for a crucial turning point in the imagining of what that project could accomplish. To build another world, we must first be brave enough to imagine how that world could be, knowing we will make profound mistakes in the process. The potential for radical action, and for radical transformation is embedded in how we proceed as our failure becomes clear.

## ENDNOTES

\*. An earlier version of this essay, titled "Radical Imagination and The Left Hand of Darkness," was published in *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media & Technology* 12 (2017). That essay grew out of a presentation made at the 2016 Tiptree Symposium hosted by University of Oregon, discussing both the concepts engaged here as well as my then still in progress body of artwork: *Reflecting Light into The Unshadow* (2012-18), which visually and conceptually engages much of what is discussed here.

Deep gratitude to Alexis Lothian for nurturing and facilitating the growth of this essay through multiple stages of development.

1. Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, (New York: Ace, 2019).
2. Emi Koyama, "The Transfeminist Manifesto," in *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century*, ed. Rory Dicker, Alison Piepmeier, and Katha Pollitt (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), 244-59. Activist and rogue intellectual Emi Koyama defines transfeminism at its core as "a movement by and for trans women who view their liberation to be intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond." While I appreciate the broad reaching inclusivity of Koyama's statement, I want to underscore that to achieve "the liberation of all women and beyond" we must recognise the layering of various systems of power and prioritise the safety and wellbeing of those most vulnerable to state and social violence, in both concrete and abstract forms.
3. Ursula K. Le Guin, "Is Gender Necessary? Redux," in *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, ed. Susan Wood, (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), 158, 160.
4. Charlie Jane Anders, "Afterword by Charlie Jane Anders," in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Ursula K. Le Guin, (New York: Ace, 2019), 336-38. Charlie Jane Anders eloquently discusses Ai's misogyny.
5. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, 8, 12-13.
6. Le Guin, "The Nineteenth Day," "Estraven the Traitor," and "On Time and Darkness," in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, 45-48, 132-38, 174-76.



7. Le Guin discusses the question of pronoun use extensively in the analytic essay "Is Gender Necessary? Redux." Her positioning on the use of pronouns pivots over time and is explored later in this essay.

8. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, 95-103.

9. Puberty and menopause both present hormonal and physiological transitions that bear some resemblance to kemmer.

10. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, 95-103.

11. Ibid., 96.

12. It should be noted that this spectrum of variation was not widely acknowledged in the West during the 1960s, though the exclusion may feel glaring to readers today.

13. Le Guin would later recognise and apologise for her insistence on heterosexuality. Her acknowledgement is explored later in this essay.

14. Joan Roughgarden, *Evolution's Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People*, (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2004). Like the acknowledgement of biological variations among humans, Le Guin's erasure of homosexuality aligns with the erasure produced throughout dominant Western scientific discourse of the 1960s.

15. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

16. Joanna Russ, "The Image of Women in Science Fiction," in *Images of Women in Fiction; Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Susan Koppelman Cornillon, (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1973), 90. A feminist and science fiction writer, Russ critiqued the novel's lack of engagement with child-rearing and family structure.

17. Le Guin makes a similarly structured argument in "Is Gender Necessary? Redux," in response to early criticism of the novel by second wave feminists including Russ. This and other reassessments of her own work are discussed in depth in the following section.

18. Le Guin's post-racial vantage sits easily in a world with minimal racial differentiation. Le Guin however, is a storyteller from Earth, where the histories of contact between different races and distinct cultures are rife with violence and exploitation. Furthermore, the

moments where those cultural differences include differing configurations of gender often result in targeted violence. European colonial encounters with various "third gender" subjects present a testament to the interweaving of colonial conquest, control, and genocide. For a rigorously researched account of British attempts to eliminate Hijra in India, see: Jessica Hinchy, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c. 1850-1900*, (Cambridge University Press, 2019). For a queer analysis of Spanish genocide within the American Indian tribes of what would become California, see: Deborah A. Miranda, "Extinction of the Joyas: Genocide in Spanish California," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 1-2 (2010). Academic interest in this subject matter is relatively recent, though Alfred Louis Kroeber, Le Guin's father was an American Indian anthropologist, and her development of the Ekumen (the inter-planetary trade alliance that has sent Ai to Gethen seeking the planet's participation) deliberately runs counter to the exploitative colonial narratives of Earth. The similarities and differences in the meeting of worlds in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the persisting colonial histories of Earth, and Le Guin's deliberate focus on conflicting gendered norms beg further exploration.

19. The act of centring black and brown protagonists and societies is one that Le Guin repeats throughout her oeuvre. Readers of colour have discussed the meaningful impact of this gesture. April Baer, "Changing The Container: How Le Guin Shaped Representation In Sci Fi," Oregon Public Broadcasting, June 12, 2018, accessed October 5, 2019, <https://www.opb.org/artsandlife/article/ursula-le-guin-race-ethnicity-politics/>.

20. Ursula K Le Guin, "Winter's King," in *The Wind's Twelve Quarters* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 85-108; Ursula K Le Guin, "Coming of Age in Karhide," in *The Birthday of the World: And Other Stories* (New York, Perennial, 2003), 1-22.

21. Le Guin, "Is Gender Necessary? Redux."

22. Le Guin, "Winter's King."

23. Le Guin, "Coming of Age in Karhide," 2-3. This can be seen in Sov Thade Tage em Ereb's, the story's narrator, discussion about the "Aliens," their strangeness and their familiarity.

24. This practice of reengagement and thoughtful revision can be seen throughout the arch of Le Guin's career. For a broader look at the ways that Le Guin's evolving politic impacts her writing of the worlds that occupy the same universe as Gethen see: Alexis Lothian,

"Grinding Axes and Balancing Oppositions: The Transformation of Feminism in Ursula K. Le Guin's Science Fiction," *Extrapolation* 47, no.3 (Winter 2006): 380-95.

25. Le Guin, "Is Gender Necessary? Redux."

26. Joanna Russ, "The Image of Women in Science Fiction;" Donna R. White, *Dancing with Dragons: Ursula K. Le Guin and the Critics* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1999). White provides a helpful outline of the critical debate surrounding *The Left Hand of Darkness*, tracing the nuances of criticism from various writers and reviewers.

27. Le Guin, "Is Gender Necessary? Redux," 156.

28. Ibid., 169.

29. Ibid.

30. White, *Dancing with Dragons*, 47.

31. Le Guin, "Is Gender Necessary? Redux," 169-70.

32. Ibid., 169.

33. Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana L. Veith, "Again, The Left Hand of Darkness: Androgyny or Homophobia?," in *Erotic Universe: Sexuality and Fantastic Literature*, ed. Donald Palumbo (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 221-31.

34. Le Guin, "Coming of Age in Karhide."

35. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, 279-81.

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