

# Of Pregnant Kings and Manly Landladies: Negotiating Intersex in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*

Mascha Helene Lange  
Leipzig, Germany

**Abstract:** This essay examines narrative negotiations of intersex in contemporary US science fiction literature. Intersex is understood as a highly contested concept as well as the lived realities of intersex people. The intelligibility of intersex people is constantly negotiated in and through cultural norms and practices, with literature serving as one major cultural playing field of renegotiation. This article seeks to close a perceived gap in the analysis of literary representations of intersex: Discussions so far have focused solely on realist fiction; science fiction has hitherto not been included. I am therefore going to analyze Ursula K. Le Guin's seminal novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* in search for instances in which intersex intelligibility is prohibited, interrupted, or challenged in ways distinctive of the novel's genre. In this contribution, I argue that intersex is a productive, yet previously neglected term of analysis that lays open conceptualizations of sex, gender, and sexuality in Le Guin's science fiction novel.

When we ask what the conditions of intelligibility are by which the human emerges, by which the human is recognized, by which some subject becomes the subject of human love, we are asking about conditions of intelligibility composed of norms, of practices, that have become presuppositional, without which we cannot think the human at all.

Judith Butler, "Doing Justice" 621

**I**ntersex is a term of great contention among those who are labeled by it as well as those using it to label others. Intersex people are generally understood to be "born with sex characteristics (including genitals, gonads and chromosome patterns) that do not fit typical binary notions of male or female

bodies” (United Nations).<sup>1</sup> The birth of an intersex child appears to be a disruption of the all-pervasive binary opened up in the question of ‘Is it a boy or is it a girl?’ For the parents of an intersex infant, this initially unambiguous question becomes unexpectedly problematic. In order to deal with a deviation from the ‘norm,’ parents as well as doctors follow specific lines of argumentation to arrange themselves with a situation that is often utterly confusing to them. More often than not, parents and doctors subject intersex children to normalizing procedures to erase their ‘abnormal’ sex characteristics rather than to embrace their difference (Holmes, Introduction 8). The most extreme measurements taken are sex-reassignment surgeries performed on children under the age of consent.<sup>2</sup> It needs to be stressed that in the majority of cases these surgeries are unnecessary regarding the health of the intersex child (Human Rights Watch 108). The necessity to comply to the male-female binary—in other words, the underlying normative gender structures—are seldom questioned. Only over the past three decades has resistance against the normalizing practices gained more widespread support in the form of a strong intersex rights movement in the United States and beyond. Simultaneously, an interest in the narrative structures that underlie the pathologizing of intersex arose. Narratives of intersex not only have found expression in the very personal experience of the birth of an intersex individual but are furthermore perpetuated in cultural productions such as literature and film. This essay is particularly interested in how intersexuality and intersex individuals are represented in fictional texts.

My aim is to delineate narrative structures contributing to the negotiation of intersex people’s intelligibility in a close reading of US science fiction literature. Following the idea of theory and practice convening in cultural ‘texts’ in the widest sense of the word, more and more scholars have turned towards fiction to delineate narratives governing the intelligibility of intersex. American cultural and literary studies discuss a shift of representations of intersex in literature and film following the 1990s intersex rights movement (Amato 13). Changing narratives in (auto)biographical writing, medical television series, and realist fiction in particular have undergone detailed analyses in the discipline. With regards to literature there exists, however, only a limited number of novels with intersex main characters. Notwithstanding the rising number of works published, I need to concur with

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1 This, however, can only serve as a working definition since the term underlies constant processes of (re)signification.

2 According to Fausto-Sterling, “between one in 1,000 and one in 2,000 live births” are subjected to sex-clarifying surgery (“Five Sexes” 20).

Amato in saying that “[to] date, it cannot be said that a canon of intersex literature exists” (159), and that the scarcity of fictional texts still speaks to a restricted visibility of intersex themes in US culture. Following from a sparse range of primary literature, literary criticism on fictional works that deal with intersex issues to date remains similarly scarce. Yet it seems that intersex studies have hitherto overlooked an entire literary genre and its contributions to representations of intersex individuals: Science fiction is not discussed through the lens of intersex studies in any of the secondary literature available at the point of writing this essay.

When it comes to visions of nonbinary gender in science fiction, Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* is probably the first novel that comes to mind simply due to its immense popularity. It was written on the verge of the 1970s, a time that saw the emergence of a distinctly feminist science fiction literature, of which, among others, Joanna Russ, Marge Piercy, and James Tiptree, Jr. (also known as Alice Sheldon) were major agents. It is regarded as a pioneering work in science fiction, namely as one of the first novels that attempts to imagine an alternatively gendered universe—a universe that in its difference reflects critically on our own binary system. For these reasons, a consideration of Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* for a discussion of intersex representations in science fiction literature seems imperative—science fiction subsequently written in the United States is necessarily influenced by Le Guin's work.

In Le Guin's novel, Genly Ai, a human envoy from planet Terra, is on a mission to persuade the inhabitants of planet Gethen to join the Ekumen, a larger coalition of humanoid worlds. The Gethenians appear human except for the fact that their bodies display neither distinctly female nor distinctly male sex characteristics. During his time at the Karhidish court, Ai befriends prime minister Estraven and is more and more involved in political rivalries between the planet's two main kingdoms, Karhide and Orgoreyn. Ai's involvement ultimately leads to him being accused of treason and being sentenced to death in a work camp from which he only escapes with Estraven's help. They develop a close connection, akin to lovers, on a dangerous eighty-day trek across an ice desert. Back in Karhide, Estraven is killed for treason, followed by a collapse of governments. Soon after, Ai's mission is completed and planet Gethen agrees to join the Ekumen coalition.

The canonicity of the novel allows for an extensive evaluation of the academic reception of the extraordinary ideas offered in the novel. An interesting question seems to be how critics judge Le Guin's execution of a world without gender as we

know it and how the alien inhabitants of her fictional universe are categorized. Therefore, I will not restrict my analysis of *The Left Hand of Darkness* to a ‘simple’ close reading of the text but also set it in the context of the considerable amount of academic criticism that has been voiced towards it.

The novel is widely acclaimed for its construction of a science-fictional society that is not rooted in a binary gender system, but whose subjects are ‘androgynes’ living in a world supposedly free of the constrictions of normative gender roles. The term androgyne has repeatedly, and rather unreflectingly, been used by science fiction critics to describe the neither/nor of Le Guin’s humanoid characters’ gender. The science fiction critic Brian Attebery comments on the popular usage of the term androgyne to describe Le Guin’s characters and assesses: “I have been calling Le Guin’s Gethenians androgynes, as do most commentators, but they are really something else: ambisexuals,<sup>[3]</sup> a form of hermaphrodite.<sup>[4]</sup> Their bodies are a combination of male and female” (133). Attebery’s comment reveals indecisiveness and impreciseness in the use of terminology: Androgyne, ambisexual, and hermaphrodite are used indiscriminately. Crucially, the terminology applied in literary criticism, in particular science fiction literary criticism, seems to be incongruent with recent discussions and achievements in gender, queer, and intersex studies. Not only Attebery and critics of *The Left Hand of Darkness* regress to the terminology of androgyne, hermaphrodite, and related phrases—outdated terminology can be frequently found in commentary on nonbinary gender in science fiction.<sup>5</sup> In this contribution, I want to argue that the more valuable term of analysis with regards to conceptualizations of sex and gender is, indeed, intersex, and that it is due time that the term is applied to science fiction literary criticism which has hitherto overlooked the possibilities of an ‘intersex lens.’<sup>6</sup> I will therefore examine instances in Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* which prohibit, interrupt and/or challenge intersex intelligibility in ways distinctive of the novel’s genre.

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3 Ambisexual, according to *Merriam-Webster*, means “having qualities or characteristics associated with both sexes: sexually ambiguous” (“Ambisexual”).

4 Hermaphrodite is a denomination for individuals with male and female sex characteristics that originates in Greek mythology. It is considered an archaism that can still be found in some publications but that is deemed “vague, demeaning, and sensationalistic” (Reis 154) in its implications and therefore should not be used.

5 In her seminal *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction*, published in 2002, Justine Larbalestier, for example, speaks of “hermaphrodites” and “androgynes” (92).

6 For further information on the topicality of the discussion and the appropriateness of terminology, cf. Reis; Kessler; Holmes, *The Doctor*; or Holmes, Introduction.

To illustrate the ways in which *The Left Hand of Darkness* prohibits, interrupts, and challenges intersex intelligibility, this paper will be structured into two parts. The first part begins with discussing narrative othering at the intersections of science, fiction, and gender. Subsequently, in a chapter titled "Introducing 'The Question on Sex,'" I will detail understandings of sex and gender as rendered in Le Guin's novel. This chapter will be followed by a second part which adduces five arguments of how reading Le Guin's novel through an intersex lens adds to the discussions around the intelligibility of intersex individuals.

### NARRATIVE OTHERING AT THE INTERSECTIONS OF SCIENCE, FICTION, AND GENDER

A reading of intersex in science fiction allows for a unique perspective that combines science, fiction, and the discursive othering of nonbinary gendered individuals. In literature and other cultural modes of representation, intersex characters have repeatedly been used as narrative devices for the simple purpose of surprising and shocking audiences. True-to-life depictions of intersex persons valuing their individuality are extremely rare, much to the detriment of actual intersex individuals (Astorino). From a range of abusive terms that have been used to add to the narrative of intersex individuals, 'freak' is a label that is most frequently applied to the exceptional intersex body and a narrative that is most often told. According to Elizabeth Grosz, freaks can be described as "those human beings who exist outside the structure of binary oppositions which govern our basic concepts and modes of self-definition" (qtd. in Weinstock 327). In the case of persons with sex characteristics that do not correspond to traditional conceptions of sex, it is the disconcerting middle ground between the established categories of female and male. The feminist and disability studies theorist Rosemarie Garland Thomson comments on the betweenness that characterizes the freak in the following way: "hybridity, along with excess and absence, are the threatening organizational principles that constituted freakdom" (5).<sup>7</sup> The wording already hints at the underlying principle of the process of 'enfreakment,' which Garland Thomson further details as the interpretation of an unusual body as a freakish

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7 Thus, a person who is perceived as female with an exhibition of excess genital organs, such as an enlarged clitoris resembling a small penis, is interpreted as threatening. And vice versa, a person who is initially assigned the male gender but who does not exhibit the corresponding genitals or exhibits genitals that are perceived as lacking in size (a threatening absence) is 'abnormalized' or, in Garland Thomson's words, enfreaked.

object “emerg[ing] from cultural rituals that stylize, silence, differentiate, and distance” (10) the different body from that which is perceived as the norm. Garland Thomson moreover emphasizes the collapsing effect of the process of enfreakment, which turns bodies into “a single amorphous category of corporeal otherness” (10) —thus transforming the complexity of the human individual into the simplicity of the freakish other and denying intelligibility. The aspect of threat perceived in the freakish intersex body is not to be underestimated and finds expression in a range of common misconceptions about intersex. The visually different body (in terms of genitals or other features of sex anatomy) provokes the imagination of others “[b]ecause such bodies are rare, unique, material, and confounding of cultural categories” and, hence, “they function as magnets to which culture secures its anxieties, questions, and needs at any given moment” (2).

Considering processes of enfreakment regarding the representations of intersex bodies in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, it seems furthermore necessary to elaborate on the affiliations of intersex, freak, and the extraterrestrial, humanoid alien. Indeterminacy or otherness in sex characteristics is often used to mark the extraterrestrial through blanking or exaggerating their sex characteristics. Further, in the discourse surrounding aliens, monsters, and freaks in science fiction, various points of intersection with intersex are established. As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, intersex is regulated in a framework which is necessarily medicalized, thus historically rooted in a scientific discourse. This pattern seems continuous with the conceptualization of the freak and the alien. Weinstock observes the following:

[It is] evident that the freak emerged from the conjunction of science *and* fiction. As [is] staunchly maintain[ed], the ‘freak’ is not an essential ontological category, but a construct produced at the crossroads of multiple discourses, including the medical, anthropological, and economic. (329)

Accordingly, similar mechanisms appear to be at work in how science and fiction discursively overlap, intermingle and mutually influence each other in the literary genre of science fiction and in regulated discourses on the freak and the intersex body. What is more, several processes of othering narratively conjoining in science fiction (enfreakment, alienation, medicalization, scientification) can produce a heightened awareness of those lines of thought that construct normativity. Weinstock asserts that “[i]t is no accident that [...] freaks, aliens, and monsters [are figured] in nearly identical terms: the three categories are merely three branches of

the same amorphous and disturbing family of ‘boundary breakers’” (327). What Weinstock seeks to impart is that all three terms originate in the same cultural fears and fascinations and that all three of them are viewed objectionably because they fall out of the matrices of various well-maintained binaries. If “[d]epictions of aliens in SF texts can tell us a great deal about the extent to which a given culture values and fears human difference and diversity” (Weinstock 330), then depictions of intersex characters in science fiction *as* aliens can tell us a great deal about the extent to which a culture values and fears difference in human sex anatomy and gender performance. As much as “science fiction isn’t about the future” (Le Guin xvii) because it is descriptive not predictive, alien characters are not used to depict the extraterrestrial; they are used to depict the terrestrial. I argue that reading Le Guin’s Gethenians as intersex disrupts ‘terrestrial’ understandings of gender and reveals them for the fiction they are. Nonbinary sexed humanoids are not as novel as they appear, and Le Guin’s novel *is* descriptive, for intersex people have been there all along. Thus, *The Left Hand of Darkness* can be read as a deliberation on the intersections between science, fiction, and the discursive othering of nonbinary gendered individuals.

#### INTRODUCING “THE QUESTION OF SEX”

For those unfamiliar with Le Guin’s novel, it is necessary to further detail the information given on the sex and gender of its characters and to relate it to points of critique that have been voiced towards the novel’s sex and gender system. Ai, the Terran envoy to Gethen, is presented as a ‘normally’ gendered male human. Gethenian sex characteristics, meaning also Estraven’s, are set in contrast to Terran ideas about sex and gender in chapter seven of the novel, which is aptly titled “The Question of Sex” (Le Guin 95). The point of view of this chapter is noteworthy, for it is related from the perspective of a female Ekumen “Investigator” called Ong Tot Oppong, “of peaceful Chiffewar” (103), who secretly investigated planet Gethen prior to the arrival of the main character Ai. The perspective of the investigator stands in contrast to the novel’s two personal narrators Ai and Estraven.<sup>8</sup> This appears to be a deliberate choice that enables the mediation of information as ‘scientific,’ in a voice that preeminently stands above Ai’s personal account and

8 A major part of the novel (ten of twenty chapters) is comprised of personal reports related from the perspective of Ai. Besides Ai, the main Gethenian protagonist Estraven also narrates parts of the novel (four chapters).

exerts the authority to unbiasedly relate “Gethenian sexual physiology” (95). Instead of being part of the narrative, the investigator’s perspective appears nearly extradiegetic,<sup>9</sup> similar to a commentator on the social and political structures of Gethen. Le Guin also inserts quasi-ethnographic data collections into the narrative, such as chapter two “The Place Inside the Blizzard,” which is introduced as “*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*” (2).<sup>10</sup> These fictional documents, together with the investigator’s account, “help solidify Gethenian culture as one with historical and genealogical permanence that stretches from the past into the future, providing the cultural aspects that give life to an alien species” (Bernardo and Murphy 30). The novel bestows planet Gethen with a rich cultural background that supports the reader’s imagination of a different order through a multiplicity of sources of information. The plurality of narrative voices in *The Left Hand of Darkness* has furthermore been characterized as “distinctly post-modern” (White 46), i.e., as questioning the singularity of truth and offering instead the idea of partial, revisable, and conditional narratives.

The following longer quotation taken from chapter seven of the novel shall be used to explicate the information given on Gethen’s sex and gender system, and to illustrate the investigator’s role in establishing a scientific discourse that serves to authenticate the novel’s fictional universe:

The sexual cycle averages 26 to 28 days. [...] For 21 or 22 days the individual is *somer*, sexually inactive, latent. On about the 18th day hormonal changes are initiated by the pituitary control and on the 22nd or 23rd day the individual enters *kemmer*, estrus. In this first phase of kemmer (Karh, *secher*) he remains completely androgynous. Gender, and potency, are not attained in isolation. A Gethenian in first-phase kemmer, if kept alone or with others not in kemmer, remains incapable of coitus. Yet the sexual impulse is tremendously strong in this phase, controlling the entire personality, subjecting all other drives to its imperative. When the individual finds a partner in

9 The investigator’s perspective appears nearly extradiegetic because her position is integrated into the narrative universe: She is revealed as the Ekumen undercover agent who visited Gethen decades before the events in the novel, yet her voice remains that of a reporter, a commentator—she never actively participates in the action but remains removed from diegesis.

10 Karhide is one of the greater kingdoms on Gethen and the place where Genly Ai starts his mission. Erhenrang, respectively, is the name of a place in Karhide, and Argaven VIII a historical ruler of the kingdom.



kemmer, hormonal secretion is further stimulated (most importantly by touch—secretion? scent?) until in one partner either a male or female hormonal dominance is established. The genitals engorge or shrink accordingly, foreplay intensifies, and the partner, triggered by the change, takes the other sexual role (? without exception? If there are exceptions, resulting in kemmer-partners of the same sex, they are so rare as to be ignored). [...] Once the sex is determined it cannot change during the kemmer-period. [...] If the individual was in the female role and was impregnated, hormonal activity of course continues, and for the 8.4-month gestation period and the 6- to 8-month lactation period this individual remains female. The male sexual organs remain retracted (as they are in somer), the breasts enlarge somewhat, and the pelvic girdle widens. With the cessation of lactation the female reenters somer and becomes once more a perfect androgyne. (96-97)

The content of this paragraph has provoked a wide range of criticism, and most likely, it has been referenced, at least in part, in every single review written on *The Left Hand of Darkness*. In an effort to contextualize, the main points of discontent critics have voiced about how Gethenian sexual anatomy and gender practices have been characterized in the novel will be related in the following. Points of critique include the usage of a male main protagonist, the generic 'he' in reference to what is called an androgynous humanoid species—and following from that, the novel's failure to depict Gethenians as female—as well as a perceived homophobia and the myth of androgyny (Clarke 60). Strikingly, the criticism towards the novel is often aimed at Le Guin herself, who supposedly failed in her effort to create a world that is alternatively gendered (White 47). Le Guin, as a woman in the male-dominated field that science fiction literature was at the time of the publication of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, was expected to transcend her own socialization as a woman and was relentlessly criticized for failing to do so as a woman. What should not be neglected is the fact that Le Guin, in the first place, wrote *The Left Hand of Darkness* to enable a range of discussions around gender and representation. Therefore, the novel should not be interpreted as a work from a certain author (the eminent Ursula K. Le Guin) but as a product of its time. The question should not be what the author intended, or what she, in this case, 'failed' to convey convincingly, but rather what the text can tell us about the cultural context it arises from, and how *we* can interpret its content for ourselves, today: In this sense, "the book is what is real [...] the author isn't there" (Le Guin, *Language* 127).

In the following, I will use the information rendered in the previous citation (Le Guin 96-97) combined with my understanding of Gethenians as intersex to complicate a variety of readings of the novel and delineate intersex intelligibility in several close readings. First, I will scrutinize the language applied in the novel, in particular personal pronouns and sentences such as “[t]he king was pregnant” (106). In a second step, I will question binary notions of sexuality, bypassing homo- as well as heterosexuality and proposing the need for an extension of said binary. Thirdly, the concept of androgyny, which is consistently and unreflectingly applied to nonbinary gendered characters in the novel, will be criticized. In a fourth step, I will reveal the role of narrative authority and scientification in order to lastly question gender-naturalizing discourses at work in *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

#### QUESTIONING LANGUAGE

Genly Ai, the protagonist who occupies the dominant narrative position in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, is male, human, and in the course of the novel revealed to be black. The fact that the novel ‘hides’ Ai’s skin color, by not commenting on it until way into the story, provides a moment of surprise and need for reflection on the side of the reader, who (most probably) has to check their own initial assumptions of the protagonist being white. The novel thus breaks with the bias towards white protagonists that was and is so notorious for science fiction, but it does not break with the genre’s bias towards male protagonists. This is a characteristic of the novel that has received sharp critical commentary (Clarke 61). *The Left Hand of Darkness* applies language challenging gendered matrices in sentences such as “[t]he king was pregnant” (Le Guin 106), yet it remains anchored in a gendered use of language that displays the unintelligibility of nonbinary gendered individuals in the restricting framework that is the English language.

Since the novel favors the male generic pronoun ‘he’ over the female ‘she’ or neologisms that might evade any gendered connotations at all,<sup>11</sup> the story creates

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11 And whose implementability has been proven by other authors, e.g. Marge Piercy and Dorothy Bryant, according to Clarke (70). White summarizes Le Guin’s initial adverse position towards other pronouns in the following: “She says she did consider inventing a neutral pronoun but could not find a way to make it work. One reason why readers sometimes jump to the conclusion that the Gethenians are almost wholly masculine, Le Guin suggests, is that the readers are reacting to their own culturally conditioned assumptions that a woman could not be a prime minister or pull a loaded sled across the ice and that trousers are an inherently masculine form of clothing” (47-48). Curiously, Le Guin does indeed use neologisms in *The Left Hand of Darkness*—the initial

the impression that even its Gethenian protagonists are uniformly male. As Cummins argues, “Le Guin [here, again, the author is blamed] is faulted for using the pronoun ‘he’ to refer to them [the Gethenian characters], for portraying them only in those roles usually associated with men (king, statesman, political rebel), and for not portraying them in family and child-rearing roles” (78). An illustration of the use of male pronouns is rendered in the introduction of Estraven at the beginning of the novel, as related by Ai:

He is one of the most powerful men in the country; I am not sure of the proper historical equivalent of his position, vizier or prime minister or councilor; the Karhidish word for it means the King's Ear. He is lord of a Domain and lord of the Kingdom, a mover of great events. His name is Therem Harth rem ir Estraven. (Le Guin 5-6)

Not only are the male pronouns ‘he,’ ‘his,’ etc. consistently used, but furthermore gender-specific, masculine nouns such as ‘men,’ ‘king,’ and ‘lord’ are continuously applied to the nonbinary gendered Gethenians. Their intelligibility is thereby constrained in a traditionally gendered matrix. Yet it has to be taken into consideration that the text is open about the source of this information—even before the reader is introduced to Estraven, the human narrator Ai relativizes his observations in saying that “I’ll make my report as if I told a story” and the assertion that “[t]ruth is a matter of the imagination” (1), as well as “*man* I must say, having said *he* and *his*” (5). In these statements, Ai clearly addresses the subjectivity of his own observations. Hence, the novel is honest about its biased position of narration and the human source of gendered reading. The difficulty *The Left Hand of Darkness* displays in linguistically representing nonbinary gendered individuals reveals constraints of the English language that are very real for intersex individuals. The appropriation of pronouns gendered neither female nor male, and in how far they matter, has been a topic of great contention in intersex studies and for the intersex movement. It is generally argued that pronouns speak to an individual’s sense of self, and that an incorrect address can cause feelings of disrespect, alienation, or even gender dysphoria.

A different level of gendered bias resides in the way notions of masculinity and femininity are associated with certain other character traits judged as ‘inherent.’

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reluctance to use alternative pronouns seems not to extend to neologisms as such. ‘Somer’ and ‘kemmer’ are both words made up to characterize the extraordinariness of Gethenian sex cycles.

Cummins in particular comments on Ai's tendency to classify the Gethenian's actions according to gendered stereotypes:

Ai has preconceptions about how men ought to behave and about how prime ministers ought to discuss affairs of state. Because Estraven does not follow either pattern, Ai concludes that Estraven is dishonest. In this scene, as well as others when Ai distrusts Gethenians, he labels them 'womanly.' (75)

The conflation of scheming, seemingly dishonest behavior with femininity—Ai feels “[a]nnoyed by this sense of effeminate intrigue” (Le Guin 8)—is highly problematic. Again, it has to be taken into consideration that this is Ai's judgment, and it has to be interpreted as such only. Admittedly, his—and also possibly the reader's—judgment changes as the story progresses, and Ai becomes more and more aware of his biased perception. Yet it remains regrettable that no counter examples are given. As has been quoted earlier, Estraven is never shown in positive feminine roles, s/he is never shown as a parent, and neither is s/he reversely presented as a powerful female politician (Cummins 78). Estraven's femininity, as related by Genly Ai, always remains a shadow haunting his/her perceived maleness.

Readers *can*, however, find sentences in the novel that are completely counterintuitive to the gendered structures of the English language. One such an example is the frequently quoted “[t]he king was pregnant” (106). Another phrase is “My landlady, a voluble man” (49)—a semantic combination that alienates and questions the gendered connotations of both ‘lady’ and ‘man’ and thus exemplifies and raises awareness for the difficulty of describing the corporeality of Gethenians within the constrictions that are posed by the English language. This example illustrates how “the conventions of SF allow it to represent gender as [...] a code” (Attebery 16)—without the constraint of speech and other habits that pertain to realist genres, science fiction is able to disrupt dominant ideologies of gender. Reading Gethenians as intersex can thus help understand the lived realities of intersex individuals and their restricted intelligibility in the linguistic framework of the English language. As has been shown, *The Left Hand of Darkness* simultaneously challenges “the conditions of intelligibility [...] by which the human emerges” (Butler, “Doing Justice” 621) in sentences such as “My landlady, a voluble man” (49) and reinforces them through its consistent use of male pronouns and personal nouns.

QUESTIONING SEXUALITY

Coming back to the lengthily cited passage above (Le Guin 96-97), another point that has been heavily criticized is the omission of addressing the issue of homophobia, and the way the novel implies that sexuality is necessarily heterosexuality (Clarke 60). The occurrence of same-sex partners in kemmer is at the utmost seen as rare, or rather it is considered illogical and therefore rejected out of hand given that kemmer is all about “race survival value” (Le Guin 99) and homosexual encounters would not ensure offspring. Thus, when Estraven is in kemmer during his/her and Ai’s arduous journey through an ice desert that comprises the peak of the novel, Estraven changes towards a more feminine appearance in reaction to Ai’s manly presence. Their attraction towards each other is never lived out in physicality, thus the reader is “left uncertain about whether to read the unconsummated love between Genly [Ai] and Estraven as homosexual or heterosexual” (Roberts 90). Ai viewed Estraven as foremost male over the major part of the novel except for the slight changes during their journey through the ice. Roberts lauds this ambivalence as “one of the beauties” (90) of the novel’s love story, but others have judged it differently, since this ambivalence is overshadowed by Estraven’s death at the end of the novel. Estraven’s death could be interpreted as “the price that must be paid for forbidden love” (Lamb and Veith qtd. in White 72) and thus as a condemnation of homosexuality. For these reasons, *The Left Hand of Darkness* can be criticized for a perpetuation of compulsory heterosexuality.

Yet it seems questionable whether hetero- and homosexuality are terms that can even be applied to the relationship between Ai and Estraven. Extrapolating from the sexual anatomy of the Gethenians, there should be no question of hetero- versus homosexuality at all but rather the stance that love equals love. If Gethenians are interpreted as intersex, the terminology of homo- and heterosexuality simply seems incongruous and outdated. Ai and Estraven’s relationship, if read through an intersex lens, “challenge[s] the very distinction between heterosexual and [homosexual] erotic exchange, underscoring the points of their ambiguous convergence and redistribution” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 101). Hence, an extension of the binary sex system including intersex as a valuable subject position asks for an extension of binary understandings of sexuality. It seems that answers to this need so far remain scarce. I propose that the lived realities of intersex, however, can help understand sex characteristics, as well as sexuality, as nonbinary: If there are more

than just two sexes (female and male), that is, if sex characteristics are understood as comprising a spectrum and not a binary, then heterosexuality as well as homosexuality (and by extension bisexuality) cease to suffice because they continue to rely on a binary. A reading of Estraven's and Ai's relationship as attraction between an intersex individual and an individual identifying as male thus emphasizes a deficiency in current understandings of sexuality. Such a reading further undermines hegemonic constructions of sexuality and points towards much-needed change.

### QUESTIONING 'ANDROGYNY'

This brings me to another point of criticism that has been uttered towards *The Left Hand of Darkness*, namely the concept of androgyny as such (Clarke 60). The term originates in the Greek words for 'man' ('anēr') and 'woman' ('gynē'), thus translating roughly to 'manwoman.' It implies a combination of male and female sex characteristics or a combination of masculinity and femininity in a single person. The very term, although it tries differently in merging the binary, enforces the idea that there are two essential poles, male and female, and everything that lies in between is different, diverging from the biological or 'natural' norm. Rhodes describes androgyny as a myth that "is both androcentric and essentialist" and goes on to say that "[i]t positions men and women as different, and upholds stereotypes of women as weak and emotional, men as strong and logical [...] historically the man is depicted as questing for and discovering his female identity" but women are not (qtd. in Clarke 62). Exactly this historical search for the female in the male can be seen in *The Left Hand of Darkness*: Genly constantly sees the female in the male of Estraven but does not see the male in the female, as Estraven is never regarded as female in the first place. Although androgyny appears to be a concept that strives to abandon the sex and gender binary, it does so only superficially. Thus, even the seemingly groundbreaking introduction of 'androgynous' characters demands critical examination because they are not free of gender biases. If the concept of androgyny continues to hold up gender stereotypes and sets the quest for the female man before the male woman, it is only a perfunctory departure from heteronormativity and does not open up utterly new forms of intelligibility.

I propose that reading Gethenians as intersex is more productive than understanding them as 'androgynous.' Admittedly, the term intersex, like the term

androgynous, has been heavily criticized and remains contested. In a 2015 “Fact Sheet” intersex is defined as “relat[ing] to biological sex characteristics, and [...] distinct from a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity. An intersex person may be straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual or asexual, and may identify as female, male, both or neither” (United Nations). This wording addresses an issue with the term intersex that particularly parents of intersex children have voiced, i.e. the common confusion of intersex “with sexuality, eroticism, or sexual orientation” (Reis 155). The designation of intersex, despite its morphemic collocation, does *not* imply a form of sexual orientation. Rather, the term may speak to a variety of possibilities and thus adds to the intelligibility of individuals outside the male–female gender matrix, such as Le Guin’s character Estraven. Moreover, having intersex characteristics is not to be understood restrictively as resulting in a third gender, since an intersex person might identify as one of the two traditional genders, or both, or none of them. Neither does intersex necessarily mean that one is genderless or outside the gender matrix. Yet intersex *can* be adopted by individuals as their gender identity, if they wish so, and in this context is often used synonymously with terms such as “genderqueer,” “gender fluid,” or “non-binary” (cf. Vioria and Zzyym). The ‘inter’ acknowledges the fact that the term lies between two poles, female and male, yet it does not preclude that there is only one state in between, in contrast to androgyny. The term intersex was appropriated by those who were formerly labeled by it in a medical discourse, and intersex people nowadays use it as a tool for self-empowerment. Thus, intersex appears a term of analysis that is far more productive than androgynous. Applying intersex instead of androgynous to Gethenian characters, as the previous chapters have shown, allows for a more complex reading. Intersex questions linguistic representation as well as hegemonic conceptions of sex, gender, and sexuality.

### QUESTIONING NARRATIVE AUTHORITY

Returning to the long passage from chapter seven (Le Guin 96–97), a few comments seem due on the way gender and Gethenian otherness are narratively framed. In an analysis of the word choice in this chapter, in contrast to the rest of the novel, it becomes apparent that highly scientific language is used to describe the sexual anatomy and social formation of the inhabitants of Gethen. The word choice ranges from the relatively intelligible yet specialized terminology of “sexual cycle”

to “pituitary control” (96), a term that is probably not familiar to the average reader.<sup>12</sup> This is an expert vocabulary usually used in medicine or biology, which in this case is applied to impress on the reader and establish narrative authority. Furthermore, in a move that seems to demarcate Gethenians as more animal than human, the text applies the term “estrus” (96) to the Gethenian state of sexual receptivity, a term that is typically used for female mammals (other than humans). This move is further made obvious in the statement that “[t]he somer-kemmer cycle strikes us [the humans of the Ekumen] as degrading, a return to the estrous cycle of the lower mammals” (101). Although the text draws parallels between Gethenians and Ekumen humans (for example, the fourth phase of kemmer is compared to the menstrual cycle), it continues to insist on fundamental differences between the two. The Gethenians are made objects of study through the investigator’s pseudoscientific descriptions, similar to the ways in which intersex individuals are made study objects in medicine. The manner in which Gethenian changing genitals are described in chapter seven (“the male sexual organs remain retracted [...] the breasts enlarge somewhat, and the pelvic girdle widens” [Le Guin 97]) is reminiscent of medical literature and its treatment of intersex sexual anatomy. Moreover, the investigator’s descriptions are highly reminiscent of what Garland Thomson identifies as “the oral spiel—often called the ‘lecture’—that was delivered by the showman or ‘professor’ who usually managed the exhibited person [in freak shows]” (7). Garland Thomson identifies the “oral spiel” as one of the structures that establishes the freak narrative, helping the enfreakment of extraordinary individuals, as in this case Gethenians. Thus, chapter seven’s “cultural work is to make the physical particularity of the freak into a hypervisible text” (10).

As commented on earlier, the choice of vocabulary creates the impression of a highly knowledgeable and therefore trustworthy and authentic narrator—one could say lecturer—who is the arbiter of the major ‘facts’ on Gethenian androgyny that the reader is able to obtain. The reader is to believe that the source of information is unbiased, reliable—yet parts of the chapter are highly speculative, e.g. a comment on the possibility of homosexuality, which quickly deems homosexuality nonexistent, but not without the question “without exception?” (Le Guin 96). Yet again, the correctness of the narrator’s assertions is enforced in the question of “What else have I learned for certain?” (98) following her elaborations

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12 It describes an endocrine gland at the base of the brain that regulates basic body functions, including reproduction (“Pituitary Gland”).



on Gethenian sex anatomy and behavior. The questions also reveal the note-taking character of the chapter—the narrator seems to work out a list of the particular characteristics of Gethen's inhabitants, like the note-taking (medical) expert, biologist, or ethnologist. The note-taker, as the writer, is the one in power, the one dominating discursive representations, the person judging the existence of human variation with nonbinary sex anatomy as an unpleasant “experiment” (95). This power is only balanced by the experimental change of narrative perspectives in the novel—as Bittner has remarked, the multiplicity of narrative voices is “due to her [Le Guin's] realization that authorial omniscience is a kind of imperialism” (qtd. in White 72). Authorial omniscience is a kind of imperialism not only in the sense of one nation dominating others but also in the sense of a supreme power trying to impose, in this case, their ideas of gender on others.<sup>13</sup> The pathologizing, biologizing, and/or enfreaking voice of the investigator that limits intelligibility is countered by the stories of actual individuals, in particular the voice of Estraven in his position as a Gethenian native and the chapters relating Gethenian folk tales and myths.

#### QUESTIONING NATURALIZING DISCOURSES

If intersex is defined as an “umbrella term that refers to a range of traits and conditions that cause individuals to be born with chromosomes, gonads, and/or genitals that vary from what is considered typical for female or male bodies” (Human Rights Watch 19), Gethenians fall under that term at any rate. Their sexual anatomy, described in detail in chapter seven of the novel (Le Guin 96-97), is considered deviant from the norm of female and male genitals. They seem to possess both male and female fertile reproductive organs from birth—something (science-)fictional which does not exist in reality—which also means that “the mother of several children can be the father of several more” (97). Their genitals are not described (or named) explicitly, but the text says they “engorge or shrink accordingly” (96) in kemmer. The “accordingly” is interesting, as it indicates that there seems to be two directions their genitals develop to, probably either male

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13 Considering imperialism, it might be important to note that the novel clearly contrasts the Gethenian political system with that of the Ekumen world. Genly Ai and the other Ekumen investigator (at least initially) regard themselves as more evolved than the Gethenians—to be seen in particular in the way they ‘report’ on Gethen and in the Ekumen imperial interest of incorporating Gethen into their league.

“engorge”) or female (“shrink”). The text does not specify to what extent genitals “engorge or shrink,” but without further information, the reader is led to think along the lines of the male-female binary. Thus, it is still a question of either/or—either they are female in kemmer, or they are male.

Overall, their seemingly fluid sexual development is surprisingly phrased in terms of biological determination, since everything is explained to be driven by hormones in the first place, and only from these already existing biological truths do social differences arise. The Gethenians cannot ‘choose’ their sex/gender, or which role they would like to perform in the phase of kemmer, although it seems that some might wish to be able to (the text mentions hormone derivatives and contraceptives, which appear, however, not to be in wide use, especially not in the kingdoms).<sup>14</sup> Additionally, it is problematic that the existence of Gethenians with their sex anatomy differing from ‘normal’ humans is speculated to be the result of “human genetic manipulation,” an “experiment abandoned” (95-96) by early space explorers. It presents their existence as an aberration, a scientific game, something ‘unnatural,’ and it thus emphasizes their freakishness and alienness, despite the fact that intersex conditions occur quite ‘naturally.’<sup>15</sup>

The narrator of chapter seven clearly reveals herself as the judging spectator in the following statement: “The kemmer phenomenon fascinates all of us Investigators, of course” (99). Fascination—a “strange blend of reverence and condescension” (Garland Thomson 10)—positions herself and the rest of the binarily sexed humans of the Ekumen as the norm, and Gethenians, because of their body’s differing sex anatomy, as the alien other. The narrator seems to be fascinated also by the fact that “four-fifths of the time, these people are not sexually motivated at all” (Le Guin 99). Subsequently, the narrator uses Gethenian asexuality and absence of gender roles during somer to explain their peacefulness: “There is no division of humanity into strong and weak halves, protective/protected,

<sup>14</sup> In other words, being transexual/transgender is not possible on planet Gethen.

<sup>15</sup> A note on the frequency of intersex births: The source that is referenced most often in academic writing is a study by Anne Fausto-Sterling and a group of Brown University students, who systematically tried to assess the number of intersex births based on frequencies of various intersex conditions recorded in medical literature (“Five Sexes” 20). They found that the estimate of intersexual births is 1.7 percent (for every 1,000 children born, 17 are intersex, i.e. display “chromosomal, anatomical and hormonal exceptions to the dimorphic ideal” [Fausto-Sterling, “Five Sexes” 20]). Fausto-Sterling herself admits that this number is to be understood as “an order-of-magnitude estimate rather than a precise count” (*Sexing the Body* 51). The actual number of children that are subjected to genital surgery is smaller, between one in 1,000 and one in 2,000 (“Five Sexes” 20).

dominant/submissive, owner/chattel, active/passive" (100). And she goes on to say that "[t]he fact that everyone between seventeen and thirty-five or so is liable to be [...] 'tied down to childbearing' [...] implies that no one is quite so thoroughly 'tied down' here as women, elsewhere, are likely to be—psychologically or physically" (100). Everybody can take either role, which is why nobody can claim a specific role for themselves. This fact is, however, presented as something curious, something hard to understand for the humans of the Ekumen, and the reader. At this point, the novel criticizes the limited understanding that humans in the novel, and by extension 'real' humans in 'real' societies, have of gendered beings, and it aims to open up imagination with the help of its alternative science fiction universe. Science fiction's famous question of 'what if?' is pointed towards issues of sex and gender—the novelty of *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Yet this novelty is apparently also not detached (only extrapolated) from real-world discourses, and since the publication of the novel in 1969 it has inspired numerous thought processes.

In the observation that "ambisexuality [...] fascinates us, but it rules the Gethenians, dominates them" (99), the narrator reveals the persistence of the thought that biological 'givens' dominate social interaction in a strict linear logic, and not the other way around. In a pseudoscientific line of argumentation following evolution's principle of fitness, Gethenian sex difference is further depreciated in the statement that "[t]heir ambisexuality has little or no adaptive value" (95). The term 'ambi,' as used here, has since been subject to high scrutiny in queer studies (Bornstein 52). The question the novel ultimately poses is: What if the biological or 'natural' base of sex/gender is different—will the social be different, too? The novel proposes that there could be worlds in which the question 'Is it a boy or is it a girl?' is not asked at all: "They do not see one another as men or women. This is almost impossible for our imagination to accept. What is the first question we ask about a newborn baby?" (Le Guin 101). Many critics have lauded the novel for scrutinizing the determinacy of 'natural' roles of female and male individuals because "'nature' is often used as a political tool to justify social stratification between men and women" (Bernardo and Murphy 32). Yet in its pseudoscientific line of reasoning, the novel remains in a naturalizing discourse. Bernardo and Murphy claim that Le Guin is "rewriting 'nature' in *The Left Hand of Darkness*," (32) and the novel surely does so in its invention of an intersex humanlike alien species, the Gethenians, but it does not rewrite nature's seeming determinacy because it does not account for the very real existence of intersex in the real world.

CONCLUSION

By examining instances that prohibit, interrupt, and/or challenge intersex intelligibility in ways distinctive of the novel's genre, I have argued that reading *The Left Hand of Darkness* through an intersex lens allows for more complex understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality, which is a novel approach in science fiction literary criticism as well as intersex studies. The remaining question is whether the novel allows estrangement and reflectivity to such a degree that readers are provoked out of their habits, or whether its depiction of the Gethenians continues to perpetuate discriminative representations of nonbinary gendered individuals as aliens. To evade the latter, I again propose not to call Gethenians 'androgynes' or 'ambisexuals' but, instead, to call them intersex. This term has been appropriated by intersex activists and is generally deemed most respectful towards people whose congenital sex characteristics defy contemporary norms. It seems worthwhile to end the fictionalization and mythologization of individuals born with sex anatomy different from the constricting male/female binary by using intersex instead of 'androgyne' or, even worse, 'hermaphrodite,' 'alien,' or 'freak.' *The Left Hand of Darkness* was published even before gender was a term widely in use, decades before the diversity approach of third-wave feminism, and thirty years before the intersex movement's achievement of increased awareness of intersex individuals' subject position. Nonetheless, it is important to apply these terms to the text, for us to derive our own contemporary interpretations of this seminal science fiction work. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, as this essay has shown, for one enables readers to read gender as a code that restricts our sense of reality, as does language through perplexing sentences such as "My landlady, a voluble man" (49). With the relationship between Genly Ai and Estraven, it also calls attention to the workings of compulsory heterosexuality and at the same time calls into question the categorical distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Yet it still exhibits traces of a medical discourse negotiating the intelligibility of intersex, as seen in the pathologizing, biologizing, and enfreaking voice of the Ekumen investigator. Thus, the question opening my conclusion can only be answered ambiguously. *The Left Hand of Darkness* provokes readers to deliberate on the necessity of categories such as male and female, but it is not free from discourses that naturalize sex itself and needs to be read critically. A critical reading can be achieved, as explicated in this essay, through an 'intersex lens.' Looking towards the

future, it promises to be interesting to see how subsequently published science fiction novels continue negotiations of intersex intelligibility.

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