Living “Long in a Cold Land”: Ecofeminist Perspectives on Environment, Culture, and “Othering” in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*

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Living “Long in a Cold Land”: Ecofeminist Perspectives on Environment, Culture, and “Othering” in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*

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In 1969 Ursula K. Le Guin permanently altered the landscape of science fiction when she published *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Despite making immediate waves in the science fiction community, the novel has since received a somewhat mixed reception. Twenty years ago, Christine Cornell noted that “with this novel there is no agreement on central themes or even the basic trajectory of the plot” (317). To this day students, scholars, and critics alike are not quite sure what to make of the story, its unusual narrative style (and frustrating narrator), or its human aliens who are simultaneously neither men nor women, and yet both men and women. In fact, the issue of gender within the novel has provoked a near countless wealth of literary criticism and interpretations. In response to the critical buzz, Le Guin published an essay in 1976, intending to clarify and defend her writing choices. In 1987, however, “uncomfortable with some of the statements [she] made in it,” she revised and republished that essay (“Is Gender Necessary?” 7). In both versions she makes a bold statement about the real subject of the book: “as far as I can see, it is a book about betrayal and fidelity. That is why one of its two dominant sets of symbols is an extended metaphor of winter, of ice, snow, cold” (8). And indeed, snow is such a near-constant presence on the planet called Gethen, where her story takes place, that outsiders call it “Winter.”

However, a central conclusion of Le Guin’s revised essay is her
own acknowledgement that her initial insistence on downplaying the role of gender in the novel was overstated. As she notes, “I had opened a can of worms and was trying hard to shut it. ‘The fact is,’ however, that there are other aspects to the book, which are involved with its sex/gender aspects quite inextricably” (8). A complete reading of the novel must therefore take both central themes—physical environment and sex/gender—into account. Therefore, this paper proposes to take Le Guin at her word, analyzing the novel's environmental issues while at the same time not ignoring the issues of gender; thus, in order to better understand their relation. A primary purpose of the 1987 redux of “Is Gender Necessary?” was for Le Guin to present her own changing ideas around gender and sex within the novel. Some of these shifts were quite significant, such as the perhaps begrudging recognition of the central role gender plays in the novel's core themes. Another change in Le Guin’s assessment worth discussing for its bearing on the remainder of this paper concerns the use of pronouns. Throughout the novel Le Guin refers to Gethenians with the “so-called generic pronoun he/him/his,” a choice that was criticized both immediately and regularly after the book’s publication (14-15). Though she initially defended this decision in the 1976 version of her essay, nine years later her redux conveyed a very different conclusion noting that using he/him/his as the generic pronoun “does in fact exclude women from discourse” and therefore unintentionally obscured the inherent female aspects of Gethenians (15). Further, she argues, “until the sixteenth century the English generic singular pronoun was they/them/their […] It should be restored to the written language, and let the pedants and pundits squeak and gibber in the streets” (15). In light
of this ardent reconsideration on Le Guin’s part, though quotations from
the novel will preserve the use of he/him/his in reference to Gethenians,
my own discussion will use they/them/their as the singular, non-gendered
pronoun when referring to Gethenians.

The novel follows the character and main narrator Genly Ai,
originally of Earth (called Terra), who is a representative of an eighty-world
interplanetary alliance. When the book begins, Genly is on the planet
Gethen, where he has spent two frigid years attempting without success to
convince the paranoid king of Karhide to join the alliance. Consequently, he
seizes the opportunity of summer to travel, eventually coming to the neigh-
boring nation of Orgoreyn where he makes another attempt at securing an
alliance. There he reunites with Estraven, a disgraced politician of Karhide,
his only supporter thus far. When Genly fails to take Estraven’s advice, his
plans backfire and he is imprisoned on a remote work farm. Estraven rescues
him, but the two are forced to make a dangerous sled-trek across a great
glacier, the Gobrin Ice, plagued by volcanic eruptions, shrieking blizzards,
frostbite, and starvation. It is only by finally learning to understand and
trust one another that they are able to arrive back in Karhide and realize
Genly’s mission.

Le Guin has called *The Left Hand of Darkness* “a book about
betrayal and fidelity,” in which the trek across the Ice forms the central
metaphor for the chief characters’ emotional journey (“Is Gender Neces-
sary?” 8). In fact, I argue that this environmental symbolism is much more
than a metaphor: the physical aspects of Genly’s journey on this alien planet
become the hinge on which the story turns and around which he will either
break down and fail in his mission or come to accept and join Gethen and the Gethenians, enabling his success. Ultimately, the core arc of the story is not merely how Genly Ai, First Mobile of the interplanetary alliance, the Ekumen, attempts to build an alliance with Gethen; it is the story of how Genly Ai, as a human being, forges a deep connection to another human being, Estraven, and the world on which they both now live. Gethen’s stunning landscapes and harsh climate, and even the cities the Gethenians have carved out of those landscapes, shape Genly’s mindset and attitudes. At times, he is unnerved by the rich colors of Karhide and profoundly unsettled by the pale, dreamlike quality of Orgoreyn. And yet, over time, as he comes not only to accept but deeply love his companion, Estraven, the landscapes mirror this change of heart, at times seeming to actively push it along. Broken by his time in Pulefen Farm, pushed on by volcanic eruptions, and taught by the curious Unshadow, Genly not only learns to accept the physical world of Gethen—he embraces it and even becomes a part of it. In the first chapter of his story Genly recounts a ceremony for the placing of a keystone in a great stone arch; the metaphor is not subtle (he does not intend it to be), and at the end of their trek across the Ice both Genly and Estraven will embody this metaphor. Ultimately, Genly’s mission cannot succeed until he has learned to embrace all of Gethen—its people and its climate, its cultures and its landscapes. The two are inseparable, and if he is to make an alliance with the people, he must also come to terms with its environment.

Despite robust academic discussion on the role of the environment in several of Le Guin’s novels, there is little scholarship available on the role
the environment plays in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Therefore, to better understand the intersection between culture and environment on Gethen, this paper will read the novel through a critical lens almost as controversial as *The Left Hand of Darkness* itself: that of ecofeminism, which combines aspects of both ecocritical and feminist literary theory to explore the phenomenon of “othering” that so often leads to oppressive societies. This theoretical lens, though popularized several years after Le Guin’s novel was first published, enables a reading of the novel that explores both Le Guin’s assertion that “one of its two dominant sets of symbols is an extended metaphor of winter” and the more subtle impacts of the critical controversy around gender in the novel (“Is Gender Necessary?” 8). Le Guin herself implies that just such a reading is not only possible but necessary when she notes that the environmental themes “are involved with its sex/gender aspects quite inextricably” (8).

Ecofeminist philosophy posits that the ways in which many cultures think in hierarchical binaries—separating “us” and “them” while placing one group clearly above the other—can also be seen in the human tendency to separate nonhuman nature and human civilization, enabling us to exploit nature more comfortably. In other words, just as we “other” people who may be different from us, we also “other” the environment we live in. Therefore, exploring the way people interact with their physical environment can shed light on intracultural othering and oppression. Considering the nature of Genly’s mission and, being an alien on Gethen, his keen understanding of what it is to be the other in a society, ecofeminism is a prime lens for understanding the personal and conceptual transformations
Genly experiences and the process he must go through to dismantle his own binary thinking. Although this paper seeks to focus on the roles that nature plays in the novel more than the role of Gethenian sexuality and culture, as Genly himself comes to understand there is no way to truly separate a culture from its environment. This is true as much for the Ekumen as it is for the Gethenians, making the dissolution of the nature-culture boundary a crucial element of Genly’s success or failure in realizing alliances. Read through this lens *The Left Hand of Darkness* becomes a prime example of ecofeminist literature, as Genly’s personal journey functions as a potential roadmap for readers’ own personal and societal changes.

**Ecofeminism and Science Fiction**

Val Plumwood argues that ecofeminism is a school of thought that “results from the application of feminist perspectives to problems of ecology” leading to a theory that seeks “a society beyond militarism, hierarchy, and the destruction of nature” (10). As many ecofeminists have noted, it is an inherently political theory grounded in a desire to understand oppressive social systems with the explicit goal of steering human society toward what Douglas Vakoch terms “liberatory alternatives” and a more egalitarian future (12; see also Otto 15, Murphy 46). Put another way, most ecofeminist texts will have two core goals: “exploring patterns of domination and unhealthy social systems and their causes” and “propos[ing] alternative lifestyles based on an ethics of care and respectful practices towards the other” (Alonso 216). As Jeffrey Lockwood argues, by drawing on a plethora of academic fields, “eco­feminism is a unique synthesis—not merely an odd assemblage—of
perspectives from which emerges a new way of seeing and engaging the world” (168). As an example of the scholarly diversity within ecofeminism and present in this very paper, Lockwood is an entomologist and pragmatic philosopher, and Vakoch—who has edited three of the ecofeminist anthologies that have informed this paper—is an astrobiologist and psycholinguist.

The work of philosopher Amy Chan Kit-sze adds an additional dimension to ecofeminist theory, and one which presents important concepts regarding the core argument of this paper. In analyzing the wealth of scholarship on the use of Daoist philosophy in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and other of Le Guin’s novels, Kit-sze identifies a trend of surface-level readings focused on “the general Daoist ideals […] such as yin-yang, ecology, [and] balance” (126). She proposes that the Daoist ideals in the novel run far deeper than have previously been realized, and that the *yin*, or feminine, principle in particular is inextricably woven into the novel, such that the success of Genly’s mission only becomes possible because multiple characters learn to embrace the *yin* principle in their own lives and leadership style. Though her work focuses more on the philosophical and gender elements of Le Guin’s writing than the environmental ones, when taken in conjunction with the more ecologically focused scholarship in this paper Kit-sze’s arguments help elucidate potential alternatives to the problematic cultural mindsets presented in *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

A final and perhaps most important argument to understand is that of Barry Pegg, who, at the time of this writing, has put forward one of the only accessible papers on the use of the environment within *The Left Hand of Darkness* itself. Pegg argues that Le Guin’s novel presents “extremes of
terrain” designed, “by a kind of environmental exaggeration, to get at the fundamentals of the human condition” (491). In essence, he posits that the extreme environment on Gethen, and the ways Gethenians are forced to adapt to that extremity, highlights not only the aspects of society that are most intrinsic to humanity, but also the traits that give a society the best chances of long-term survival. Thus, for Pegg, when Le Guin suggests the superior viability of societies that are predicated on “not only a real relationship between the people and landscape, but among the people themselves” she is also suggesting that our society would also benefit from a more cooperative relationship with our own landscapes and neighbors (490).

In terms of the resonance between ecofeminism and science fiction, Irene Alonso claims “since science fiction allows the reader to experience alternative realities, writers can depict ecofeminist ethics in practice” and propose balanced societies that “may encourage people to make them possible in the real world” (220). In other words, she suggests—and both Eric Otto and Pegg agree—that the genre of science fiction is particularly well-suited to explorations of the themes of oppression and liberation that make up the core of ecofeminism (Otto 36-37, Pegg 482). Similarly, Otto asserts that the field of ecofeminism, despite being relatively young (only achieving prominence in the late 1970s), can still be an effective lens for books written before the theory was fully developed as “certain works of science fiction [...] have engaged with central ecofeminist issues at the same time as, and in some cases before, such issues provoked theoretical deliberations in more academic setting” (14). I suggest that The Left Hand of Darkness, published nearly ten years before ecofeminism became widespread in the late 1970s, is
a particularly interesting manifestation of Otto’s point.

By carefully tracking the way the narrators interact with and describe the environment in the last third of the novel, readers can identify trends of environmental interaction that both mirror and even spark Genly’s changes over time, as well as identify the ways in which Le Guin may have been pushing into the ecofeminist realm nearly ten years before it rose to prominence. To better understand these changes, I will begin my reading at the hinge point of the novel, where Genly’s own emotional transformation begins: the work camp at Pulefen Farm. It is at Pulefen that, for the first time since coming to Gethen, Genly experiences greater tension with the people around him than with the physical world. From Pulefen, this paper will follow Genly and Estraven past the volcanoes Drumner and Dremegole—whose violent eruptions signal dramatic change for both the physical and political worlds of Gethen—and across the Gobrin Ice, where Genly will first learn to accept Estraven as an equal and partner and even comes to lean into rather than fight against the stormy weather of Gethen. When the two return to human society they are sufficiently changed by their experiences to actualize Genly’s mission and bridge the cultural gap between the Ekumen and Gethen, embodying the red arches of Karhide with which Genly opens his report.

Farms and Fences

Discussion of the plot of *The Left Hand of Darkness* is often broken into three main “sections,” each based on Genly’s location: the Karhide chapters (one to five), the Orgoreyn chapters (six to thirteen), and the Ice
chapters (fourteen to twenty). This paper argues that the changes Genly undergoes in each region are not just a result of the people he encounters there; his relationship to the natural environment plays a significant role in his development. Each region is packed with details about the landscape, weather, and architecture that offer insight into Genly’s mindsets and current understanding of the people who live there. This paper will focus on the later events of the book, beginning at Pulefen Farm on the border of Orgoreyn and following Genly and Estraven onto the Ice.

The reason for this decision is simple: despite being more than two years into his mission at that point, Pulefen Farm is where the ecofeminist undertones of the novel—and, consequently, Genly’s own transformation—begin to make themselves known. Prior to Pulefen, Genly frequently shows himself in conflict with the world around him, both physically and culturally. For example, in the opening pages of his report, Genly mentions that he is dressed too warmly for the parade, as the weather is unusually hot (*Left Hand* 4-8). The Karhide chapters are rife with images of red stone, red buildings, even red trees, which contrast sharply against the white snows and create an almost constant feeling of tension. In Orgoreyn, with its “yellowish-white stone” buildings and grey thore-tree forests, Genly often remarks that the country feels strange and unreal (123). And although he claims it is a relief to be free of Karhide’s “color, choler, and passion,” it is in Orgoreyn that he first reveals his ability with Farfetching—a learned skill among the Ekumen which Genly describes as essentially “highflown speculation” and “the intuitive perception of a moral entirety” which readers might better recognize by the idiom “trusting your gut”; in Orgoreyn
Farfetching manifests as Genly’s intuitive realization that, despite outward appearances of peace and comfort, something is not quite right there (122, 157-58).

In these sections, Genly’s deep separation from his physical environment displays a mindset that Alonso terms “oppositional value dualism,” in which two connected concepts, such as human culture and nonhuman nature, are perceived as being in conflict with one another rather than being complementary (216). In short, the tension between Genly and the natural environment, particularly in Karhide, stems from his Ekumenical perception of nature as something to be fought against and domesticated. I say “Ekumenical” rather than “Terran” or simply “his” because the report of the Ekumen’s Investigator, “a woman of peaceful Chiffewar,” contained in chapter seven displays a similar mindset made explicit when she observes that “the dominant factor on Gethenian life is not sex or any other human thing: it is their environment, their cold world. Here man has a crueler enemy even than himself” (Left Hand 103, emphasis mine). Hence Genly’s almost child-like excitement when he arrives in Orgoreyn’s capital city to find the Orgota have beaten back this enemy with well-heated apartments, heavy blankets, and hot showers, leading to his exuberant declaration “Long live comfort!” (128).

Chapter thirteen, therefore, detailing the Pulefen Commensality Third Voluntary Farm and Resettlement Agency, forms the hinge of Genly’s report. It is here that he reaches his lowest moments, physically and mentally. And it is here that his fragile state begins to be reflected in the landscape, signalling the gradual modification of Genly’s oppositional,
dualistic mindset. For the first time since coming to Gethen, Genly records seeing fences. He is aware of the border fence in a contested region between Karhide and Orgoreyn, but he deliberately avoids going to see it himself (*Left Hand* 115). By contrast, at Pulefen Farm he is surrounded by fences. As a somewhat conspicuous alien on Gethen, Genly has been keenly aware of his status as “other” on the planet; but at Pulefen Farm, for the first time his brand of “other” also means “dangerous” and “less than,” resulting in the first instances of Genly being deliberately and inhumanely mistreated. Thus, the activity at Pulefen reflects a key attribute of ecofeminist theory: identifying a clear connection between the undue domination of nature and the “othered” group (Vakoch 2, Plumwood 12).

Despite the fences, Genly records that the forest is “carefully husbanded” at the Farm, so that it is not wasted or needlessly destroyed (*Left Hand* 189). Though a small detail, Genly’s use of the highly patriarchal term “husbanded” is itself significant from an ecofeminist perspective; it indicates Genly’s own understanding of Orgoreyn’s relationship with the environment at Pulefen as uniquely hierarchical on Gethen, and further characterizes the Orgota in a distinctly masculine way in relation to the freshly-feminized forest. At the same time, the Farm guards, “seldom harsh and never cruel,” ensure that the prisoners are not overworked either, adopting a similar mindset toward their workers as they take with the forest: “punitive, but not destructive” (189, 191). And yet, as Genly is put to work subjugating the thore-forest (as grey as his own new uniform), the doctor sets about subjugating Genly with drugs designed to make him mindless. Considered a political threat to the Commensality of Orgoreyn, Genly has been so thor-
oughly “othered” by the Orgota that they have created what Alonso terms a “logic of domination” (217). Which is to say, Orgoreyn’s leadership comes to see Genly (and the other prisoners) as so different from, and potentially dangerous to, themselves that they are no longer fully human; therefore, the forced use of mind-altering and other drugs—which effectively halt the Gethenian sexual cycle, the non-consensual use of which arguably constitutes the first known form of sexual violence in Gethenian history—become acceptable to Commensals and guards alike (*Left Hand* 190). Is it any wonder that Pulefen becomes the hinge point of his story? Here, for the first time, Genly is not unsettled by the forest, nor does he struggle against the snow; he is disturbed by the fences, drugs, and the realization that Gethenian culture can take the same dangerously inhumane turns that other worlds have.

It is fortunate, then, that Genly does not stay on the Farm for long. In chapter fourteen readers learn that Estraven has followed him to Pulefen and immediately works to break Genly out. Following their luck, Estraven succeeds in dragging a near-dead Genly off the Farm and, fortuitously, nature itself aids their escape in the form of a snowstorm that helps cover their tracks. After a few days of hiding out and recovering, the pair set off for the Gobrin Ice, hoping to return to Karhide and finish Genly’s mission. Before they can reach the Ice, however, they must pass through a natural barrier that acts as a kind of gate between the settled world of Orgoreyn and the wild, shifting glacier to the north: the twin volcanoes, Drumner and Dremegeole.
The Volcanoes’ Eruption

After the turn in Genly’s character arc at the Farm, his interactions with the environment also shift; once a source of tension and reflective of his own psychological state in Pulefen, as Genly and Estraven flee to the Ice the natural world begins to foreshadow and even instigate the next stages of Genly’s emotional development. It is here, in the true wilderness of Gethen, that *The Left Hand of Darkness* begins to fulfill the second key function of an ecofeminist text: exploring potential societies and behaviors that challenge patriarchal and/or dominating cultures and model what Murphy describes as “a process of *radical transformation* of the human connection, *from the interpersonal to the political*, […] to end all forms of oppression” (42). Put another way, if we accept *The Left Hand of Darkness* as an ecofeminist text, then chapters one to thirteen present explorations of the harm inherent in oppositional value dualism, patriarchal thinking, and the tendency to “other” that plagues human societies today. Chapters fourteen to twenty use Genly’s personal transformation to explore potential methods of change for oppressive societies. In effect, Genly’s personal journey, reflected in his changing relationship to both Estraven and Gethenian nature, serves as a theoretical roadmap for our own personal and societal changes.

This transformation becomes clear as readers follow Genly and Estraven to and across the Gobrin Ice in perhaps the most well-known arc of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, recognizable enough that in 2021—more than fifty years after the novel was first published—the US Postal Service included it on their stamp honoring Le Guin. In this final third of the story, Genly and Estraven take turns narrating, each detailing their harrowing experi-
ences and the ways in which they were finally able, perhaps forced, to come
together as equal partners and dear friends. For Genly in particular this
journey is transformative, and he is finally able to see and accept Estraven
for who they are. By extension, he comes to realize what he has misunder-
stood about his mission. He is not merely on Gethen to convince them to
accept the Ekumen; he is on Gethen to learn to accept the Gethenians and
their world. When he can finally do that, he will be ready to bring both
Gethen and the Ekumen together, serving as a cultural bridge or keystone
between them. Part and parcel of this process of becoming the keystone is
Genly’s learning to accept the planet as much as the people on its surface.
What better place to do that than in its most extreme climates?

Shortly into their journey, as they seek a way onto the Ice, Estraven
twice records a simple sentence in their journal: “Drumner is in eruption”
(Left Hand 242, 243). The fact that Estraven not only records but repeats
this sentence makes it clear that they place great significance on the eru-
p tion. Further, the fact that they are writing in a journal they intend for
their child to one day read indicates that they expect their child to find it
significant as well. These repeated sentences cannot be coincidence any more
than the eruption itself can. If Genly and Estraven wish to climb up to the
Gobrin Ice, they must first pass the gates of Drumner and Dremegole. By
working their way past the volcanoes and onto the ice, Genly and Estraven
pass a point of no return; from here on out, they deliberately work toward a
change in Gethenian society, knowing that without change they will likely
die, and possibly leaving Gethen to follow the path of other human socie-
ties into nationalism and oppressive totalitarianism. For several days of
their journey, Estraven notes daily in their journal the effects of the eruption, including that Dremegole has joined in “Drumner’s labor,” detailing the noxious fumes, raining ash and cinders, and the way larger debris melts the ice as it lands around them (243-245). I suggest that Estraven’s care in describing the volcanoes eruption is not simply a coincidence; there is something in this violent act of nature that resonates with their understanding of the mission they and Genly are on.

After their explosive destruction, volcanoes often leave behind lands rich for new life. They build islands, grow mountains, and can even melt glaciers. It is this last idea that Estraven latches onto, explaining a theory they once heard: “Eskichwe rem ir Her hypothesized that the volcanic activity in N.W. Orgoreyn and the Archipelago has been increasing during the last ten or twenty millennia and presages the end of the Ice, or at least a recession of it and an interglacial period” (Left Hand 242, emphasis mine). That Estraven chooses to include so much detail about the eruption indicates their tenacious hope that change is coming to Gethen. But it is more than mere hope. Like the prediction Genly once received from a group of seers back in Karhide, Drumner and Dremegole—Gethenian nature itself—offer a dramatic testimony of Genly’s mission and the impact the arrival of the Ekumen will have for Gethen. Thus, Estraven’s reference to the volcanoes is as “the dirty chaos of a world in the process of making itself. Praise then Creation unfinished!” (245). Later, Estraven’s actions will trigger an eruption in the political landscape, toppling the governments of Orgoreyn and Karhide within a matter of days. From the rubble, Genly is finally able to build the alliance he came for, creating new possibilities for both Gethenian
A New Kind of Duality

Another significant example of the way in which the environment mirrors, perhaps even spurs, Genly’s emotional transformation is the experience Genly and Estraven have in the Unshadow. In those days stuck in the strange “white weather,” the environment itself reinforces the idea that a new form of duality—not the oppositional, conflict-inducing dualism of both the Ekumen and Orgoreyn, but a more inclusive duality that embraces both sides of a perceived binary as necessary and co-dependent—is an ideal mode of being: a life embracing light with dark, sun with shadow. As Genly narrates the experience, “All brightness was gone, leaving nothing. […] Estraven stood beside me, but neither he nor I cast any shadow. […] The illusion was so complete I had trouble keeping my balance. […] 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” (Left Hand 280-281). Despite being softer and quieter than the howling blizzards that have besieged them on the Ice, the white weather is a no-less extreme environment produced by the complete absence of shadow; it is a world seemingly of pure light that results in an omnipresent dull brightness, a pale grey void that, for all its seeming unity, is a wearisome, unnatural place. It is so mentally and physically exhausting that even Genly comes to long for snow and blizzard, just to have a hint of shadow again.

This whiteness is exhausting to Genly because it is a world in
tension with the philosophical ideals that he has recently learned on this ice trek: he must reject the oppositional value dualism he has inherited from Terra and the Ekumen and instead embrace a more inclusive model of duality. The distinction is as crucial as it is subtle. According to Plumwood, “dualism is a way of construing difference in terms of the logic of hierarchy” where one side of the difference is seen as “alien to and of a different nature or order of being to the ‘lower’ side […] and each is treated as lacking in qualities which make possible overlap, kinship or continuity” (12). Therefore, in order to achieve a measure of kinship or continuity between Genly and Gethen, Genly must embrace a different model: duality, or difference without the need for hierarchy and confrontation. The way this model appears on Gethen is simply summed up by Estraven, who tells Genly “daylight’s not enough. We need the shadows, in order to walk” *(Left Hand 286)*. This idea, which Kit-sze notes carries “a strong overtone of the *yin-yang* principle in Daoism,” is central to Gethenian philosophy and even provides the inspiration behind the title *The Left Hand of Darkness* (133). After Estraven rescues Genly and shortly before they arrive on the Ice, Genly and Estraven have a conversation about the *yin-yang* principle found in some of the Ekumen’s cultures and which appears—albeit without the black and white symbol readers will no doubt be familiar with—in the Handdara (Gethen’s philosophy-religion) beliefs. During this conversation, Estraven shares a poem that will eventually lend its opening lines to the very title of Genly’s report: “Light is the *Left Hand* of darkness / and darkness the right hand of light” *(Left Hand 252)*. Later, in the aftermath of their time in the Unshadow, this poem prompts Genly to share the symbol of *yin-yang*
with Estraven (287). Building on Le Guin’s use of Daoist symbolism in this second scene of exchange, Kit-sze emphasizes how “the yin-yang principle aptly describes the sex of the Gethenians: they have both sexes in them. And when yin gets stronger, then the yang recedes, and vice versa. Nevertheless, they are dependent on each other” (133). Without this internal sexual duality in himself, Genly has held a world view based on oppositional and hierarchical dualism that has significantly hindered his ability to connect to the Gethenians. For Genly and Estraven’s mission to succeed, however, Genly must learn to accept and embrace not only both sides of the Gethenians, as male and female, but both aspects of himself as well. Within days of this philosophical realization, Gethenian weather itself, in the form of the Unshadow, reminds Genly that a life without both light and shadow is void.

Genly’s realization of this non-hierarchical dualism leads to perhaps one of the most moving passages in the novel as he describes his newfound understanding of Estraven’s nature: “I saw then again, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not to see in him: that he was a woman as well as a man. [...] it was from the differences between us, not from the affinities and likenesses, but from the difference, that that love came: and it was itself the bridge, the only bridge, across what divided us” (Left Hand 266-267). This phrasing is strikingly similar to Alonso’s in her study of ecofeminist principles in science fiction, when she claims that “it is necessary to accept otherness as part of one’s identity if we truly want to embrace difference” (229). It is through Genly’s radical acceptance of Gethenian ambisexuality, culture, and even the weather he once hated that The Left Hand of Darkness fulfills the second goal of an ecofeminist
text: identifying and exploring potential solutions for the societal problems identified within the text. In short, Genly’s problematic Terran mindset of oppositional dualism can only be “fixed” by embracing a healthier, complementary form of duality in which difference is respected and embraced without placing preference on one side or the other. This second ecofeminist goal is reinforced by the final events of the novel, when Genly and Estraven make it off the Ice and back to civilization in Karhide.

Placing the Keystone

With Genly and Estraven’s newfound love providing insight into one another and, in Genly’s case, Gethen as a whole, he is finally ready to fill the role he came to Gethen for: to act as a true go-between for Gethen and the Ekumen, and to become the cultural keystone that will hold the arch of their alliance in place. I suggest that Kit-sze’s argument surrounding the yin principle goes deeper than the discussion of sexual duality, such that Genly cannot hope to establish an alliance with Gethen by remaining wholly Terran but must learn to embrace and embody the cultures of both the Ekumen and Gethen. In fact, Genly himself suggests that he was sent alone to Gethen for this very reason: “Alone, I cannot change your world. But I can be changed by it. Alone, I must listen, as well as speak. Alone, the relationship I finally make, if I make one, is not impersonal and not only political: it is individual, it is personal, it is both more and less than political” (Left Hand 279). If that phrasing sounds familiar, recall Murphy’s argument regarding the purpose of ecofeminist theory: “ecofeminism focuses on the future. […] Resistance [to oppressive systems] is not an end in itself but
part of a process of radical transformation of the human condition, from the interpersonal to the political [...] to end all forms of oppression” (42, emphasis mine). That is to say, after all that Estraven and Genly have been through together, Genly has created that personal relationship with Estraven and now must create political bonds with Gethen.

Yet, from the outset of his report, Genly tells readers that the keystone will not be easy to place. It will require patience, discomfort, and sacrifice. This is best seen at the very start of his story when, bored by how methodically the king is setting the keystone, Genly asks Estraven about the red cement the king is using. Their answer is almost frustratingly concise: “Very-long-ago a keystone was always set in with a mortar of ground bones mixed with blood. Without the blood bond the arch would fall, you see” *(Left Hand 5)*. Although Genly is not very subtle in setting up his metaphor, readers might be forgiven for hoping it will be just that: a metaphor for personal sacrifice, perhaps some suffering, but nothing the mortar-figure cannot come back from. Instead, in a heart wrenching moment that, in Genly’s narration, seems to arrive from nowhere, his ability to function as a cultural keystone is set with a more literal mortar: Estraven’s blood. In the end, it is their death that sets off the political eruption, clearing the way for Genly to build an alliance between Gethen and the Ekumen, and acting as a blood bond to cement the new cultural arch.

**Conclusion: No Longer Cold**

Otto observes “how certain works of science fiction [...] have engaged with central ecofeminist issues at the same time as, and in some
cases even before, such issues provoked deliberations in more academic settings” (14). Despite the lack of ecofeminist critical attention it has thus far received, Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* is precisely this kind of text. Although the novel was first published in 1969, nearly ten years before the ascendance of ecofeminism as a viable critical theory, Le Guin herself emphatically claimed that Gethen’s extreme environment was a conscious, metaphoric choice (“Is Gender Necessary?” 8). Genly’s journey is inextricably tied to his experiences with Gethenian nature, and through that relationship the novel explores, according to Pegg’s ecocritical reading of it, “which human systems are viable and which are not” (489). Genly’s personal transformation functions as a possible roadmap for our own personal and societal changes. Before the term “ecoefeminism” was coined, Le Guin’s novel offers a thought experiment, claiming “the purpose of a thought experiment […] is not to predict the future […] but to describe reality, the present world” (*Left Hand*, xvii).

In sum, therefore, consider a final example of the ways in which Genly has changed, coming closer to not only Gethenian culture but to its climate, revealed only when he travels to Estre and the family of his dear friend. When Genly first shares a meal with Estraven, as one might expect, he is reluctant to walk out into the cold evening afterward, telling Estraven that “[he’s] been cold ever since [he] came to this world” (*Left Hand* 21). At several points throughout his account Genly notes the bitter cold, and the people he meets are often quick to note that he is more sensitive to it than they are. It is what prompts Commensal Shusgis of Orgoreyn to “treat him as if he were pregnant,” and what spurs an unspoken act of kindness
on the truck to Pulefen Farm, when the Orgota—prisoners themselves—are always sure to tuck him into the center of their warmth-huddle (125, 182-83). And yet, after their travels on the Ice and the death of Estraven cements him as the alliance’s keystone, Genly does not mention feeling cold again. In fact, when he travels to Estre and feels the wind coming off the Ice, Genly notes “I did not feel cold as I used to, my first two years on Winter” (321).

Once at odds with the climate of Gethen as much as with its people, over the course of his report Genly reinforces his changing opinions of Gethenians with his changing experiences with the environment. Freed from the confines of Pulefen’s fences and the subjugation of its doctors, Genly accepts the dramatic parallels Estraven saw between their journey and Drumner’s eruption by folding them into his narrative. Finally, atop the Ice, he learns from the weather itself the importance of inclusive duality, adapts to the harsh cold, and even becomes a part of the landscape itself when, upon their return to society, they come to embody the keystone and blood mortar that once so unnerved him. By establishing the metaphor of the keystone, Genly makes clear his real task: not to ingratiate oneself with political leaders, but to embrace the world on which they stand. Culture and climate are inextricable, on Genly’s Terra as much as Gethen or any other Ekumenical world; to understand and embrace the first, one must accept the latter.
Works Cited


Otto, Eric C. “Ecofeminist Theories of Liberation in the Science Fiction of Sally Miller Gearhart, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Joan Sloncze-
