

“AN EXPERIMENT IN THE SUPERORGANIC”: EMPIRE AND POLITICAL EVOLUTION
IN URSULA K. LE GUIN'S HAINISH UNIVERSE

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ABSTRACT

Ursula K. Le Guin is an American author of novels, short stories, poems, children's books, and essays; she predominantly writes science fiction and fantasy. Le Guin first began publishing in the 1960s and continues her work today including speaking engagements in and around her home in Portland, Oregon. Her most recent publication is *The Real and Unreal: Selected Stories* (2 vol) from 2012.

Le Guin is particularly known for her books set in the Hainish Universe. These short stories and novels comprise what is sometimes referred to as the Hainish Cycle and discuss various themes of gender, ecology, religion, and politics. The universe is believed to be seeded from and governed principally by the world known as Hain. The Hainish global government undergoes a transformation from its original iteration as the imperial League of All Worlds into the more cosmopolitan peace-keeping Ekumen and while the publication chronology of the works and the internal chronology of the universe differ there is a notable political evolution from the League to the Ekumen.

By studying the characters of Raj Lyubov, Genly Ai, and Havzhiva from the novels *The World for World is Forest* (1972), *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), and *Four Ways to Forgiveness* (1995) this paper will examine assumed cultural understandings regarding themes of empire, imperialism, cosmopolitanism, and governance by building on the criticism of James W. Bittner and David M. Higgins. I will utilize the theoretical science fiction frameworks of Steve Shaviro and Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. in conjunction with Michael Ignatieff's theory *Empire Lite* to demonstrate Le Guin's capacity to continually envision new parameters for alien contact and negotiation and explain how her work in world building and character development challenges readers to question existing concepts of empire through the evolution and exhaustion of two systems of global governance.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Dancing = *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Worlds, Women, Places*

Four Ways = *Four Ways to Forgiveness*

LH = *The Left Hand of Darkness*

SF = Science Fiction

SFS = *Science Fiction Studies*

Word = *The Word for World is Forest*

Science fiction (SF) texts temporarily relocate the discussion of space and time to the theoretical level and reflectively stimulate an inventory of ideas and potentialities for the real world. The works of Ursula K. Le Guin provide imaginative context for exploring the consequences of social behaviour under varied extrapolative “what if” circumstances. In particular, Le Guin’s ventures in empire construction and negotiation open a critical landscape where the consequences of empire, globalization, cosmopolitanism, and sovereignty can be examined in relation to current political circumstances in developed western nations. In doing so, Le Guin demonstrates that empire is neither a linear process nor a cyclical reinforcement of imperialism. Le Guin demonstrates the malleability of empire through various situations of alliance, intervention, authority, and governance in the Hainish Universe. The imagined Hainish Universe provides the setting and social context for many of Le Guin’s novels and short stories including *Rocannon’s World* (1966), *The Dispossessed* (1974), and *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). The narratives set in this universe make up what is sometimes referred to as the Hainish Cycle and the many worlds within the universe are seeded from and governed predominantly by the world of Hain. Her first work in the Hainish Universe, “The Dowry of Angyar,” was published in *Amazing Stories* in 1964 and the most recent, *The Telling*, was published in 2000. I aim to increase critical understanding of the later published works, in conjunction with the earlier works in the universe, by tracing the political evolution of empire and the transitions of Hain’s governing global bodies from the League of All Worlds to the Ekumen.

In this study I intend to use political theory as a springboard from which to analyze the imagined social and cultural issues incorporated in Le Guin’s SF. SF studies hold the potential to uproot and explore preconceived notions of culture in “developed” nations and a globalized world. SF criticism may interrogate assumed cultural understandings such as the “completion” of colonialism, the “success” of cosmopolitanism, and the “reward” of sovereignty for nation-states more successfully than mimetic fiction. Through multiple lenses of empire and globalization studies, in the context of an increasingly “science fictional”¹ world, I will update the criticism of Ursula K. Le Guin by examining the Ekumenical emissaries in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and

¹ This descriptor is used by Steve Shaviro in “Towards an Alternative Globalization” and later on in this paper I will discuss it further.

Four Ways to Forgiveness (1995). I will utilize the theoretical SF frameworks of Steve Shaviro and Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. to further analyze the Hainish Cycle and build on the criticism of James W. Bittner and David M. Higgins by tracing the character development of Raj Lyubov, Genly Ai and Havzhiva as they experience the alien encounter. By contrasting the policies of the League of All Worlds, as evidenced in *The Word for World is Forest* (1972), to those of the Ekumen a new perspective will emerge creating renewed relevance for Le Guin's vision as a theorist and writer. The Ekumenical governance and policy in the Hainish Universe provide a significant examination in SF world building and a reflective extrapolation of other worlds as a mirror to our own.

Le Guin endeavours to develop a new paradigm in her global governance rather than further engaging in a cyclical reinforcement of imperialism under the guise of innovative necessity by calling attention to the follies of imperialism and experimenting with new visions of empire. Bittner explains, "As Le Guin developed her future history and filled in the prehistory before and the future beyond the League Era, she discovered that the League Years were themselves part of a larger Interregnum between the Hainish seeding of a hundred worlds and the Ekumen" (97). And although Bittner makes distinctions between internal chronology and publication chronology he still cautions against a linear reading of the Hainish texts and describes "the growth of Le Guin's Hainish future history [as] a creative hermeneutic circle" focused on both invention and discovery (96, 104). Supplementary information provided by Peter Brigg, in his article "Literary Anthropology of the Hainish," builds on Bittner by mapping out both the internal chronology and publication chronology of the Hainish Empire up to 1996. Le Guin herself is less concerned with the timeline specifics and describes the Hainish world as a "pseudo-coherent universe" (*The Birthday of the World* viii). She explains,

Though I've put a good deal of work into my fictional universe, I don't exactly feel that I invented it. I blundered into it, and have been blundering around in it unsystematically ever since -- dropping a millennium here, forgetting a planet there. Honest and earnest people, calling it the Hainish Universe, have tried to plot its history onto Time Lines. I call it the Ekumen, and I say it's hopeless. (*The Birthday of the World* vii)

Rather than focusing on specific time lines, Le Guin is more concerned with the overall role of science fiction writing and the potential consequences of creating extrapolative narratives. SF theorist James Gunn, in "Towards a Definition of Science Fiction," puts forth definitive

requirements of the genre similar to Darko Suvin's outline of cognitive estrangement. Gunn explains,

Some significant element of the situation is different from the world with which we are familiar, and the characters cannot respond to the situation in customary ways, that is, without recognizing that a changed situation requires analysis and a different response. Or if the characters attempt to respond traditionally, without recognizing the need for a different response, they fail, or they fail for the rest of us, the human species. (7)

In this way, not only are the characters estranged from the familiar and traditional but so too are the readers and both are forced to reconsider a new framework and approach through cognition, whereby the unfamiliar provides a mirror that, as Suvin explains, "is not only a reflecting one, it is also a transforming one" (26, 25). The transformative mirroring process is encouraged throughout the genre as normative assumptions are challenged and made other. The definitive boundaries of the genre become less pertinent as the work of the genre becomes more relevant. Le Guin embodies these premises of the genre in theory, content, and form. Le Guin is critical of realist or mimetic fiction and describes the genre as an irrelevant "literary pseudo-reality of non-realism" whereas she describes science fiction as "a modern literary device for handling this insane world we live in...a tool, fitted to the job" (qtd. in Broughton 49). In her own right Le Guin is also an SF theorist and her critical work *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, and Places* discusses the role of science fiction as a transformative lens. She cautions,

Fiction in particular, narration in general, may be seen not as a disguise or falsification of what is given but as an active encounter with the environment by means of posing options and alternatives, and an enlargement of present reality by connecting it to the unverifiable past and the unpredictable future. A totally factual narrative, were there such a thing, would be passive: a mirror reflecting all without distortion. (*Dancing* 44-45)

Le Guin creates the necessary narrative distortion whereby the conditions of the SF genre, globalism, and technological revolution collide.

David M. Higgins in "Towards a Cosmopolitan Science Fiction" insists that "as a literary mode attending to imperial dream-work, science fiction addresses the philosophical and institutional operations of imperialism more fully than any other genre of cultural production. It is from this deep understanding of empire...that science fiction's useful critical objections against

imperialism emerge” (331). Using the contemporary political philosophy of Ignatieff’s *Empire Lite* as an ideological marker, the benefits and consequences of empirical governance can be flushed out from Le Guin’s work. Literary discourse and “science fiction’s focused treatment of imperial themes” provide the necessary framework whereby:

The genre often moves beyond critique in order to extrapolate cosmopolitan alternatives to imperial domination. Imperialism and cosmopolitanism each reflect contrasting attitudes concerning the interrelation between social and political bodies in contexts where inequitable power relations are seemingly inevitable because of the greater technological, economic, military, or informational resources of one entity over another. (Higgins 332)

By “extrapolating cosmopolitan alternatives” from an “imperial dream-work” varied imagined socio-political alternatives can be explored; this process motivates readers to envision and rethink global paradigms.

In 2003, Michael Ignatieff wrote approvingly about “Empire Lite” and it has since become an epithet for the imperial imperfections of government intervention in the process of nation building. The striation of governments, under the guise of nation-building or humanitarian efforts, is a direct outcome of imperial initiatives focused on finance and resource gain rather than fostering open mutual cooperation. Ignatieff makes allowances for the necessary “evils” of imperial influence as the only access by which to introduce the positive aspects such as humanitarian intervention and national stability. The ideal of working within an existing mindset to achieve realistic change is behind Ignatieff’s policies. He insists that it

is appropriate to call this exercise imperial because, even though the United Nations, independent humanitarian agencies and many other foreign governments are taking part, it was American military power which made nation building possible in the first place. The alternative account – which is to call nation-building an exercise in ‘humanitarian intervention’ by a fiction called ‘the international community’ – actively obscures the fact that none of it would have happened had the United States not decided to use decisive military force. (*Empire Lite 2*)

Ignatieff condemns the larger global inequalities and attempts to account for the “limits of American power and influence” within the debate (*Empire Lite 3*). He explains, “The key question is whether empire lite is heavy enough to get the job done” (*Empire Lite 3*). Ignatieff contemplates American's role within, and often at the top of, empire in an imperial system:

Imperialism doesn't stop being necessary just because it becomes politically incorrect. Nations sometimes fail, and when they do only outside help – imperial power – can get them back on their feet. Nation-building is the kind of imperialism you get in a human rights era, a time when great powers believe simultaneously in the right of small nations to govern themselves and in their own right to rule the world. Nation building lite is supposed to reconcile these principles...of imperial power and self-determination. (*Empire Lite* 160)

However, empire as reality and empire as ideology can differ; it may no longer be solely about getting the job done, but how the job is done. The consciousness of the international community and global population could be weighed against the imperial vision of one power. Ignatieff invokes American imperial action as a necessity; he argues, “humanitarian action is not unmasked if it is shown to be the instrument of imperial power” (23). In contrast, Le Guin is demonstrating that humanitarian action is in fact unmasked if it is shown to be the instrument of imperial power. She is optimistically setting the stage for a metamorphosis of the Hainish Empire and the League of All Worlds into a more enlightened international community: the Ekumen. The exclusionary, elitist, and self-serving assumptions of “Empire Lite” reflect the shortcomings of the League of All Worlds. Rather than fostering equality, and mutual assistance, a system of striation, exclusionary peacekeeping, and elitist communications enforces the top-down governance of developed and less developed nations within the Hainish Empire. Bittner's exposition of *Rocannon's World* describes an early League that is “ignorant of the people it is exploiting” and is “in short, racist and ethnocentric...it [the League] grants other people recognition only as potential extensions of itself” (93). *The Word for World is Forest* provides additional evidence to further prove Bittner's analysis of the League. Ignatieff's *Empire Lite* is similar to that of the League of All Worlds as he posits America, like Hain, at the top of his empire.

SF as a genre can provide alternatives to existing theories and embodiments of empire. SF treats “real imperialism as the growing pains of imaginary Empire” (Csicsery-Ronay Jr. 232). Empire represents the “embedded goal [and] the conceptual fulfillment of imperialism” as it functions within the SF genre to manage the “abstract techno-political leap forward out of “domestic” culture, from a nation among nations to a global culture” (Csicsery-Ronay Jr. 232, 235). Outlining connections between science fiction and empire theory, Csicsery-Ronay Jr.

explains that “for most commentators, imperialism is the ideological justification for attempts by a nation-state to extend its power over other, weaker territories, in competition with similar nation-states striving for the same goals” (232). As a genre, SF “has been driven by a desire for the imaginary transformation of imperialism into Empire, viewed not primarily in terms of political and economic contests among cartels and peoples, but as a technological regime that affects and ensures the global control system of de-nationalized communications” (Csicery-Ronay Jr. 232). Csicery-Ronay Jr. cites various writers including Le Guin, H.G. Wells, Frank Herbert, and Orson Scott Card as exemplars of empire SF; however varying their specific worlds and regimes may be they “operate in the same social-ontological continuum” wherein sentient beings “construct technological cultures to manipulate and extend their power over the worlds in play” (*SFS* vol 30 241). Most importantly, Csicery-Ronay Jr. highlights that the genre of SF does not purport a homogenized view of empire nor the desire to adhere to one particular iteration of empire: “To say that sf is a genre of empire does not mean that sf artists seek to serve the empire. Most serious writers of sf are skeptical of entrenched power, sometimes because of its tyranny, sometimes because it hobbles technological innovation” (241). Rather, empire serves as a “rich political myth” focused on the “restless reconstruction of relationships between the center and the periphery” (238). Csicery-Ronay Jr. describes empire as “constant managed transition: its worlds are perpetually at some point on the timeline of imperial evolution” (238). Discussions in SF literature concerned with empire and imperialism range from moods of hostile condemnation to unanimous support. Writers question whether imperialism can exist as a benign peacekeeping force within empire or if the process of encounter, exploitation, corruption, and control negate imperialism altogether in future improvements of empire. Imperialism is presented and exposed through science fiction’s various treatments of empire:

Sf artists construct stories about why this Empire is desired, how it is achieved, how it is managed, how it corrupts (for corrupt it must), how it declines and falls, how it deals with competing claims to imperial sovereignty, or how it is resisted. The history of sf reflects the changing positions of different nation audiences as they imagine themselves in a developing world-system constructed out of technology’s second nature. (Csicery-Ronay Jr. 236)

The Hainish stories represent a similar cycle or course in so far as imperialism and empire are continually refigured and understood anew through the viewpoints of the main characters and their anthropological encounters on various worlds in the universe.

The relationship between the conditions of global capitalism and SF narrative dialectically provide context to complex theories of globalism and empire that emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and continue to develop. This merging of theory creates a continued desire and relevance for Le Guin's vision and works. In his introduction to a special issue of *Science Fiction Studies* on SF and globalization David M. Higgins explains that "globalization impacts literature" but he also highlights that "literature does not passively reflect globalizing conditions" (370). Higgins maintains that SF "contributes to, reflects upon, and/or challenges global regimes of economic, social, and political power" (370). Steve Shaviro notes the importance of SF narratives as alternatives as they "can track the processes of globalization, all the way to their most dreadful and apocalyptic consequences. And sf can also provide counter-narratives, visions of an alternative globalization, precisely at the time when such imagining has become so difficult for us" (384). Furthermore, he insists that SF global dialogue is the only means by which to interpret our current conditions:

And yet, the conditions of capitalist globalization insinuate themselves so completely into our everyday existence, that we find ourselves taking them for granted. As Slavoj Žižek, Frederic Jameson, and Mark Fisher have all suggested, we find it easier to imagine the end of the world altogether than we do to imagine the end of capitalism. And this is why science fiction is urgently necessary. We live in a world that is, itself, so cognitively and affectively estranging, so science-fictional and hyperreal, that traditional (realist or 'mimetic') fiction is not capable of representing it. (384)

Csicsery-Ronay Jr. explains that "because globalization has no classical spatial or temporal boundaries, it requires new cartographies and geographies" and must be "continually reconstituted" (*SFS* vol 39 488). Le Guin's oeuvre and theory can be further utilized in relation to the emerging discussion of "global science fiction."²

Global science fiction expounds the boundaries between and beyond fiction and reality; in addition, it serves as cartography to view, reflect, and reconsider other worlds and our own.

² This term is fully examined in "What Do We Mean When We Say 'Global Science Fiction?' Reflections on a New Nexus" by Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. as it appeared in the journal *Science Fiction Studies*.

This ideological meeting point, as expanded throughout the Hainish Cycle, reaches a transitory highpoint of optimistic global governance in *The Left Hand of Darkness* in both narrative form and content. George Wickes and Louise Westling in “Dialogue with Ursula Le Guin” discuss both the metaphoric internal journey of Le Guin’s characters as well as the physical journeys on their quests as they are “always travelling around...to see [her] geography”(16). Le Guin’s circular narrative structure reinforces the itinerant quests of her main characters both literally, as they traverse through the physical worlds, and metaphorically through the process of becoming other, recognizing the other, embodying the other, and finally reflecting upon their own people as other. The cycle embodies the continuous internal dialogue of the self in relationship with external forces as the main characters experience, understand, and relate to new worlds and ways of thinking, knowing, and doing.

In *The Word for World is Forest* the independent planet of Athshe is colonized by Terrans from planet Earth through a militarized deforestation project. The on-site anthropologist Raj Lyubov provides a narrative account of critical interactions with Athsheans and with representatives from The League of All Worlds. Through Lyubov Le Guin explores the consequences of militarized imperialism and exploitation as he questions governance and authority. In opposition, the character of Don Davidson represents the limited mentality of the conqueror, the ruling class (or race), and the militarized hero. It is through narration from his perspective that readers are aggressively aware of the inherent dangers of colonization. The destruction of Athshe’s peaceful way of life is considered through the perspectives of the conqueror, the conquered, and the sympathetic. In the Hainish Chronology this book marks the initial contact and negotiations between Terra and Athshe with representatives of The League of All Worlds. It is a condemnation of colonialism and imperialistic tactics and is often read as an allegory for the war in Vietnam³. The world of Athshe is an example of a negative empirical encounter with a less than optimistic outcome. Although compromises are made regarding the deforestation and occupation of the planet, the culture and social nature of the Athsheans will be altered forever.

37 See H. Bruce Franklin’s “The Vietnam War as American Science Fiction and Fantasy” for more information on this perspective.

From Davidson's viewpoint every commodity, person, and species is treated as less than the conqueror. Davidson represents all that is harmful under colonial or imperial rule. He dehumanizes others through sexism and racism all in the name of perceived progress:

Ben was about a meter high and his back fur was more white than green; he was old, and dumb even for a creechie, but Davidson knew how to handle them; He could tame any of them, if it was worth the effort. Get enough humans here, build machines and robots, make farms and cities, and nobody would need the creechies any more. And good thing too. For this world, New Tahiti, was literally made for men. Cleaned up and cleaned out, the dark forests cut down for open fields of grain, the primeval murk and savagery and ignorance wiped out, it would be a paradise, a real Eden. A better world than worn-out Earth. And it would be his world. For that's what Don Davidson was, way down deep inside him: a world tamer. (*Word 12*)

Davidson refers to the Athsheans as creechies: the derogatory term used to dehumanize the local population. His dehumanizing attitudes extend beyond his treatment of the Athsheans including his treatment of women and the environment: "Don't look for good sense from women or creechies, OK!" (*Word 20*). Davidson's relationship with his in-house creechie labourer sets the platform for his personal imperial goals:

I think we might just clean out the areas we settle, instead of this voluntary Labor routine. They're going to get rubbed out sooner or later, and it might as well be sooner. It's just how things happen to be. Primitive races always have to give way to civilized ones. Or be assimilated. But we sure as hell can't assimilate a lot of green monkeys. (*Word 21*)

Problematically, the roles of both anthropological and ecological specialists in this militarized system are only advisory at best and men like Davidson can gain power. This results in a bureaucratic balancing act of pleasing the chain of command and only minor concern for environment and humanitarian ethics can be aired in a system of limits set by a ruling class mentality. The inadequacy of imperialism is demonstrated by imposing imperialistic goals and leadership on a previously "static, stable, uniform society" (*Word 74*). Imperialistic rule without consideration for the other limits the capacity for revision from within the existing government or from outside of it. The examination of responsibility and intervention is central to Lyubov's internal moral dilemma.

Lyubov was acutely aware of the constraints imposed upon his work under the imperial agenda. His friendship with the Athshean Selver is his initial impetus for questioning the intent

of military leadership. In the process of studying Selver, and later protecting him in an escape from one of the labour camps, Lyubov develops a friendship that challenges the perceived norms of Terran/Athshe relations. In fact, “the regular officers distrusted [Lyubov] totally, instead of partially, from then on; and even his colleagues in the Special Services, the exobiologist, the ag and forestry coordinators, the ecologists, variously let him know that he had been irrational, quixotic or stupid” (*Word 121*). Gosse, the ecologist, quips, “Did you think you were coming on a picnic... You know the people you’re studying are going to get plowed under, and probably wiped out. It’s the way things are. It’s human nature, and you must know you can’t change that” (*Word 121-122*). Readers glean a sense of the inevitability of “progress” under the existing Terran political rubric. The insights of the social sciences are viewed as superfluous to the overall logging expedition. The limited published findings seem to placate certain intellectuals in the Terran elite but access to uncensored social reports or publication of such reports to a wider audience is a difficult process with the military agenda as the gate-keeping and policing agency for Lyubov’s work. Lyubov tries to rationalize the futility of his short term position by adhering to policy just closely enough to secure the possibility that his work may, in the long term, come into the orbit of a committee with more political sway:

He had been careful to keep on the right side of HQ, objecting only to the extreme cases of brutality against the natives, using persuasion not defiance, and conserving what shred of power and influence he had...His reports to the Administration and to the Committee on Rights might – after the roundtrip of fifty-four years – have some effect; Terra might even decide that the Open Colony policy for Athshe was a bad mistake. Better fifty-four years late than never. If he lost the tolerance of his superiors here they would censor or invalidate his reports, and there would be no hope at all. (*Word 120*)

Although Lyubov’s delicate approach may be viewed by some readers as defeatist, his practicality should be understood as the only possible approach. The initiative for positive intervention and change, even when human rights are being violated, is difficult in the shadow of a seemingly impenetrable overarching imperial power scheme. Even when the Emissaries of the League of All Worlds arrive, Lyubov questions their capacity for intervention and the authority they may or may not have in the current political dynamic: “How [does] an ‘Emissary of the council of the League of World’s rank? Who’s in charge here, thought Lyubov” (*Word 81*). Through his interaction with the Emissaries, Lyubov comes to the conclusion that his studies are

being censored. He realizes that any type of change may need to be enforced by a higher ranking empirical power than his own government; however, the Terran military prevented his research from reaching the appropriate committees:

He knew now that only his scientific studies had been sent up to the *Shackleton*; his protests, even his annual assessments of “Native Adjustment to Colonial Presence” required by the Administration, had been kept in some desk drawer deep in HQ. The two N.-T.H.’s knew nothing about the exploitation of the Athsheans....a Cetian and a Hainishman, how much would they know about Terran colonies, unless chance brought them to one on the way to somewhere else? Lepennon and Or had not intended to come on-planet here at all. Or possibly they had not been intended to come on-planet, but, hearing of trouble, had insisted. Why had the commander brought them down: his will, or theirs? Whoever they were, they had about them a hint of authority, a whiff of the dry, intoxicating odor of power. (*Word 70*)

In meeting with the League representatives, Lepennon and Or, Lyubov speak passionately and in defiance of Colonial Code in order to appeal to the Emissaries’ humanitarian consciousness. He condemns the Terran military by explaining the possible rationale behind the Athshean uprisings:

For four years they’ve behaved to us as they do to one another. Despite the physical differences, they recognized us as members of their species, as men. However, we have not responded as members of their species should respond. We have ignored the responses, the rights and obligations of non-violence. We have killed, raped, dispersed, and enslaved the native humans, destroyed their communities, and cut down their forests. It wouldn’t be surprising if they’d decided that we are not human. (*Word 75*)

The peaceful Athsheans were subjugated by the destruction of their habitat and dominated by the perceived threat of extermination imposed upon them by the Terrans. This infringement of the Athsheans’ previous independence and sovereignty produced negative learned behaviours such as violent retaliation. When the League representatives recognize that Terran “reports are very incomplete” they conclude that “censorship or stupidity have been at work” (*World 80*). This proclamation gives Lyubov hope that the Emissaries could be the source of change needed within the Terran system. For Lyubov, reform from within was a slow progress and risked having no impact at all due to censorship and publication complications. In addition, to ensure that imperial tactics are not obstructed it is possible to manipulate the Colonial Code and sideline humanitarian efforts. The representatives explain that although they are only “observers [on Athshe], not empowered to command, only to report. You [the Terrans] are still answerable to your own government on Earth” (*Word 82*). The commander of the *Shackleton* announces that

“Earth is now a league member and may have changed the colonial code somewhat during recent years” (*Word* 82). The up-to-date communications and procedural adaptations were one possible route by which Lyubov’s voice might be heard. The gift of the ansible (an instantaneous communication device) from the League to the corps stationed on Athshe was intended to help break the fifty-four year time gap between the planets and to update the Terran military on new operations that Earth may have put in place since joining the League. Lyubov is hopeful that joining the League instead of merely co-operating with it will help the Athsheans to induce the surrounding governments to change their minds about their home world. The union would represent hope and positive change rather than intervention or domination.

The League of All Worlds is initially portrayed in a positive light. It has advanced technology, can influence the policies of member governments, and demonstrates enthusiasm for social inquiry. At this point, the role of the League is largely conjecture and the effects of their influence unknown; but Lyubov reasons that

Reports home meant something, now that this ansible, this *machina ex machina*, functioned to prevent all the comfortable old colonial autonomy, and make you answerable within your own lifetime for what you did. There was no more a fifty-four-year margin for error. Policy was no longer static. A decision by the League of Worlds might not lead over night to the colony’s being limited to one Land, or forbidden to cut trees, or encouraged to kill natives – no telling. How the League worked and what sort of policies it was developing could not yet be guessed from the flat directives of the Administration. (*Word* 125)

The necessity of accurate Intel, up-to-date communications, and malleable policy revision in response to humanitarian and ecological deficiencies becomes clear to the reader. However, the capacity of the League to address these issues or have sway over the ruling Terran government as an overarching empire remains in question. The unknown deficit between responsibility for social change and the authority for intervention prompts Lyubov to question his own civic role in relation to the role of the League:

It was not in Raj Lyubov’s nature to think, ‘What can I do?’ Character and training disposed him not to interfere in other men’s business. His job was to find out what they did, and his inclination was to let them go on doing it. He preferred to be enlightened, rather than to enlighten; to seek facts rather than the Truth. But even the most unmissionary soul, unless he pretend he has no emotions, is sometimes faced with a choice between commission and omission. ‘What are they doing?’ abruptly becomes, ‘What are we doing?’ and then, ‘What must I do?’ (*Word* 124)

Lyubov's internal dialogue and moral crisis create empathy and encourage readers to contemplate their own stance on the role of intervention and humanitarian efforts within our current globalized political context.

After Lyubov's death, and the passing of three and a half Terran years, the Emissaries from the League of All Worlds return to Athshe to act as intermediaries during negotiations between the Terrans and the Athsheans. A contract is reached and Athshe is placed under "League Ban... so long as the League lasts" (*Word* 186). Neither the League nor any members of the League are to return to the planet thus ensuring that no outside government interferes with Athshean resources or sovereignty. This arrangement pleases the Athshe leader, but perhaps not the readers. It appears to be a political appeasement more than a mutually beneficial alliance. And although the Emissaries explain they will never come back "for five generations...then perhaps a few men, ten or twenty, no more than twenty, might come to talk to your people, and study your world" (*Word* 186) this suggests that the League does not fully respect the Athsheans' requests. In addition, what if the League itself disbands? Furthermore, in the interim, the League could offer protection in addition to evacuating the Terrans. Instead what they implement is an exclusionary policy. Selver observes: "These were people of power; they were very different from all yumans he had known, except his friend, but they were much stronger men than Lyubov had been" (*Word* 184). The strength and power of the Emissaries is built on their political position as representatives of the League. Their political power is maintained by their ownership of advanced technological communications and space travel equipment. They "own" the cosmos through their technological domination rather than through a militarily imposed threat. The Athsheans are not included as sovereign members of the League privy to global participation. This exclusion seems to be a sign of weaknesses in the League's membership policies. As Higgins explains, "the League of All Worlds (Le Guin's first interstellar supraplanetary body) [is] an imperial power, that organizes client worlds without directly colonizing them; it divides the cosmos into 'developed' and 'developing' territories and imposes a universal rule" (337). Rather than offering to evacuate the Terrans as well as protect the Athsheans, the League leaves them to their own defenses and dismisses the Athsheans as less worthy of coalition than the Terrans. Higgins criticizes this aspect of the League as he feels it "exhibits all the characteristics

of a weak (or imperial) cosmopolitan institution: it imagines itself as a benevolent and inclusive universal body, yet it establishes a hierarchy of racial differences within its ever-expanding domains, and it imposes a program of linear cultural and technological development” (338). Although the agreement secures at least temporary protection for the Athshean people and their natural resources, there is no mention of any other off-planet cooperative initiatives like repairing the ansible or having an ansible sent to the Athsheans in the future. This could have kept the Athsheans up to date on the intraplanetary activities and fostered peaceful communication between themselves and the League. The exclusionary practices of the League therefore deprive Athshe of any global technological benefits with the only compensation being the evacuation of the Terrans. Higgins explains that “the terms of [League] inclusion are different for different peoples, and it is ultimately an inclusion that prioritizes one economic way of life at the expense of others” (338). The intraplanetary relations exist on a basis of who has the most advanced commodities and power (be that military, technology or culture) and temporary appeasement of lesser governments. This criticism explains the necessary thought progression that accompanies the transition from League to Ekumen within the Hainish novels:

If the League represents Le Guin’s early thinking about cosmopolitan social and political formations, it climaxes as a theoretical failure. Although the League is not a traditional colonial empire, and although it conceptually embodies a familiar 1960s opposition to territorial colonialism, it nonetheless valorizes emergent neoimperial modes of inequity and domination. The League is a hegemony with various striations of different inclusion...The Ekumen, in contrast, represents a very different kind of universalizing attitude...that continuously rearticulates its own hegemonic constitutions as it encounters and engages its external Others. (Higgins 345)

The theoretical failure was not a flaw of Le Guin’s imagination but rather a necessary step towards political modification. The continued development of intraplanetary communications in the Hainish Universe must evolve from this point. The valorization of “inequity and domination” reinforces a system of top-down global governance wherein developed, “superior” governments dictate the “progress” of less developed nations in the Hainish Universe at this point (Higgins 344). Le Guin uses the League to call attention to the fact that global political powers purport to achieve moral victory while asserting stability for the empire under misguided imperialism. Le Guin uses the imperial theme to complicate the question of one people's rule over another. *The Word for World is Forest* demonstrates empire in one of its worst forms and

presents a League that does not know how to negotiate the alien encounter. In the chronology of the Hainish universe *The Word for World is Forest* provides additional history of the supraplanetary government and sets the stage for the necessary dismantling of the League. The Ekumen formation and the novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* provide an optimistic encounter and new progress in the exploration of empire.

The Left Hand of Darkness is the story of Ekumenical Envoy Genly Ai and his travels to the planet of Gethen. Gethen, often called Winter to describe its cold climate and desolate landscapes, is a planet noted for its androgynous inhabitants and two main nations: Karhide and Orgoreyn. Genly is sent there to seek a union between Gethen and the Ekumen. Genly's main source of introduction to the planet and its customs comes from Estraven, a political representative in Karhide. Their unlikely friendship develops as Estraven is estranged from his own country and the two characters must survive a journey across the ice, as equals in their humanity, in order to fulfill the mission of alliance between Gethen and the Ekumen. In *The Left Hand of Darkness* Genly Ai's first person narrative, the interpolated texts of myth, report, and Estraven's diary join together to form an overall transformation of experience and discovery for Genly, the Ekumen, and the reader. Genly is aware that he must overcome his initial reactions if he is to complete his mission: "Though I had been nearly two years on Winter I was still far from being able to see the people of the planet through their own eyes. I tried to, but my efforts took the form of self-consciously seeing a Gethenian first as man, then as a woman, forcing him into those categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential to my own" (*LH* 12). Genly accesses the field notes of the first Ekumenical party to land on Gethen and based on their interpretations Genly's initial considerations regarding the Gethenians begin to form: "There is no division of humanity into strong and weak halves, protective/protected, dominant/subordinate, owner/chattel, active/passive. In fact the whole tendency to dualism that pervades human [Terran] thinking may be found to be lessened, or changed, on Winter" (*LH* 101). The inclusion of these initial reports not only provides context for Genly on his mission, but the reports function as one element in the formation of multiple points of view. Genly and the reader are both asked "The Question of Sex" (*LH* 95) as they jointly undergo a process of defamiliarization through the progression of the "what if" experiment of sex and gender androgyny and neutrality. This destabilizing framework carries through to the discussion of unfamiliarity with war,

economy, and politics as entire ways of thinking are subverted and shifted. From his position of lone Envoy Genly reflects on his initial communication efforts with Estraven: “I was alone, with a stranger, inside the walls of a dark palace, in a strange snow-changed city, in the heart of the Ice Age of an alien world” (*LH* 19). Not only is Genly Ai faced with understanding an “other” or alien way of life, but Estraven is also taken aback by his experience; he explains to Genly, “No, I don’t mean love, when I say patriotism. I mean fear. The fear of the other. And its expressions are political, not poetical: hate, rivalry, aggression” (*LH* 20). Estraven is becoming aware of his position as more than just a citizen of Karhide but as a member of a universe that is much bigger than his country and even his planet. As Genly presents the “new road” of a global citizenship Estraven fears what it may take to get onto that road that goes beyond local interests (*LH* 20-21). Genly, Estraven, and the reader must all undergo a process of defamiliarization in order to attempt to imagine a new point of view. Le Guin facilitates this process through the experiment of androgyny:

It was a heuristic device [androgyny], a thought experiment... The experiment is performed, the question is asked, in the mind... They are questions, not answers; process, not stasis. One of the essential functions of science fiction, I think, is precisely this kind of question-asking: reversals of a habitual way of thinking, metaphors for what our language has no words for as yet, experiments in imagination. (*Dancing* 9)

It is necessary to consider that Le Guin recognizes three essential outcomes of her experiment: the absence of war, the absence of exploitation, and the absence of sexuality as a continuous social factor (*Dancing* 10-12). The lifestyles of the Gethenians are such that communal hearths facilitate a limited division between rich and poor and the practice of shifgrethor is used for conflict resolution. The centralized and communal lifestyle of the Gethenians is inextricably linked to their kemmering rituals and the restricting environment of constant winter. Le Guin explains, “The Gethenians do not rape their world. They have developed a high technology, heavy industry, automobiles, radios, explosives, etc., but they have done so very slowly, absorbing their technology rather than letting it overwhelm them. They have no myth of Progress at all.” For example, the Gethenian calendar is always moving forward or backwards from the current Year One (*Dancing* 12). Genly learns that “the people of Winter, who always live in the Year One, feel that progress is less important than presence” (*LH* 52). He deduces,

Winter is an inimical world; its punishment for doing things wrong is sure and prompt: death from cold or death from hunger. No margin, no reprieve. A man can trust his luck, but a society can't; and cultural change, like random mutation, may make things chancier. So they have gone slowly. At any one point in their history a hasty observer would say that all technological progress and diffusion had ceased. Yet it never has. Compare the torrent to the glacier. Both get where they are going. (*LH* 105)

Genly learns that in order to convey the purpose of Ekumenical membership, and the corollary cultural shifts that would inevitably follow, to a planet that has no war, terms like “alliance,” “threat,” and “power” would not convince Karhide to join the Ekumen. In his audience with King Argaven of Karhide Genly explains,

Forays are worth no one's trouble, across space... Trade, however is worthwhile. In ideas and techniques, communicated by ansible; in goods and artifacts, sent by manned or unmanned ships. Ambassadors, scholars, and merchants, some of them might come here; some of yours might go offworld. The Ekumen is not a kingdom, but a coordinator, a clearinghouse for trade and knowledge; without it communication between the worlds of men would be haphazard, and trade very risky. (*LH* 36-37)

Higgins highlights that one of the merits in Ekumenical policy is its ingenuity to “be fluid; it loses itself, or gives itself to be changed by its exterior rather than imposing its own changes on others through force or violence” (346). Genly uses this fluid approach to adapt his explanation of the Ekumen to resonate with the Gethenians. In his offer of alliance to Argaven Genly explains the potential for “Material profit. Increase of knowledge. The augmentation of the complexity and intensity of the field of intelligent life. The enrichment of harmony and the greater glory of God. Curiosity. Adventure. Delight” (*LH* 35). This is an attempt to reach a philosophical common ground. Genly Ai “was not speaking the tongue spoken by those who rule men, the kings, conquerors, dictators” (*LH* 36). Rather, he was augmenting his theoretical agenda, where the “democratic hegemony of the Ekumen is by necessity always radically reconstituted. Winter is not simply invited to join the Ekumen; instead, the gradual interaction between Winter and the Ekumen inevitably transforms them both” (Higgins 347). The mutually beneficial transformative exchanges between governing bodies are what makes the Ekumen into an appealing form of global empire. Higgins explains,

Because of the way the Ekumen operates – because of its nonimperial practices and attitudes – the first contact between Winter and the Ekumen unfolds as a dialogical exchange rather than as the imperial imposition of one set of values over another. Both

the Gethenians and the Ekumen are forced to reconsider the basic categories of inclusion and exclusion that constitute their social formations as a result of their intersection. (347)

The structure of global governance has been uprooted and reinvented. Contact with aliens is no longer an imperial affair, but rather a conversation of mutual benefit for the greater stability and inclusion of all who wish to participate. Genly explains to Estraven, “the Ekumen doesn’t rule, it co-ordinates. Its power is precisely the power of its member states and worlds. In alliance with the Ekumen, Karhide will become infinitely less threatened and more important than it’s ever been” (LH 18-19). Eventually, as Genly and Estraven join together, they attempt to explain to the other major government on Gethen, Orgoreyn, the benefits of the Ekumen. Estraven explains that Genly “brings from his people offers of communication, trade, treaty, alliance, nothing else. He came alone, without arms or defense, with nothing but a communicating device, and his ship... he is not to be feared, I think, yet he brings the end of Kingdom and Commensalities with him” (LH 91-92). Estraven is breaking down the barrier between Karhide and Orgoreyn by demonstrating that they could all belong to one Hainish alliance in the Ekumen: “How shall we deal with strangers, except as brothers? How shall Gethen treat with a union of eighty worlds, except as a world?” (LH 92). By highlighting the possibilities of Ekumenical alliance Estraven explains how the divisions between Karhide and Orgoreyn will become diminished as their borders would no longer be the line between two hills but “the line our planet makes in circling the Sun” (LH 93). Not only is it a question of alliance between the two ruling powers, Karhide and Orgoreyn, it is also matter of progress and mobilization for the entire planet of Gethen (Winter); Genly explains to Argaven Estraven’s faith that the smaller countries of Sith, Perunter, and the Archipelago will also seek Ekumenical memberships once the larger countries have (LH 315). Eventually, Karhide leads the alliance with the Ekumen, and Genly assures King Argaven that it is for the benefit of mankind that he and Estraven sought alliance (315) just as Genly had initially explained: “We are all men you know, sir. All of us. All the worlds of men were settled, eons ago, from one world, Hain. We vary but we’re all sons of the same Hearth” (LH 37).

Although this conclusion may read as overly optimistic, Le Guin is not attempting to develop a utopia. Le Guin does not see *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a utopia and states that it does not serve as a “*practicable* alternative to contemporary society” (*Dancing* 16). Rather than

enforcing one viewpoint she insists on continually forming new ways of thinking: “All I try to do is open up an alternative viewpoint, to widen the imagination” (*Dancing* 16). She asserts that equality for men and women, legal, social, and economic, would result in a very different world in which solutions to the central problem of exploitation of women, the weak, and the earth could be envisioned (*Dancing* 16).

The Left Hand, then, concludes on a very positive note. Yet even here Le Guin foreshadows several problems that the Ekumen might conceivably face. For example, Genly explains that

Member states follow their own laws; when they clash the Ekumen mediates, attempts to make a legal or ethical adjustment or collation or choice. Now if the Ekumen, as an experiment in the superorganic, does eventually fail, it will have to become a peace-keeping force, develop a police, and so on. (*LH* 147)

Thus far, in the Ekumenical chronology, Le Guin has sidestepped the requirement of militarized peace keeping through the successes of organic development.

It is not until *Four Ways to Forgiveness* that readers witness the shortcomings of the “superorganic” Ekumen when member states suffer human rights violations and inequality. Higgins states, “Le Guin progressively refuses to take for granted the conditions under which cultural contact can occur, and she is constantly reconsidering the ethical obligations that large-scale political, military, and economic power should entail” (351). *Four Ways to Forgiveness* introduces the downside of the Ekumenical approach as a mature Ekumen deals with the excruciating problem of encountering evil regimes and the question of intervention. The threats of sexism, slavery, rebellion, and civil war make a heavier-handed global government seem more appealing. The balance between cooperation, coercion, and conquest is put into question. The androgynous planet of Gethen faced few of these controversial social issues; therefore, the alliance with the Ekumen seemed beneficial and adaptable to everyone. *Four Ways to Forgiveness* is described by Le Guin as four connection stories “linked by place, characters, theme, and movement” (*The Birthday of the World* xi). Le Guin suggests that the stories form “not a novel but a whole” and could maybe be described as a “story suite” (*The Birthday of the World* xi, xii). All the stories take place on and between the twin planets of Werel and Yeowe. The two planets share a history, and there is movement between them. Both Werel and Yeowe

experience political and economic revolution, upheaval, and change. The underprivileged citizens, usually women or former slaves, trying to escape the entrenched norms of the caste system reach out to Ekumenical representatives and struggle to have their rights represented and upheld. The themes of freedom, slavery, revolution, education, and gender are explored. In “A Man of the People,” the female character Yeron explains to the Envoy Havzhiva her concerns regarding the women’s rights movement that followed the revolution and “liberation” of the slaves. Yeron is dismayed and exclaims,

We [the women] can organise in the dark...But I don’t think we can win freedom for ourselves alone by ourselves alone. There has to be a change. The men think they have to be bosses. They have to stop thinking that. Well, one thing we have learned in my lifetime, you don’t change a mind with a gun. You kill the boss and you become the boss. We must change that mind. The old slave mind, boss mind. We have got to change it, Mr. Envoy. With your help. The Ekumen’s help. (*Four Ways* 168)

All Havzhiva is able to promise her in return is that he would “serve as a link between your people and the Ekumen” and that he would listen (*Four Ways* 168). Problematically, literal aid in the form of education, supplies, or more Emissaries is not part of the deal. Higgins attempts to account for this Ekumenical flaw by insisting that in comparison to the League of All Worlds, the Ekumen is a strong “cosmopolitan success...(albeit in a difficult, slow, and complex way)” (351). Rather than viewing cosmopolitanism as a success signifying its completion, it is more accurate to describe cosmopolitanism as a process of continual evolution that reaches no static end point. It is a contradiction to champion the ideological strengths of the Ekumen as a “cosmopolitan success” when the imperialistic ideals of assimilating a primitive race have really only been transformed to a less invasive empire than previous incarnations. Revolutionizing the inhuman and discriminatory activities on Werel and Yeowe from the perspective of the Ekumen would be an infraction of their cooperative and transformative process. The Ekumen would need increased political authority and possible militarized action to intervene in the name of humanitarian equality as Yeowe threatens possible warfare and rebellion in order to oust the Ekumen. This type of movement is against the seemingly cosmopolitan and cooperative policies of the Ekumen. Any infringement on this long established peaceful policy would have imperialistic tendencies. In “A Woman’s Liberation”, the argument that “all knowledge is local” and the implicit implication that cultural relativism should be respected is debunked by the

humanitarian atrocities (*Four Ways* 224). Rakam is perplexed by the philosophy of “local knowledge” when one of her friends, a fellow “use-woman” (sex slave) is murdered. Rakam recounts, “All knowledge is local, my friend has said. Is it true, where is it true, that that child had to die in that way? Is it true, where is it true, that she did not have to die in that way?” (*Four Ways* 224). The Envoy Havzhiva recognises, on a personal level, that local knowledge is no excuse for this and other atrocities. Havzhiva’s personal quest to become a citizen of Yeowe, his assistance with the women’s movement, and his attempts to develop educational materials on the topic of equal rights is all conducted without explicit sanction from the Ekumen as his personal interests sometimes run counter to, or further than, the Ekumenical scope of his position.

On Werel and Yeowe the official cooperative procedures of the Ekumen prevent grand scale intervention; the risk of militarized imperialism is deflected but at a cost. The cosmopolitan strengths of the Ekumen make it seem successful in some worlds, as in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, but cooperative trade and knowledge exchange do not outweigh the Ekumen's inability to enforce humanitarian change but rather reinforce the need for further political reworking in other worlds. The balance between imperial intervention and cosmopolitan cooperation should be a new transitory phase for the Ekumen. Although it is an improvement from the League of All Worlds and its exclusionary practices, the Ekumen still falls short of an all-encompassing global philosophy or government. The strength of the Ekumen is that it depicts how “cultural differences can become sites of cosmopolitan exploration and negotiation rather than sites of struggle and domination” (Higgins 351-352). This is particularly evident in the negotiations Genly Ai facilitates. The weakness of the Ekumen is that its respect for difference can lead to the toleration of humanitarian atrocities such as those in *Four Ways to Forgiveness*. In addition, the Ekumen lacks a capacity to prevent the homogenization of cultures and loss of indigenous knowledge within member states; although it champions the sharing and expansion of knowledge it lacks tangible support and adherence to specific humanitarian policies. Bittner’s critique (pre *Four Ways to Forgiveness* and *The Telling*) cites the Ekumen as “mythic” and unchanging (120) and describes it as a replacement of imperialism with anarchism (96). It is in Le Guin’s later conceptualizations of the Ekumen that this critique no longer holds as readers learn more about individual Envoy's training, experiences, and personal epiphanies; these characters represent the necessity for change. In *The Telling* Le Guin continues to use her main

character's journey as the site of individual and Ekumenical change as Sully confronts situations of religious totalitarianism, intolerance, and censorship on two very different worlds as she undergoes her training with the Hainish as an Emissary. The trend of change rather than stagnancy within Ekumenical policy begins with *Four Ways to Forgiveness* and is the new trajectory in the Hainish novels.

The “experiment in the superorganic” political evolution of imperialism, globalization, and empire in the Hainish Universe provides an imaginative context to envision various stages of alliance, citizenship, governance, power relations, and culture in an ever-changing and engaging universe. The course of Le Guin’s later works in the Hainish Universe displays her continued vigilance to reconstitute and challenge accepted views of global progress. At the ideological intersection of globalization and science fiction theory I aim to develop the critical analysis by James W. Bittner and David M. Higgins by utilizing the SF theories of Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. and Steve Shaviro alongside empire theories such as *Empire Lite*. As Le Guin’s empire transitions from the inexperienced and imperial League of All Worlds in *The Word for World is Forest* to the peace-keeping cosmopolitan stages of the Ekumen in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and finally to the stagnating, ineffective, and mature regime in need of change in *Four Ways to Forgiveness* readers are challenged to question the concept of empire through the experiences of the Emissaries. Le Guin continues to be a champion of SF world building fiction and theory as she refuses to accept a static vision for her imagined universe or our real one.

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