

Imagining a Trans World

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Abstract: Le Guin's work is well known as a foundation of feminist science fiction's analysis of gender. But can contemporary readers understand *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a transgender text? To demonstrate what is gained by reading trans authors, I offer my own series of poems, *Pregnancy*, as an example.

Le Guin's Thought Experiment

In *The Left Hand of Darkness (LHOD)*, Le Guin (2003) describes the planet of Winter by saying "There is no unconsenting sex, no rape... There is no division of humanity into strong and weak halves, protective/ protected... they have never yet had what one could call a war" (94, 96). The inhabitants of Winter are all "androgynous" 21 or 22 days of the month. For a short period once a month called estrus, they have binary male or female genders in order to mate and reproduce. The narrator Genly Ai, a visitor from another world, is male. *LHOD* is inspiring, heartfelt and intricate. Le Guin's work is well known as a foundation for feminist science fiction's analysis of gender. But can contemporary readers understand *LHOD* as a transgender text? If so, how? I was invited by Alexis Lothian to reflect on these questions at the 2016 Tiptree Symposium. This essay is based largely on that talk, which sought to bring a consideration of transfeminism and trans of color feminism to the table.

Transfeminism, as proposed by Emi Koyama, demands that the needs of trans women be understood as significant concerns for feminists (Koyama 2003). This essay considers *LHOD* as a trans text, a feminist text, and/or a transfeminist text. While Le Guin's novel was groundbreaking for many, I find that it is not in dialog with transgender authors or experience. Considering it an early example of the imagination of gender beyond binaries reveals some of historical conflict between feminists and transgender people. I urge readers to look to transgender authors when seeking transgender texts. To demonstrate what is gained by reading trans authors writing from experience, I offer my own writing in the *Pregnancy* series of poems as an example of the hormonal changes that Le Guin speculated in *LHOD*.

Le Guin imagines a world without rape or war. Given the November 2016 election of Donald Trump, who has openly boasted about sexually assaulting women and has been accused by over ten women of sexual harassment and assault, her vision is particularly relevant to the context of the US in which I am writing (Cut 2016). Trump's attempts to repeal the Affordable Care Act, changes to Title IX interpretations, and mass deportations are already having a detrimental impact on many transgender people, and trans people of color in particular. By envisioning a world where gender transition is normal and having a stable gender is perverse, Le Guin created a strong challenge to cisnormativity: the assumption that living in accordance with the gender one was assigned was at birth is, or should be, normal. Her idea is still incredibly visionary. Today, many people identify with a gender known as "genderqueer," which seems to parallel her idea of being androgynous, as genderqueer people reject identification as male or female and often prefer the pronoun "they." Additionally, genderqueer and trans people are not new phenomena; they have existed for centuries. A world where gender transition is the norm is still a distant future, however.

Language to describe gender is one realm that has changed a great deal between 1969, when *LHOD* was written, and 2017. *LHOD* has been critiqued for its usage of male pronouns, as many see that as a limit to Le Guin's (1989) claims to the androgyny of the Gethenians who populate *Winter* (1969). Beyond this, though, the book may be seen as evidence of divisions between 1960s feminists and communities that may now be described as queer and trans, although the language they used to describe themselves then differs from today. To imagine people who change genders, Le Guin had to imagine another world. Did she know that trans people received hormone treatments that resemble some of the processes she described as early as the 1920s (Stryker and Whittle 2006, 45)? Did she consult them or their doctors on the effects of those treatments? What was her thought experiment shaped by? She states in her 1988 essay "Is Gender Necessary? Redux?" that "it is hard for us to see clearly what, besides purely physiological form and function, truly differentiates men and women... the only going social experiments that are truly relevant are the kibbutzim and Chinese communes" (Le Guin 1989, 159). Le Guin's comment here shows that her focus was on the division of labor between genders. Though, the comment also leads me to believe that she did not consult transgender people for the writing of *LHOD* because many people in 1969 were living their lives outside of the binary genders assigned to them at birth. One way to consider a possible reading of the book as a transgender text is to try to understand the author's attitudes towards trans people and her intent in writing it. Le Guin says in

an interview with *Vice* magazine that she didn't know any transgender people and that the word was not in use at the time (Lafreniere, 2008).

For historical context, we could look to many examples of gender transition in mythology and religion, as well as centuries-old traditions of indigenous two spirit people, some of whom have genders that might be described as transgender, transsexual, transvestite, genderqueer or gender fluid (Feinberg 1996). As far as biological gender transformations like those described in *LHOD*, sex-change surgeries were first performed in Germany in 1931 (Stryker and Whittle 2006, 39). In Austria, early hormone treatments for gender-transitioning people began in the 1910's and in 1950 there were documented cases of people of both sexes requesting hormone treatment at a clinic at University of California San Francisco (Stryker 2008, 41). In 1953, Christine Jorgensen made headlines with her medical gender transition: she was featured on television and radio and went on to tour universities in the 1970's and 80's (Stryker 2008, 49). In her book *Transgender History*, transgender studies scholar and historian Susan Stryker describes three very public incidents in which "transgender and gay resentment of police oppression erupted into collective resistance" by hundreds of people at Cooper's donuts in 1959 in Los Angeles, at Dewey's lunch counter in Philadelphia in 1965 and at the Compton's Cafeteria Riot of 1966 in San Francisco (60-63). A few years after *LHOD*, in 1973 Sylvia Rivera stormed the stage at the Christopher Street gay pride rally to speak about years of organizing being done by Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries to improve the lives of queer and trans people, many of whom were sex workers who had been incarcerated (Calpernia 2014).^[1]

Many intersectional feminists today consider analyses of cisgender privilege and accountability to trans women to be important parts of feminist political action. I worry that describing *LHOD* as a trans text may continue a trend of scholars and feminists making trans lives and trans cultural production invisible, as Viviane Namaste has described in her book *Invisible Lives* (2000). I call on all of those who would act in solidarity with trans people to continue to work against this exclusion by including transgender authors in our collections and our panels, as well as looking to historical examples of transgender science fiction authors. James Tiptree Jr. is an inspiring example of an early science fiction author who may be described as trans (Samer, 2016). Also, looking to trans women authors for examples of trans science fiction challenges trans-misogyny, or the ways that misogyny is multiply compounded against trans women. Trans women such as Rachel Pollack were publishing science fiction writing as early as 1971, such as her short story "Pandora's Bust" (Pollack 1971). From

1973 to 1975, Jessica Salmonson was one of the editors of *The Literary Magazine of Fantasy and Terror* and she was public about being transgender (Clute and Grant 1999, 832). The work being done by the Motherboard of the James Tiptree Jr. Award Council is important work in the right direction. Members of the board organized the panel in which this paper was first presented, and have awarded Tiptree Fellowships to trans women, including myself. I am grateful for this work and hope to see it continue!

In the introduction to *LHOD*, first included in the 1976 edition, Le Guin (2003) describes the book as a “thought-experiment, as the term was used by Schrödinger and other physicists...not to predict the future... but to describe reality, the present world” (xxiv). As such, I see her writing as theory. I see Le Guin as an early visionary in a line of theorists that includes Judith Butler’s 1990 book *Gender Trouble*, where Butler said that to end gender based oppression, the feminist movement should move on from its illusion that the gender of woman exists as a material substance (2006, 6). Le Guin’s work also resonates with feminist theorists such as Monique Wittig, whose 1969 book *Les Guérillères* imagined new possibilities for language to describe gender (Wittig 2007), and Donna Haraway’s (1991) “A Cyborg Manifesto,” which also sought to challenge the unity and boundaries of the category of woman. *LHOD* opens a space of imagination that can be seen in the queer and transgender movement that demands space in the present for embodiments beyond cisgender assignments, beyond binary genders as the only option, and beyond a heterosexual matrix of power predicated on that binary.

Writing from Trans Experience

“The king was pregnant” (Le Guin 2003, 99). King Argaven’s pregnancy is a major plot point in *LHOD*, and this elegant, short sentence provides a powerful image of patriarchy undermined, subverted, transformed. Going into more detail about pregnancy, Le Guin writes “if the individual was in the female role and was impregnated, hormonal activity of course continues, and for the 8.4-month gestation period and the 6- to 8-month lactation period this individual remains female” (91). While *LHOD* brilliantly imagined other worlds with bodies that periodically change their hormones to become pregnant, one can look to the writing of trans authors to understand how these experiences are actually unfolding.

My own artwork resonates with Le Guin’s close consideration of moments of hormone induced bodily changes. In my project *Pregnancy*, I sought to bring attention to the reproductive rights of trans women. In many places in the US, including prisons, the

only way for trans women to have safety, to be treated in accordance with their genders, is to get permanently sterilizing surgery. Trans women in the US are frequently told that the only way for them to have reproductive rights is to pay for exorbitantly expensive cryogenic banking of their sperm. This process costs thousands of dollars.

Additionally, many doctors and published pieces of literature on hormone treatment tell trans women that once hormone treatment has begun, they will no longer be able to have children. My personal experience documented in *Pregnancy*, as well as the experience of other trans women I met, shows that this is a lie. I understand this advice from doctors as a form of punishment of trans women and a way of making life saving gender related medical treatments more difficult to access.

Wanting children of my own, I sought out other trans women who have had children in the year before my gender confirmation surgery. I found a group of women on social media who had stopped their hormone treatments temporarily, long enough to begin producing sperm again. These women taught me how they did it. They also taught me the do-it-yourself science of identifying sperm morphology and motility at home with an inexpensive microscope.

I have long been inspired by bioartists who challenge the boundaries between life and art, scientist and layperson, body and art object, by creating art from biological materials. These artists include the Tissue Culture and Art Project, Stelarc, Orlan and Shannon Bell. Bell worked with a bioart lab called SymbioticA and created a female phallus out of genetically engineered tissue (SymbioticA 2011).

In my project *Pregnancy*, I documented the changes in my biology over a period of months in which I had stopped my hormone treatment. I documented the changes with poems inspired by women of color feminists such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde, as well as with photos and video. The video focuses on my biological material to call into question any simple notion of transgender visibility as a political goal. The poems reference do-it-yourself science and the usage of biological material as a medium, both aspects of the bioart genre.



20141201_163491.mov

A blizzard of hormones,
for months,
undersea volcanoes spewing hot affects
tectonic emotional swings
intense food cravings
my body is foreign to me
it's changing, in ways I don't like,
shape, texture
and so many little black hairs coming back,
despite being tortured out of existence,
on my cheeks, in my cleavage,
I have to wear baggy clothes,
all my underwear was too tight
for gamete making temperatures,
I have to take my vitamins every day,
all to make a baby.
I'm a trans woman
and I'm pregnant.

20141227_195816.mp4

While I once thought taking hormones was a good experiment

an ethico-aesthetic experimental life act in the spirit of Deleuze and Guattari,
now I realize what a masculinist, colonialist dream that was,
and I don't like that old self of mine.

Some of us write out of need,
for some of us, this is not a luxury, as Lorde said.
Now, after so many years of taking them,
I realize that in these pills there is a home for me,
these pills, and all the changes they've brought to my body and life,
have brought me to a place of commitment to building a home and a family,
to heal the deepest wounds in myself,
to care for myself and those I love,
by creating stability,
by being careful with our hearts and our lives.
Funny that my Colombian father's whole way of raising me,
was to teach me to be the man, the breadwinner,
and it didn't work at all,
but absolutely rejecting man in the deepest way I could
brought me full circle to want to create and protect my family,
in a way that dad
will one day appreciate.
They told me I would be sterile,
the doctors and brochures,
that I couldn't do this,
what I'm doing.
But they don't know,
and they lied to me,
and other trans women
have done it.
I mourned the loss of my children and family,
and I've heard my friends mourning them too,
but the truth is that even after 8 years on estrogen and t blockers,
you only have to go off your hormones for a few months
to make gametes.
Other trans women taught me how to do it.
Sadie said, get a microscope,
don't pay hundreds of dollars for doctor visits to check your semen,
with a \$50 kids microscope,

you can see sperm,
morphology and motility.
I did, I can and I do,
see hundreds of sperm squirming their way across the field of view,
clearly swimming in a line,
I shared with the other women a short video I made,
and they exclaimed:
you've got swimmers!

Often, cisgender viewers of trans art want to look so closely, to know the truth of the trans person's life so intimately, that the viewing becomes a form of voyeurism, a form of violence. My work challenges that desire to see the truth of the transgender body or life. In this work, the intimate details of my life and body are literally under the microscope, but I literally use a poetic lens to subvert the power of the cisgender gaze. In other works, I have used science fiction as a means to subvert that gaze. The project for which I was awarded the Tiptree Fellowship, "Redshift & Portalmetal," is an interactive story in a style I refer to as transreal, blending fiction and non-fiction to tell a story of how femme science can open portals in time and space, and how a trans woman on a dying planet uses these portals to escape and to stay in touch with her lover while on the run (cárdenas 2014).

Lastly, a note on language. Le Guin describes many of the characteristics of Gethenians that change as they go through estrus and pregnancy. One characteristic of my own that I explore in *Pregnancy* is the way my language changed. One of the poems asks, "whose language is this, the logos of cis-heteropatriarchy," as I identify that my poetry has changed, my sentence structures, my word choices. I did not edit the poems after going back on my hormones, and my mind changed back to what I know to be my mind, which I understand as female. In that sense, *Pregnancy* is a material experiment with some of the issues that Le Guin's thought experiment in *LHOD* explores. I wanted to record how even my language and thoughts changed when my hormone levels changed.

Le Guin's act of imagination, conjuring a world where gender is temporary and in permanent flux, where having a single, stable gender is described as perversion, is brilliant and powerful. In a way, Le Guin imagined a trans world through the character of a cisgender observer on that world. Still, I encourage readers to look to the writings of transgender authors for examples of transgender science fiction, alongside Le Guin's

work, and to research actual trans people's lives when writing stories about transgender experiences. The embodiments and cultures she imagined on other planets have clear precursors in history and are becoming increasingly visible today in popular media and art. The categorization of transgender science fiction is not just a matter of representation, or making science fiction literature better. The ways that transgender people are described in popular culture have real, material effects on our safety and our ability to survive. With events such as the US Attorney General rescinding protections against employment discrimination against transgender people, our lives are made even more precarious (Horwitz and Hsu 2017). If Gethenians are understood as genderqueer people or transgender people, it needs to be noted that Le Guin describes them saying "they were an experiment" (2003, 89), echoing hateful comments widely published about transgender people after Trump banned them from military service (Smith 2017). While much of the novel humanizes them, their ontological status is still both alien and experimental. Transgender people are neither of these. Despite claims, even by feminists, that transgender people are deluded, it is crucially important that trans people be understood as the authority on their own experience, not cisgender doctors, ethnographers or authors (Butler 2014, 90).

[1] The footage is owned by the "Lesbians Organized for Video Experience Collective", and was posted to Vimeo by Reina Gossett, and has become part of a larger conflict about who owns and tells the story of trans women of color, as Gossett alleges that David France used much of her archival work for his own film about Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, which was released by Netflix first. For more information, see: <https://www.allure.com/story/janet-mock-why-i-stand-by-reina-gossett-marsha-p-johnson> <https://jezebel.com/who-owns-marsha-p-johnsons-story-1819347978>

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—CITATION—

micha cárdenas (2017): Imagining a Trans World. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, No. 12.

Text. <https://doi.org/10.13016/M2MK6594D> (<https://doi.org/10.13016/M2MK6594D>)
doi:10.13016/M2MK6594D

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Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology
ISSN 2325-0496