

ABJECT CREATURES IN ALL THE WORLDS OF MEN: SCIENCE FICTION'S  
REJECTION OF HUMANITY FOR THE ATYPICALLY GENDERED

by

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(Under the Direction of Christopher Pizzino)

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the treatment of non-binary, intersex, and otherwise gender non-conforming people within science fiction, using a sampling of four narratives: Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy, Melissa Scott's *Shadow Man*, and Ian McDonald's *River of Gods*. Through careful consideration of the similarities and differences between portrayals and treatments of such characters within these narratives, this paper seeks to illuminate a troubling trend within the genre of science fiction: the inability of the genre to conceive of cultures in which non-binary, intersex, and otherwise gender non-conforming individuals can be allowed recognition and basic humanity. By analyzing these narratives in succession according to publication date, the paper further contemplates an apparent increase in pessimism regarding societal acceptance of gender non-conformance that parallels increased Western consciousness of transgender issues and real-world discrimination against transgender individuals.

INDEX WORDS: Science fiction, transgender studies, Non-binary gender, Intersex conditions, Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler, Melissa Scott, Ian McDonald

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“...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...”

—Genly Ai, Ursula Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*

“So all of them, out on these other planets, are in permanent kemmer? A society of perverts? So Lord Tibe put it; I thought he was joking. Well, it may be the fact, but it’s a disgusting idea, Mr. Ai, and I don’t see why human beings here on earth should want or tolerate any dealings with creatures so monstrously different.”

—King Argaven of Karhide, *The Left Hand of Darkness*

“If they’re not human,” Warreven said slowly, “what does that make me, Ten? I’m a herm, that’s real, I’ve got tits and a cock and a cunt, and what does that make me?”

“You can pass for a man,” Tendlathe said, after a moment. “You can make the effort.”

“Pass for human,” Warreven said bitterly. “Fuck you, Tendlathe.”

—Melissa Scott’s *Shadow Man*

The bodies are strewn up the alley. One wears a car tyre around its neck, burned down to the steel wires. The body is intact, the head a charred skull. One has been run through with a Siva trident. One has been disemboweled and the gape filled with burning plastic trash. The police stamp out the flames and drag the thing away, trying to handle it as little as possible. They fear the polluting touch of the hijra, the un-sex.

—Ian McDonald’s *River of Gods*

Science fiction (sf) as a genre has a long and storied history of gender trouble. Since the early days of hard science pulps with their hypermasculine space frontier narratives and the virtual absence of women within them, to recent controversies such as that surrounding the “Sad Puppies” and their efforts to diminish the presence and power of politically progressive works at the Hugos,<sup>1</sup> the readers, writers, and scholars of sf have spent much of its relatively

short existence as a genre dealing with a slew of gender issues. Since moving out of its so-called “Golden Age” and into the “New Wave” in the 1960s, issues of binary gender re/presentation have come to receive a considerable amount of fannish and critical scholarly attention. Masculinity, femininity, the presence of women, and the supposed dominance of men within the genre (in terms of writing, reading, and existing within narratives) have all come under the eye of sf readers, writers, and scholars over the decades, without an end to such inquiries in sight. The numerous manifestations of gender in sf that disrupt or challenge the gender binary have, however, gone relatively unnoticed, particularly in terms of critical consideration. Recent years have seen an outpouring of deliberately binary-disruptive and transgender-focused works of sf, among them anthologies such as *Meanwhile Elsewhere*, *Scheherazade's Facade*, and *Transcendent*, all of which contain stories written by and about the unusually gendered. A similar outpouring of critical work focusing on sf's gender disruption does not seem to be forthcoming, despite the fact that such disruption is not a recent phenomenon in sf.

Perhaps the most well-known instance of an sf narrative seeking to disrupt the gender binary is Ursula K. Le Guin's 1969 novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Several others have followed in Le Guin's footsteps, creating a variety of different worlds and similarly various configurations of disruptive gender(s). Of those works, the ones that this essay will consider in addition to *The Left Hand of Darkness* are Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy, Melissa Scott's novel *Shadow Man*, and Ian McDonald's novel *River of Gods*. By considering these four works in the same space, I hope to bring to light a trend among works of sf that deal with manifestations of gender outside of the gender binary. This essay represents an attempt to grapple with an aspect of the “transgender question” within sf that I find particularly troubling,

namely the inability or unwillingness of the genre to conceive of a human community that can contain binary *and* non-binary genders at once within the same cultural space. That is, these works of sf suggest that where men and women exist in a cultural space, people who identify with a gender that is not predicated on being either a man or a woman cannot find a place to live their lives authentically. Humans who subscribe to the gender binary, these works imply, cannot allow the transgression of that binary in a culturally significant way. To put it otherwise, an individual man or woman can recognize a person outside the gender binary as *a person*, but whole human cultures and societies cannot *allow* those who fall outside of the gender binary to be considered *people* or even *humans*. There are worrisome suggestions in these texts that biology is human destiny as far as gender goes, unless those of us who do not fit within the binary are willing to forego our humanity altogether.



## CHAPTER 2

### UNDERSTANDING THE “TRANSGENDER QUESTION”

Transgenderism and transgender people<sup>2</sup> have had a long and storied history of trouble in general. Transgender women have been the most visibly troubled of all transgender people, since male to female (MTF) gender transition seems to earn particular ire from conservative elements of society, and the recent influx of transgender people appearing throughout various media have largely seen transgender women in the spotlight.<sup>3</sup> However, transgender people in general have had their fair share of troubles of various sorts, from minor discrimination to hate crimes and murder. Although not on the same level as these very real physical violences, arguably there has been epistemic violence against transgender people by feminist and, to a lesser degree, queer theories in the past few decades. Particularly in the late 20th century, “transsexuals were considered abject creatures in most feminist and gay or lesbian contexts,” even when the transsexuals<sup>4</sup> in question have been both feminist and gay or lesbian (Stryker 273). Though for a time transgender people were not particularly welcome or accepted in its circles, and though even today significant feminist communities exist who deny outright the validity of transgender or otherwise gender variant individuals,<sup>5</sup> feminist theory has been increasingly preoccupied with the “transgender question,” as evidenced by the way that influential theorists such as Judith Butler have incorporated transgenderism and transgender people into their works. Transgender scholar Viviane Namaste positions the “transgender question” in typical feminist work as “the ways in which feminist theory depends on looking at transsexual and transgendered bodies in order to ask its own epistemological questions”

revolving around “the central question of considering how gender is constituted” (12). By utilizing transgender people this way, making our identities and experiences less important in terms of lived reality and more important in terms of the ways we can support theories of gender construction, feminist theory reduces the importance of our lived realities in and of themselves as well as the knowledge that those realities provide us, and makes us cogs in a machine rather than placing our own knowledge(s) at the forefront of gender studies.

Queer studies presents a somewhat less problematic place for transgender scholarship. But as Susan Stryker, another transgender scholar, notes, “[w]hile queer studies remains the most hospitable place to undertake transgender work, all too often *queer* remains a code word for ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian,’ and all too often transgender phenomena are misapprehended through a lens that privileges sexual orientation and sexual identity as the primary means of differing from heteronormativity” (274). Where then do questions of transgenderism and its many manifestations best fit? They fit in the realm of transgender studies, which Stryker has suggested to be “queer theory’s evil twin” because it “willfully disrupts the privileged family narratives that favor sexual identity labels (like *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, and *heterosexual*) over the gender categories (like *man* and *woman*) that enable desire to take shape and find its aim” [emphasis Stryker’s] (272). Importantly, transgender studies is a place in academia where the scholarship on transgenderism and gender variance in their many possible forms is performed by and large by *actual transgender people* rather than being formulated primarily on the outsider observances of cisgender people.<sup>6</sup> This essay seeks to inject the ethos of transgender studies into sf studies in particular and literary studies broadly.

## CHAPTER 3

### OUT ON THE EDGE OF GENDER

Transgender identity manifests in innumerable different ways throughout the human population. The most culturally recognized identities, in Western society at least, are transgender women and men, that is, people who transition either from male-to-female (MTF) or female-to-male (FTM). However, there are numerous other types of transgender identities beyond these binary categories of transition to the so-called opposite gender. The most relevant of these identities to this paper's analysis are non-binary and intersex identities, although it is important to note that those who identify as non-binary and/or intersex do not necessarily identify as transgender, and there are certainly people who object to non-binary and intersex individuals being placed into the category transgender. However, I use transgender in its broadest sense, to refer to a wide variety of gender varying/nonconforming individuals. Broadening the purview of the word transgender is, I believe, useful in that it positions gender/sex categories at its forefront and avoids the potential subtle eschewing of such categories risked by using the word queer. And in fact, many non-binary and/or intersex people *do* consider themselves to be transgender in some sense, so transgender is not an unfounded term to use in this context.

Both non-binary and intersex are terms that encompass a broad variety of identities and physicalities within their basic definitions. Declan Henry's book *Trans Voices* provides an explanation of the terms in their simplest sense:

...The key defining feature of a non-binary person is that they do not feel comfortable thinking of themselves as simply either a man or a woman. They reject the traditional Western idea of gender as binary, defined only in terms of man or woman. Instead they feel that their gender identity is more complicated to describe. It is important to remember that being a non-binary person is not the same thing as being an intersex person, because non-binary is about the way someone self-defines their gender identity while intersex is about the physical body a person is born with. (118)

Individual notions of what it means to be non-binary or what particular “type” of non-binary one identifies with number at least in the dozens, if not the hundreds: agender, androgyne, bigender, demiboy, demigirl, gender-fluid, gender-fuck, gender-questioning, gender-queer, inter-gender, neutrois, and pan-gender among them, to name just a few (Henry 120-2). The term “intersex” also encompasses numerous different specific conditions within itself. The traditional image of the so-called hermaphrodite, possessing an equal amount of evenly divided male and female physical characteristics, frequently proves not to be the case at all. There are “over 40 known intersex variations,” among them “chromosomal incongruities,” “differences in... physical make-up,” or “visibly ambiguous genitalia” (Henry 46). Though intersex births are not extremely common, they are not as rare as one might expect given the lack of public conversation regarding them; Anne Fausto-Sterling argues in her well-known article “The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough” that given evidence of intersex births being a statistically significant portion of the population,<sup>7</sup> Western culture badly needs to rethink its commitment “to the idea that there are only two sexes” (1993, 20-1). Both intersex conditions and non-binary gender identities have existed for thousands of years. They are normal, if less

common, human conditions and identities. Except where intersex conditions create side effects that prove harmful to the intersex person in question, there is nothing wrong with these people or their identities; as transgender writer Kate Bornstein says in her book *Gender Outlaw*, “there are as many truthful experiences of gender as there are people who think they have a gender” (8). Yet humans, both in modern society and in the novels I will be examining, have difficulty understanding that fact.

## CHAPTER 4

### POSITIONALITY

The development of this project has been shaped in large part by my own gender troubles, namely the realization of my own transgender identity and the transitional gender state in which I have lived for nearly two years. As a genderqueer transgender man, I have spent much of my life, whether consciously or not, cultivating my own gender expression.<sup>8</sup> I have variously presented myself as very feminine, very masculine, and androgynous. Particularly in the interim between starting hormone replacement therapy and reaching a physical state that generally allows me to pass as male,<sup>9</sup> as well as during my androgynous preteen years, I found that regardless of my manner of dress, people often had trouble placing me on the gender binary. Not infrequently have I had strangers alternate nervously between “ma’am” and “sir,” trying their damndest to place me squarely in one box but finding themselves unable to trust any of the signals that my face, clothes, body, hair, voice put out to them. My body, like that of many other transgender people, became a battleground upon which strangers’ notions of what marks a man and what marks a woman could fight each other. Most people, people who have grown up with the gender binary and have rarely if ever thought to question it, found me to be an uncomfortable glitch in the system. They don’t like to be reminded that human beings are not so simple as they like to think, and their discomfort with my own disruption of gender has made me hyperaware of that same discomfort playing out in fictional worlds. I thought that perhaps sf would be a site of progress in terms of gender, that I might find worlds populated by societies that accept gender difference as normal. Certainly, such texts must exist somewhere, but they were not what I

found in the novels I examine herein: less genderless utopia and more gender-struggling semi-dystopia. More so than in its earliest days, contemporary sf is concerned with reflecting upon the politics and problems that we do or could face in the real world; its reflections on matters like gender do not always suggest human cultural development to be quick or easy.

## CHAPTER 5

### TRANSFORMING SCIENCE FICTION

My intent in this essay is not to act outside the realm of sf studies and theory; indeed, I want to engage here with one of the most foundational theorists of sf, Darko Suvin and his “understanding of SF as the *literature of cognitive estrangement*” [emphasis his] (4) in order to ground my assertions, though the necessity of an adaptation of the theory in question will quickly become clear. Estrangement is “[a] representation which... allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar” (Brecht qtd. in Suvin 6). Cognition is precisely what it sounds like—accumulating and processing knowledge—the *science* aspect of sf. That is, genres such as fantasy or paranormal fiction have the element of estrangement, of recognizable unfamiliarity, but those genres do not approach things in a cognitive manner, with explanations and rationalizations rooted in empiricism. The major aspect of cognitive estrangement within sf is the novum, “a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author’s and implied reader’s norm of reality... [a] novelty [that] is totalizing in the sense that it entails a change of the whole universe of the tale, or at least of crucially important aspects thereof,” thereby creating an “essential tension... between the readers, and representing a certain number of types of Man of our times, and the encompassing and at least equipollent Unknown or Other introduced by the novum” (64). At its heart, “the novum is a conceptual challenge to everything we hold dear” (Broderick), whether that challenge comes in the form of “social revolution” or a total “change of scientific paradigm making” (Suvin 81).



The novum is conceivable but not yet conceived *of*, something that is “always determined by historical forces which both bring it about in social practice... and make for new semantic meanings that crystallize the novum in human consciousnesses” (Suvín 80). It is “born in history and judged in history” (81) while being nonetheless a novelty. This both does and does not hold true for the cognitive estrangement created by the presence of non-binary gender. Binary disruption, particularly the existence of trans people, non-binary, and/or intersex people, is very likely as old as human history.<sup>10</sup> Its appearance within these novels does not create *wholly* new semantic meanings, because it has already been given semantic meaning in the past. As such, Suvín himself might not agree with me when I claim that gender as manifest in these texts does function as a novum. Binary disruption acts, however, as novum in much of Western society<sup>11</sup> thanks to what Petra L. Doan calls “the tyranny of gender” (635). The tyranny of gender is enacted everywhere in societies committed to binary gender, and “[f]or the gender variant, the tyranny of gender intrudes on every aspect of the spaces in which we live and constrains the behaviors that we display” (ibid). “[T]he patriarchal social structure does not tolerate intermediate genders” (637), despite the reality that gender goes far beyond simple dichotomy. As a result, “[t]he tyranny of gender oppresses those whose behavior, presentation, and expression fundamentally challenge socially accepted gender categories” and “[g]endered bodies [whether gendered correctly or not] are subject to a regulatory regime... that enforces the boundaries of properly gendered behaviors” (639).

Gender disruption acts as novum despite its existence in our real world, then, because patriarchal efforts to suppress gender difference has rendered that difference so unfamiliar to such large swathes of Western society that it may as well be wholly new to those who encounter it in the world or in narratives. Except for that very small readership that might be binary

disruptive themselves or may know of such people, the disruption enacted within these novels is, for all intents and purposes, a genuine novum that creates a genuine Other. However, it does not seem as though the authors of these texts set out simply to exploit the real existence of transgender people in an attempt to fashion a novum or establish a “universal” Other merely to create a guaranteed source of tension between supposedly normally gendered people and the unusually gendered. A vital aspect of cognitive estrangement in Suvin’s view is “not only a reflecting *of* but also *on* reality... impl[ying] a creative approach tending toward a dynamic transformation rather than toward a static mirroring of the author’s environment” (10), and the novels that I will examine are ones in which much more happens than mere static mirroring of gender disruption as it happens in our real world.

## CHAPTER 6

*THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS*

A discussion of gender disruption within *The Left Hand of Darkness* (*TLHoD*) might best be facilitated by laying out immediately the specifics of the disruption itself, in order to avoid the confusion that can permeate a discussion of the novel. Much has been made of Le Guin's subset of humanity, the Gethenians, and their so-called androgyny (the term Le Guin herself used for them) but in fact to call them androgynous is inaccurate, if not wholly incorrect. Androgyny, after all, is typically understood as a blending of masculine and feminine traits/clothes/etc.; is it really possible to have androgyny where there is no masculine or feminine in the first place? Although Gethenians *are* humans, they do not have two genders but one (or none, depending on how you look at them) nor do they have two sexes. Gethenians spend most of their lives both without sexual arousal and without primary sex characteristics, in a state called "somer" that makes up about "four-fifths of the[ir] time" (Le Guin 76). Once a month during adulthood, they go into "kemmer," during which time they experience arousal and take on defined sex characteristics in the male (penetrative) or female (penetrated) role. Arguably they are both non-binary and intersex in the most extreme sense, or at least, they were meant to be.

The system of sex and gender that Le Guin portrays in *TLHoD* has been the subject of much scholarly interest in the novel since its publication. Le Guin herself describes her novel in its introduction as a "thought-experiment" meant "not to predict the future... but to describe reality, the present world" (xxiv), not to say "that in a millennium or so we will all be androgynous, or... that I think we damned well ought to be androgynous" but rather to point out

“that if you look at us at certain odd times of day in certain weathers, we already are” (xxvi). Sometimes we are androgynous; what if we were all the time? What would that look like, and how would the non-androgynous cope? These are the questions with which the novel grapples as it seeks to imagine a world without gender. Though the success of this endeavor has been debated amongst scholars for decades now, it is my opinion that in practice the novel’s attempt to conceive of humanity unbound from binary gender (as well as binary sex) fails rather miserably, in part because of a continued use of male as default within its language. The failure of androgyny, and the related failure to break out of language conventions rooted in binary gender, are not the specific issues I intend to pursue here, though they must be acknowledged in any attempt to grapple with the question of gender in *TLHoD*. Other scholars have pored over those subjects already,<sup>12</sup> and Le Guin herself has spoken and written at length about her own shortcomings within the novel.<sup>13</sup> I concern myself instead with the *intent* of gender disruption within the novel, since regardless of its overall success or failure, within the novel’s settings the disruption is complete, a given.

The plot of *TLHoD* follows Genly Ai, the “normal” human of the narrative who comes from a binarily gendered society, over the course of his journey to bring Gethen into the fold of and the Ekumen, a confederation comprised of “eighty-three habitable planets... and on them about three thousand nations or anthrotypic groups” (Le Guin 27) which “is devoted essentially to the general interest of mankind” (15). All of the members of the Ekumen, spread out among the stars as they are, have a shared origin, as Genly tells the king<sup>14</sup> of the first Gethenian nation with which he makes contact: “All the worlds of men were settled, eons ago, from one world, Hain” (27). The human stock that has lived on Gethen for eons originated from Hain, too, despite the fact that Gethenians are unique among all humans in their lack of binary gender. As

a result of that gender difference, Genly's political journey coincides with a more personal journey, in which he becomes able to recognize, in his own belabored way, the reality of Gethenian life without gender. Genly is the First Mobile, the first point of known contact between a world unaware of life on other planets and the Ekumen. Presumably he had some training in dealing with the gender difference between himself and Gethenians, but nonetheless he initially finds himself incapable of reconciling his own binary notions of gender—which, despite humankind's apparently enormous cultural and technological development, have apparently remained roughly equivalent to those of 1950s suburban America—with the lived realities of the Gethenians. Likewise, the Gethenians themselves struggle to comprehend the fact that the rest of humanity lives in what they view as a state of permanent sexual arousal. After all, to the binary view of sex and gender, they are more or less eunuchs for most of their lives. When they are in kemmer, they may have *a* sex, but it is definitely not a permanent one. Any Gethenian can take on either sex role at any point in their lives; similarly, any of them can bear or sire children, and many do both. Unless impregnated during kemmer, when they return to somer, those sex characteristics disappear along with the ability to be sexually aroused. Gethenian society is fully accepting of the realities of sex and sexual need, and "Room is made for sex, plenty of room; but a room, as it were, apart. The society of Gethen, in its daily functioning and in its continuity, is without sex" (76). That lack of sexual intercourse is part of what makes the Gethenians so difficult for humans like Genly Ai to understand.

Genly, after all, is "normal," coming from a society based in binary gender in which sexual desire does not simply exit the equation of human life four-fifths of the time. His discomfort, and in fact, the Gethenians' discomfort, each with the other, appears through the language of contact between them, a language that reflects a rejection of each by the other on a

fundamental level. From the outset, the language that Genly uses in his reporting serves to position Gethenians as difficult for other humans to relate to and understand because of their gender differences. It is clear that even after having “been nearly two years on Winter,” he does not cope well with the reality of life there (9). He tells us that “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 a man, then as a woman, forcing him into those categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential to my own” (9-10). He does just that with Therem Harth rem ir Estraven, noting that “it was impossible to think of him as a woman, that dark, ironic, powerful presence near me in the firelit darkness, and yet whenever I thought of him as a man I felt a sense of falseness, of imposture,”<sup>15</sup> though he is aware that it *might* be his own fault, questioning whether that falseness is “in [Estraven], or in [his] own attitude towards [Estraven]?” (10). The same confusion of how to categorize Gethenians persists for Genly throughout most of the novel. The Gethenian who rents a room to him is “thought of as [Genly’s] landlady, for he had fat buttocks that wagged as he walked, and a soft fat face, and a prying, spying, ignoble, kindly nature” (40); when he is captured and taken in a truck with several other Gethenians, one of his fellow prisoners is a “he” until a shaft of light shows that the prisoner is in kemmer, and suddenly she is “a girl, a filthy, pretty, stupid, weary girl looking up into my face as she talked, smiling timidly, looking for solace” (144). Mired as he is in binary gender, it is not until near the novel’s end that Genly will begin to actually comprehend the “androgyny” of the Gethenians in a meaningful sense.

Ai is not alone in his difficulty of reconciling Gethenian lack of gender with his own presence of gender; one chapter of the novel is a report by a woman who was one of the First Investigators, members of the Ekumen who visit newly discovered planets without revealing

themselves as foreign to the planet in order to learn about that planet's culture(s). In her report, the woman tells her fellow Ekumenical agents that:

When you meet a Gethenian you cannot and must not do what a bisexual naturally does, which is to cast him in the role of Man or Woman, while adopting towards him a corresponding role dependent on your expectations of the patterned or possible interactions between persons of the same or the opposite sex. Our entire pattern of socio-sexual interaction is nonexistent here. They cannot play the game. They do not see one another as men or women. This is almost impossible for our imagination to accept. What is the first question we ask about a newborn baby?

Yet you cannot think of a Gethenian as "it." They are not neuters. They are potentials, or integrals. Lacking the Karhidish "human pronoun" used for persons in somer, I must say "he," for the same reasons as we used the masculine pronoun in referring to a transcendent god: it is less defined, less specific, than the neuter or the feminine. But the very use of the pronoun in my thoughts leads me continually to forget that the Karhider I am with is not a man, but a manwoman. (77)

Despite how early *TLHoD* was written when compared to the other novels to be examined in this paper, this excerpt is by far the longest and most explicit examination among them of the discomfort and difficulty that a binary gender based culture faces when met with non-binary gender(s). The passage openly acknowledges the fact that a "bisexual" bases their interactions with other people on the immediate perception of a person's gender. "Man" and "Woman" do and should become proper nouns in such a system since they are so fundamental to society, based as it is on a "pattern of socio-sexual interaction." The first identity marker of a person newly born into such a society is gender. The fundamentality of gender does not permit the

conception of its absence. Gethenians cannot be “it” because “[t]hey are not neuters” to a society that cannot conceive of *something* without gender as a person. *Someone* must be gendered in some manner, even a limited one. Better to force a person into a male role than acknowledge another role, and thereby render the most basic social patterns useless. Better to say “manwoman” and confuse two genders than allow space in the culture for a third.

The Gethenians, interestingly, are no better than “Hainish-norm” (208) people when it comes to dealing with gender difference. The repulsion that they feel towards binary gender and sex quickly becomes clear in the early chapters of the novel, where they are voiced most explicitly by the king of Karhide, Argaven. Argaven derides the existence of such people, declaring them to be “[a] society of perverts” (28). There are, in fact, individuals on Gethen who are “stuck” in kemmer, born with a set of sex characteristics that never change. Gethenians call them perverts, too, or sometimes halfdeads, and they use the pronouns for sexed animals to refer to those people, not the pronouns for people in either role of kemmer (52). The language clearly belies the opinions behind it; to be permanently in kemmer is to be less than fully alive, to be something animal and *wrong*. Such “perverts” have their (limited) place in society, however, within the religion called the Handdara, as a part of groups who foretell the future. Their foretelling groups require a pervert’s presence for their ritual to be completed (52-3). Despite the accepted fact of the existence of such people, Argaven still finds Genly Ai and what he represents to be a horror, telling Ai that “I don’t know what the devil you are, Mr. Ai, a sexual freak or an artificial monster or a visitor from the Domains of the Void” (25). Regardless of what he is exactly, there is something wrong with him in Argaven’s eyes, yet to the credit of the Gethenians, the fact of Ai’s “perversion” is not the reason for his ultimate imprisonment and brush with death; no one tries to kill him for being a “pervert.”



Likewise, Ai and the Ekumen do not try to hurt or kill the people of Gethen for their radical difference. They are recognized as still being human despite those differences, and they welcome Gethenians into their fold. On a personal level, in fact, Genly becomes extremely close to Estraven over the course of the novel, and the love he comes to have for Estraven proves vital to his eventual recognition of the reality of Gethenian gender. A significant portion of the novel follows Estraven and Genly on a journey across the treacherous ice of the far north of Gethen, a journey which takes several months and during which they are each other's only company. It is over the course of that journey that Genly allows himself to see "what [he] had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not to see in [Estraven]: that he was a woman as well as a man... left with... at last, acceptance of him as he was" (209). Genly "had not wanted to give [his] trust, [his] friendship to a man who was a woman, a woman who was a man" (ibid) but at last he does. Shortly after Genly's acceptance of that reality, Estraven is killed, but despite the jarring nature of that death the novel ends with a positive view of relations between humans who possess gender and humans who do not, on both the personal and political level. At the novel's close, Gethen and its various nations is beginning the process of joining the Ekumen. The close relationship between Estraven and Genly, prematurely ended though it may be, bodes well for the development of respectful relationships between other members of their gender-different cultures. In short, Le Guin suggests through the novel's end that it is possible for the binary to acknowledge the existence of the non-binary, and vice-versa, with some difficulty certainly, but also without the whole of human culture and reality coming crashing down around itself. Our subsequent novels of subsequent years have rather less optimistic imaginings of such interactions.

## CHAPTER 7

*XENOGENESIS*

Of the novels under consideration in this paper, Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy<sup>16</sup> alone deals with literal aliens. *TLHoD* and *Shadow Man* present contact between humans that have been separated by time and space; *River of Gods* shows human interaction with the alien consciousness that is Artificial Intelligence. Butler's trilogy creates a point of contact between humans and a wholly foreign sort of being, both biologically and mentally: the Oankali. The Oankali are "gene traders" compelled to seek out new and different forms of life and engage in biological and cultural trade with them, resulting in the absorption of that life into the Oankali and their own ever-changing genetic makeup. They come upon Earth and humanity just in time to save it (and, no doubt, other species of Earth life) from utter obliteration. What the Oankali refer to as the "human contradiction," the conflicting traits of intelligence and hierarchical behavior, has already kickstarted humanity's would-be extinction; the Earth that the Oankali come upon is one deeply scarred by nuclear war. Prior to the trilogy's beginning, the Oankali retrieve the few surviving humans from the surface of the Earth, heal them of the effects of radiation and any diseases or disorders, and place them in suspended animation while Oankali efforts to restore the Earth to a habitable state are underway. *Dawn*, the first in the trilogy, follows Lilith Iyapo, the human woman chosen by the Oankali to help guide and teach the first group of humans to return to the (very changed) Earth. The following two novels, *Adulthood Rites* and *Imago*, each follow one of Lilith's Oankali-human "construct" children. All of the

novels deal in one way or another with human relationships with the Oankali, and specifically with the Oankali ooloi.

Ooloi are the Oankali third sex; unlike Oankali males and females, the ooloi have no human equivalent. The ooloi are the ones who do the actual mixing of genes and manipulation of biology within a specialized organ. In addition, the ooloi have the ability, like all Oankali, to link into the nervous systems of other individuals of their own or other species. Unlike other Oankali, the bodies of ooloi can induce phenomenal feelings of pleasure in a variety of ways—neurological stimulation of sensory experience and chemical relaxants among them. Sex among the Oankali, and with trade partner species, happens only through the ooloi, literally: the “sensory arms” that allow their interaction with and pleasuring of nervous systems allow the ooloi to link directly with their sexual partners, as well as linking partners to each other. Male and female never touch each other in Oankali mating; indeed, after mating with an ooloi, male and female partners are repulsed by each other’s touch. That sense of repulsion is a guarantee against sexual contact unmediated by an ooloi, and so a guarantee that the ooloi will have full control of the mixing of genes and formation of children.

For the purposes of this paper, the ooloi fall within the same realm as intersex conditions and nonbinary identities as laid out earlier, though it does not seem as though Butler constructed them as a deliberate metaphor for either group. When asked “[d]o these revised gendered and sexed bodies inhabit primarily a fantastic realm, or are you suggesting that popular narratives in categories of ‘family,’ ‘male-female,’ are actually inadequate to express sexuality and gender?” she has responded “Oh, I’m sure they are,” but makes no indication that her constructed alternatives point specifically to atypically sexed/gendered groups in the real world (‘Radio Imagination’ 104). The connection appears when we look closely at the text, though before we

move into doing so, we must pause to note that the whole of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy is marked by a sense of biological essentialism and an equation of gender with sex. Biological essentialism in the sense of gender is the idea that gender is innately rooted in biology, and that social and cultural aspects of gender are produced by fixed biological characteristics. In other words, “[g]enitals are the essential sign of gender” (Bornstein 47) to the biological essentialist. Under such a system, sex and gender become interchangeable, because there is no separation of the two concepts; your body is your mental state, and your mental state is your body.

There is no sense of transgenderism within the text of *Xenogenesis*, no sense that gender transition is a possibility. It comes closest to such a thing during the sexual maturation process (metamorphosis) of a child who is becoming ooloi. (Oankali children are literally neuter, sexless, until they begin metamorphosis.) Having thought itself destined to become male, the young ooloi asks its ooloi parent if it “could change if [it] wanted to” (548). The ooloi parent, amused by the question, tells it “Not now. But when you’re mature, you’ll be able to cause yourself to look male. You wouldn’t be satisfied with a male sexual role, though, and you wouldn’t be able to make a male contribution to reproduction” (ibid). Only superficial change is possible; “essential sex” is unavoidable. The Oankali, then, have what is essentially a trinary gender system: three genders rather than two.<sup>17</sup> Still, because we are considering that trinary system’s interactions with human *binary* notions of gender, the effect upon the human conception of Oankali gender is the same. Ooloi is a third gender, and the human cultures to survive the war do not have a concept of a third gender. Thus, their reaction requires effectively the same struggle in mental processing that an intersex condition or nonbinary identity would require, and humans definitely *do* struggle to deal with the ooloi, both physically and conceptually.

One of the most persistent aspects of the human relationship with the Oankali is the struggle by humans to grasp the reality of what the ooloi truly are. Acceptance of the Oankali generally—their inhuman appearance, their more than human abilities, their interest in manipulating biology rather than technology as humans did—does not guarantee acceptance of the ooloi specifically. The basic fact of their existence outside of the gender binary is difficult for most humans to grasp and attempts to integrate the ooloi into a human worldview vary throughout the trilogy. In *Dawn*, Lilith meets Paul Titus, a man who has lived 14 of his 28 years among the Oankali on their massive ship; despite living with them for so long, he refuses to acknowledge the reality of their sex. He refers to Lilith's ooloi companion Nikanj (who will one day be her mate) with masculine pronouns, and when Lilith points out to him that "Nikanj isn't male... It's ooloi," Paul tells her "Yeah, I know," and asks, "But doesn't yours seem male to you?" (89). While Lilith has "taken their word for what they are," Paul "never really lost the habit of thinking of ooloi as male or female"—"a foolish way for someone who had decided to spend his life among the Oankali to think," in Lilith's view, "a kind of deliberate, persistent ignorance" (ibid). Lilith rejects such ignorance, despite having been among the Oankali for a much shorter time, and her acceptance of Oankali gender reality distinguishes her from much of the rest of humanity's remnants, many of whom also embrace this sort of ignorance.

A persistent ignorance of ooloi reality seems to go hand in hand with a desire to assign a binary marker to them, a desire that appears repeatedly in the trilogy and primarily with men. A member of the first group to be awakened from stasis and prepared for the return to Earth, Peter Van Weerden, is an excellent example. When the group is first introduced to the Oankali in the flesh—the concept of the Oankali (and the ooloi) having been introduced and explained to them

beforehand by Lilith—pairs of humans are drugged into calmness by an ooloi to speed and ease the process of adjustment. While many of the humans manage to cope with this, Peter does not:

...the ooloi-produced drugs could be potent. Under their influence, Peter might have laughed at anything. Under their influence, he accepted union and pleasure. When that influence was allowed to wane and Peter began to think, he apparently decided he had been humiliated and enslaved. The drug seemed to him to be not a less painful way of getting used to frightening nonhumans, but a way of turning him against himself, causing him to demean himself in alien perversions. His humanity was profaned. His manhood was taken away. (192)

It is the ooloi's presence facilitating "union and pleasure" that "caus[es] him to demean himself in alien perversions," profanes his humanity, and takes away his manhood, since the only other person involved is a human woman. That Peter believes his manhood to have been taken away belies an underlying conception of the ooloi as, if not male, then at least masculine. Intercourse with a woman, and only a woman, would presumably be no threat to his manhood as an apparently heterosexual man. To the heterosexual man, it is sexual contact with the masculine that somehow impugns one's manhood, so it follows that Peter sees the ooloi as masculine. Ooloi necessarily take on a controlling role in sexual interactions, and their position of control could easily read as a position of dominance and, therefore, a *male* position. The depth of Peter's discomfort with the ooloi and its perceived masculinity is revealed by his attempt to attack it—an attempt that results in his death, since Oankali sensory appendages produce a lethal sting when threatened.

The idea that the ooloi are masculine and somehow emasculate human men persists unabated throughout the trilogy, with little exception. The third and final book, *Imago*, follows

Jodahs, the first construct ooloi (born to Lilith, at this point well over a hundred years in age, life and fertility lengthened by the Oankali) as it moves towards sexual maturity. We see both the reinforcement of ooloi-as-masculine and a differing notion of the ooloi in Jodahs' dealings with humans. In one of its encounters with a human, we see a human come nearer an approximation of what the ooloi are—at least conceptually, if not in terms of actual biology—when the human (a man, of course) does *not* assign masculinity to Jodahs. Indeed, that man describes ooloi generally as “[t]he mixed ones—male and female in one body” (710). The ooloi are, of course, not actually male *or* female, but a conception of them as somehow intersexual is less restrictive than the insistence upon ooloi masculinity.

Jodahs encounters other human males who do not view the ooloi so gender neutrally; when initially interacting with Jodahs, one in particular reacts amiably to it, since Jodahs is not visibly ooloi. When Jodahs' sex is revealed to him, however, he reacts with “cold rejection” and “revulsion” (599). Jodahs shortly manages to elicit the reason for that revulsion out of him:

“Why do you hate me?”

“I know what you do—your kind. You take men as though they were women!”

“No! We—”

“Yes! Your kind and your Human whores are the cause of all our trouble! You treat all mankind as your woman!” (599)

The ooloi and their extreme differences act as a focal point for human hatred, acting as stand-ins for the whole of their species in the eyes of such revolted humans as these. Lacking any well-known third gender of their own in which to contextualize the ooloi—gender contextualization being one of the most basic and immediate moves for members of a culture mired in binary gender and hierarchy, as the agent of the Ekumen points out in *TLHoD*—“pure” humans are

compelled to force the ooloi into one gender or the other, despite the fact that the ooloi genuinely do not belong in either. The ooloi *cannot* be figured as feminine, not given the way that they take charge sexually, which means they must be masculine. With the ooloi thus figured as dominant, oppressive figures, “all mankind” is shunted into the feminine role, men and women alike. Men are most upset by the perception that they are being feminized, although as Butler has pointed out, “that’s not really what’s happening[, but t]hat’s the way they see it because the men aren’t at the top of the hierarchy any more, biologically or sexually (‘Radio Imagination’ 113). “[M]ale functions” are not being taken away by the ooloi, and “[g]enetically, the men are still male[, b]ut in the Oankali system, ‘male’ doesn’t carry the connotations of power and authority that it does in human systems” (ibid). That fear and revulsion in the man Jodahs heals, and in many of the other “pure” human men throughout the trilogy, is rooted in the loss of gender power that acceptance of the ooloi represents.

The loss of gendered social hierarchies and of gender power (the power of men over women) represents a loss of humanity to the resister humans—and indeed, it may be the same for those humans who willingly join with the Oankali, since all of the “pure” humans regardless of their allegiances seem to view engagement in the gene trade as a “true extinction” (403). Even Lilith emphasizes the “unclean” nature of this species mixing, as when Nikanj has first impregnated her and she tells it that the children that come from the trade between the two species, her own child included, “won’t be human... That’s what matters. You can’t understand, but that *is* what matters” (249). Why won’t they be human? Lilith never makes it entirely clear; no human ever seems able to articulate clearly the specifics of what drives their fear of the trade. Yet the language of rejection, focused on the ooloi and the gender confusion that they instigate, suggests at least part of that fear’s root. To integrate Oankali genetics into human genetics and



to integrate the third gender of the ooloi into human culture is to lose something that is essentially and biologically human in the eyes of the humans themselves: binary gender.

As the Oankali see the human contradiction as a basic element of untouched humanity, the humans themselves see binary gender as such an element. Having never seemed to question its reality or validity, they have no reason to think otherwise. As it is enacted by them, binary gender is intimately tied into the human contradiction, since the complexities of its enactment relate to intelligence and the stratified power structures it instills reinforce hierarchical behavior. Perhaps on some level the humans can recognize that the loss of binary gender represents a disintegration of the human contradiction, which *is* a fundamental biological component of the species according to the Oankali. At any rate, they cannot understand the mixing of the species as anything less than the total annihilation of the species, despite the fact that human genetics are integrated into, not destroyed by, Oankali genetics; they cannot accept a third sex as human, despite the fact that Jodahs *is* ooloi and it *is* human, though not completely human, not *purely* human. This rejection of fact is a reflection of a human devotion to, perhaps even enslavement by, binary thinking. There is only human or not human, male or female, pure or impure. There can be nothing in between or other than; a third option, a third gender, cannot peaceably coexist with the binary options, at least not while the species remains fully human. To open space for such an option, the trilogy implies, requires a sacrifice of some, if not all, of what makes humanity *human*.

## CHAPTER 8

*SHADOW MAN*

Of all the novels examined herein, Melissa Scott's *Shadow Man* is the only one to have been distinctly shaped by the author's experience of reading a specific feminist work—Anne Fausto-Sterling's essay "The Fives Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough." In that essay, Fausto-Sterling lays out an argument for the expansion of our notion of sex as binary, citing the existence of intersex conditions as an example of how male and female do not encompass the realities of human sex characteristics. If Fausto-Sterling had her way, our sex system would expand to *at least* five distinct sexes: male, female, "the so-called true hermaphrodites... herms, who possess one testis and one ovary[;...] the male pseudohermaphrodites (the 'merms'), who have testes and some aspects of the female genitalia but no ovaries; and the female pseudohermaphrodites (the 'ferms'), who have ovaries and some aspects of the male genitalia but lack testes" (21). Scott copies this sex system with little alteration, places it in opposition to the traditional/binary view of sex/gender, and explores the consequences of their interactions in thorough detail.

The relevance of the five-sex system via the increased prevalence of intersex conditions in the human population of *Shadow Man* has its basis in the early days of interstellar travel, which required the use of the drug hyperlumin A in order to withstand the physical shock of faster-than-light space travel. Unexpectedly, the drug caused a major increase in miscarriages and births of children with intersex conditions. By the time this reality came to light, numerous worlds had been colonized, but in an attempt to prevent a further increase in such births,

interplanetary travel abruptly ceased. Whole worlds were lost in the 400-year interim, during which most human communities adjusted culturally to the reality of five sexes. The people of the planet Hara, however, never made the adjustment. Although they *are* normal humans in the sense of *having* five sexes, culturally and legally they only admit to having two: male and female. Those with intersex conditions are forced to conform to this system, declare a legal gender, and attempt to pass for that gender as best they can.

*Shadow Man* begins shortly after Hara has regained contact with other worlds, most of which have joined the Concord Worlds, the reassembled federation of colony planets. Members of the Concord accept and acknowledge the existence of the five sexes. Their common language accounts for such differences with honorifics (ser, serrem, serray, serram, sera) and pronouns (ðe, ʒe, þis, she, he). Harans and “off-worlders” experience major culture clash when they meet, and *Shadow Man* follows the ever-heightening tensions between Traditionalists who want to remain separate from the Concord and maintain the binary lie, and Modernists who want to join the Concord and make Haran law acknowledge all five sexes. The novel focuses on Warreven Stiller, the eponymous shadow man of the title, who is a Modernist and a herm, although Haran law recognizes him as a man.<sup>18</sup> He is an Advocate, essentially a Haran lawyer, who has long been involved in the legal fight surrounding recognition of the sexes (as well as the issues of sex work or “trade” intertwined with sex recognition); he is also an Important Man, a person who has “been accepted as someone who can represent or speak for the[ir] clan” (Scott 316). He has a history, too, with the *Most* Important Man, Temelathe Stane, the richest and most politically powerful man on Hara, and his son, Tendlathe, both of whom are Traditionalists. Warreven’s ongoing fight with them both over the matter of legal recognition of the other three sexes is a major element of the conflict in *Shadow Man*.

Despite the lack of legal recognition of the other three sexes on Hara, there are plenty of terms to refer to them, all of them slang and even the politest of them derogatory. The most common seems to be “odd-bodied,” a “colloquial generic term” (317). Its accusation of bodily oddity is mild compared to others like “titticock” (234), which needs no explaining; “halving,” which is the “politest, though still potentially insulting, colloquial term” for the intersexes and which “literally means half-and-half, and implies that one is neither man nor woman” (316); or “gellion,” a deliberately offensive word that “emphasiz[es] the perceived sterility of any relationship” involving intersex individuals (315). There is also “wrangwys,” Haran for “wrong way,” though it “has been adopted by [the intersexes] as a self-referential term and is not insulting *within* the group” [emphasis mine] (320). The refusal of a proper word to name them as a group, like the words men and women which both have their Haran equivalents, is a strategy of denying human rights and general humanity to intersex Harans. Without a name, they are not a truly recognized element of society, and without recognition they cannot be protected. Indeed, it becomes clear at various points throughout *Shadow Man* that the intersexes are very vulnerable to potential offenses both emotional and physical, and from multiple elements of society.

Beyond the language used for naming the intersexes, the way that Traditionalist Harans talk *about* them is demeaning, too, implying them to be somehow addled or indecisive at best, refusing them agency in the way that they live their lives as well as autonomy in their choices. One character, an off-worlder, recalls at one point how:

He’d once had a polite, slightly mad conversation with an old [Haran person who acts as conduit for the spirits], who had told him quite sincerely that the story about the five sexes being the result of hyperlumin-induced mutation was a lie, or at best a misperception, and that all that was really required to bring humanity back to its proper

two-gendered state was to stop coddling these people and force them to make up their minds about what they really were. (174)

Absurd as it is, it is clearly this sort of thinking that backs up the Haran refusal to acknowledge the intersexes legally. The intersexes are thus figured as though they are petulant teenagers going through a disobedient phase rather than a sizable portion of the population, many of them adults, who are distinctly and genuinely different sexually from the rest of the population. The enforced binary gender performance coded into Haran culture denies them the possibility of asserting themselves without repercussions; we know that there *are* repercussions because one such person to have faced them appears in the novel. Prior to the novel's beginning, Haliday Stiller "had demanded the right to call zimsel a herm on legal documents" but ze did not accomplish zer goal; Hara's highest authority "had not only refused to allow it, but, for good measure, had reassigned Haliday's legal gender, decreeing that, since ze wouldn't choose, the proverbial 'reasonable man' would see zim as a woman" (55).

The consequences of language ripple outward, degrading and dehumanizing the intersexes everywhere in Haran society, sometimes with such force as to be nearly fatal. A group of masked Traditionalists attack Warreven and Haliday in the street at one point, leaving them both badly injured. Despite the damage done by that group and the ongoing threat they pose to other intersex Harans, Temelathe and Tendlathe Stane do nothing to prevent or even discourage further attacks. Their own agenda is only aided by a group that makes the intersexes afraid of the consequences of openly campaigning for recognition like Warreven and Haliday. Still more consequences appear; like the law, Haran medicine does not acknowledge the intersexes as fundamentally different from male and female, and "[w]hat they won't see, they can't treat" (241). Worse, perhaps, than *not* treating Haliday for zer injuries would be treating

ger for zer basic state of being, but “on a world that didn’t admit herms existed, there would always be the temptation to ‘correct’ the ‘defect’ rather than go to the effort to restore Haliday to zer natural condition” (246). There is no safety from the desire to “fix” or erase the parts of intersex Harans that are not considered human—and though it takes much of the novel for someone to say it outright, it does come out at last that the Traditionalists do not see intersex Harans as human.

Early in the novel the Traditionalists, voiced by Tendlathe Stane, at least pay some lip service to all Harans being human. Off-worlders, with their acknowledged intersexes, are not human in the first place, as Tendlathe tells Warreven: “In every way that really matters, they’re aliens... We aren’t like them, and we can’t afford to become like them” (27). Harans, however, are “all that’s left of what people, human beings, are supposed to be, and if [they] change, that’s lost forever” (28) in the Traditionalists’ eyes, indicating a belief that intersex Harans have not drifted totally off-course from the recognizably human. That proves not to be the truth of the Traditionalist view, however; it eventually comes out that intersex Harans *have* become like the off-worlders, though Tendlathe suggests that despite their supposed lack of humanity, they could at least *pretend* to be human:

“We’ve already changed. We’re the same species,” Warreven said...

“Not anymore we’re not. And I refuse to believe that they are human.”

“If they’re not human,” Warreven said slowly, “what does that make me, Ten? I’m a herm, that’s real, I’ve got tits and a cock and a cunt, and what does that make me?”

“You can pass for a man,” Tendlathe said, after a moment. “You can make the effort.”

“Pass for human,” Warreven said bitterly. “Fuck you, Tendlathe.” (227-8)

Biological essentialism rears its ugly head again; to be other than male or female is to be other than human, since male and female are supposedly the only truly human sexes. Just like the human resisters in *Xenogenesis*, the Traditionalists consider the integration and acceptance of sexes other than male and female to mark the end of their existence as real humans. Unlike those human resisters, Haran Traditionalists turn to large scale violence in a desperate attempt to avoid such an end.

The novel’s end sees a riot break out across the city, with Traditionalists killing intersex Harans simply for being in view. Haran society remains unchanged when the riot quells; Warreven goes into exile off-world, in part because of the threat of violence against him for having attempted to instigate a gender revolution, and in part to learn how to better lead that revolution in the future. Harans, as Warreven tells an off-worlder at the novel’s close, “don’t have a word for revolution or a word for herm, and I’m supposed to invent both of them. I’ve been a man all my life—yesterday, I was still a man. Now I’m a herm, and I don’t know what that means, except that half my own people say it’s not really human” (304). Warreven’s observation on his suddenly changed gender designation points out a problem we have seen before, in *Xenogenesis*: your body defines who you are mentally in the Concord Worlds, just as it does among the Oankali, although the Concord’s possibilities for bodily, and therefore mental, differences are broader than the possibilities allowed by the gender binary held dear by Oankali-resisting humans and Haran Traditionalists alike. The five-sex system may not represent a complete upset of how gender is understood, but Scott nonetheless positions it as an improvement that Harans will *probably* embrace at some point. The ambiguity of the novel’s end points towards the success that the Concord itself once had in integrating the intersexes into

its culture, suggesting that Hara will likely be lead towards that same integration by Warreven, once he has become better able to understand what such a thing will look like for his people. It cannot be said that *Shadow Man*'s is a happy ending, but neither is it one that utterly discounts the possibility that Hara will gives its intersex inhabitants equal access to their gender(s) *and* their humanity.



## CHAPTER 9

*RIVER OF GODS*

Ian McDonald's *River of Gods* (*RoG*) is the last and most recent of novels under consideration here. Published in 2004, the novel has received little scholarly consideration, most of it dealing with McDonald's depictions of artificial intelligence (AI) or India.<sup>19</sup> Although it has been an object of passing interest in those works, the nute, the non-gender that McDonald introduces in *RoG*, has received no specific, extended consideration of which I am aware. I intend to fix this omission, taking a close look at the nute, both its construction and the reactions to it found in *RoG*.<sup>20</sup> Note that while the concept of the nute clearly has origins in the South Asian hijra, "an institutionalized subculture of feminine-identified male-bodied people who desire 'macho' men and who sacrifice their male genitals to a goddess in return for spiritual prowess" (Hossain 495), it is not within the context of that subculture in which I position my analysis. This is partially because my own knowledge of the hijra is limited, but primarily because of McDonald's white British identity, which suggests that the nute has its inspiration in the hijra rather than actually being a science fictional *version* of the hijra. McDonald portrays nutes as more directly related to modern Western notions of transgenderism through an emphasis on the surgeries they undergo, which resemble gender-affirming surgeries in purpose, but go far beyond current surgical possibilities. Additionally, the hijra take on feminine identities, whereas the nute is particularly neither feminine nor masculine and attempts to escape gendered identities altogether.

A vital aspect of that escape is the more or less total reconstruction of the body, from the skin inward. Performed by swarms of surgical robots, the process takes ten days altogether, three of which are spent in a tank hanging “skinless, bleeding constantly a whole body stigmata, while the machines work... slowly, steadily, shift after shift dismantling yts body and rebuilding,” another two to rewire the “entire endocrine system...[w]hile...big machines t[ake] the top off [yts] skull and micromanipulators cre[ep] between the tangled ganglia like hunters in a mangrove swamp to spot-weld protein processors to neural clusters in the medulla and amygdala, the deep, dark root-buttresses of the self” and “[f]ive days more... merely unconscious, in a wash of cell stimulant mediums, dreaming the most astonishing dreams” (McDonald 280-1). At the end of the process, a nute has no genitals, a body with ambiguously gendered bone structures, and yts “hormone triggers and neural response pathways” rerouted “to [an] array of subdermal studs embedded in the left forearm” (279). The price to pay for the process is high, both materially and socially: “ten per cent down and monthly repayments for most of the rest of [their lives] ... [a f]ull body mortgage” (278), and life in a society that, for the most part, does not view them as human.

The broader plot of *RoG* deals with a mysterious, ancient asteroid, a war over water in the Ganges, and crimes in both the physical and the electronic city of Bharat; the novel’s treatment of nutes accounts for little of the overall narrative. The most prominent nute character is Tal, a set designer for a soap opera in which the actors are all sophisticated AI programs. Through the sheer fact of yts political and social insignificance, having only recently moved to Bharat and kept a low profile there, Tal becomes a pawn in the sociopolitical game of engineering a prominent politician’s fall from grace and power. The politician in question is Shaheen Badoor Khan, the Private Parliamentary Secretary of the Bharati government, a Muslim, and a man with

a dark secret: he finds nutes much more attractive than he does women like his wife of over twenty years. Khan and Tal enter into a sort of romance with each other, and their brief relationship's workings provide us with some interesting commentary on how nutes and "gendereds" interact with one another on the personal level. Notably, Khan's opinions of and actions towards nutes, Tal among them, bring specific attention to an aspect of dehumanization of the atypically gendered with which the previous novels have scarcely dealt: fetishization.

We find, of course, plenty of the expected, run of the mill denigration of nutes in *RoG*. They are "[d]eviates" who are "just plain disgusting" (87); they are "freaks" and "perverts" (152); they are "things not male, not female... [m]onsters... un-m[e]n" (298). They are also frequently treated as interchangeable with members of the hijra community; one character's country mother, having come into the city to see her daughter and son-in-law, disparages that son-in-law's poor appearance, telling her daughter that "I thought I was looking at one of those hijra/nute things on the television news this morning" (393). The daughter, of course, responds with indignation, since her husband has been insulted. The confusion of the two seems not an effort to claim the groups as the same, but rather an attempt to reflect a societal unwillingness to see variety in gender difference as well as to connect the groups via shared experiences of marginalization and dehumanization. Khan and his attitudes exhibit a different sort of dehumanization, the reduction of nutes to sexual objects, alien beauties who are "delicate," "elegant," "smooth," and "perfect" (28). Khan's desire deconstructs nute bodies and recontextualizes them as objects, animals, architecture: one nute Khan spots has "the white dome of a skull, the sweep of a neck; pale, lovely hands as elegant as minarets, cheekbones turning towards [one] like architecture[, c]ranes dancing" (ibid). Later, they become explicitly "*alien*, elegant, *fey*" [emphasis mine] (148). Such language distances nutes from so-called normal

humans, making of them fantasy creatures, unreal beings to be idolized rather than real people with thoughts, feelings, and desires of their own.

Limited though they are, Khan's sexual interactions with Tal also betray an apparent disregard for nute desires and autonomy, while the language of those interactions further dehumanizes Tal. McDonald alternates between third person limited perspectives between chapters, and both Tal and Khan are among the characters whose thoughts we follow. The chapter in which we see Khan and Tal's sexual contact is one from Tal's perspective, a fact which makes the opening sentence of the paragraph a puzzling one in which "Tal... leaned against Khan, for warmth, for solidity. Yt let yts inner arm roll into the space between them. The row of buds were puckered like bitch-nipples in the street glow" (160). This sort of bestial language does not appear earlier in the text, during the other sexual encounter we see Tal have some chapters before yts encounter with Khan. *That* encounter is with another nute named Tranh; there the language is not bestial but electronic, musical:

Tal lets yts forearm fall, soft inner flesh upwards, on Tranh's thigh. A moment's hesitation, then Tranh's fingers stroke yts sensitive, hairless flesh, seek out the buried studs of the hormone control system beneath the skin and delicately tap out the arousal codes. Almost immediately, Tal feels yts heart kick, yts breath catch, yts face flush. Sex strums yts body like a sitar, every cord and organ ringing in its harmonic. Tranh offers yts arm to Tal. Yt plays the sub-dermal inputs, tiny and sensitive as goose flesh. Yt feels Tranh stiffen as the hormone rush hits. They sit side by side in the back of the jolting taxi, not touching but shivering with lust, incapable of speech. (64)

[Tranh] offers yts arm. Tal runs yts fingers over the orgasm keys.

Everything is soundtrack. (65)

Whether letting a forearm fall to expose the hormonal control system is a nute move or a uniquely Tal move is not apparent, but either way its reappearance creates a solid connection between the two encounters, eliciting comparison. What were “orgasm keys” with Tranh become “bitch nipples” with Khan. The inorganic becomes grossly organic and the absence of gender is replaced by the presence of feminization, warranted or not. The sight of Tal’s subdermal hormone keys elicit not hesitation from Khan but surprise, followed by a sort of sexual savagery, as suddenly “a hand was stabbing down the front of [Tal’s] lounging pants, a face loomed over yt, a mouth clamped over yts. A tongue pressed entrance to yts body” (160). Stabbing, looming, clamping—these are verbs of violence and violation, particularly when set against those that appear in Tal’s encounter with Tranh: stroking, tapping, strumming, playing. Tal offers ytsself to Tranh with obvious pleasure; yt offers ytsself to Khan more reluctantly, more reminiscent of an animal headed to slaughter than an eager human lover. The violence that Khan offers in return is not appealing, and the encounter is over almost as quickly as it began, Tal tearing ytsself from Khan’s grasp and dashing off into the night, having yts personal DJ AI play a “MIX FOR A NIGHT TURNED SCARY” (160).

That brief and painful sexual encounter with Khan is Tal’s only sexual encounter with the man, although yts feelings for him are not utterly destroyed by it; indeed, Tal worries incessantly about yts feelings, which yt thinks might be love:

For the rest of the week Tal throws ytsself into yts work, but [nothing...] can quell the demons. A gendered. A *man*... Tal tries to shake the image from yts brain but [Khan]’s strung out along the neurons like Diwali lights. That’s the ultimate fear: it’s all unravelling in there, all those biochips and hormone pumps dissolving into yts

bloodstream. Tal fears yt's pissing yts nuteness away through yts kidneys. Yt can still taste this Khan's lips. (274)

Tal's goal in transitioning from a binary existence to a nute existence was to escape the bounds of gender, and to escape relationships with gendered *s*. In becoming involved once again with gender and one of its possessors, yt fears that yts own lack of gender can be lost thanks to the touch of a man, fears that the electronic/biological components of yts gender can be affected by the animal/biological touch of the gender binary. Ironically, it turns out that Khan longs for nothing more than to escape the binary himself. Though he meets Tal once more at a club, that last meeting is the dissolution of their relationship, because he gives Tal a huge sum of cash, an encouragement not to pursue the relationship further, and gets caught in the flash of a camera. The photo of him and Tal makes it ways to the news media, ruining Khan's career and prompting the Bharati Prime Minister to ask him, "[W]hat did you think you could do with them?" (323). Khan finds himself unable to tell her the truth, that "It is not about doing anything. It is about being. That is why we go there, to that club, to see, to be among creatures from our fantasies, creatures we have always longed to be but which we will never have the courage to become" (ibid).

Shaheen Badoor Khan may have lived his entire life as a man, but he has spent that life longing to be otherwise: to be a nute. There is something of an element of sexualization to his desire; certainly, he calls nutes "creatures from [his] fantasies," and elsewhere he praises the "beauty and sexy sexlessness" (271) of such people. It could be argued that his long-suppressed identity is at least partially rooted in fetishization of nute identity and lifestyles. Nonetheless, it casts his behavior in a somewhat different light, and prompts us to reflect more carefully on his relationship with Tal. The intensity of his desire and the violence of his sudden actions are not rooted purely in a wish to sexually dominate Tal (although that may well *also* be part of it) but

also in a desperate longing for contact with that which he has always desired and always forbade himself. Tal, after all, lives the life that Khan has always wanted. That life takes a sharp turn, however, after yts involvement with Khan comes out, because the revelation of a high-ranking Bharati government official's supposed perversion sparks a wave of violence against nutes, especially Tal. The club in which Tal had met and been caught with Khan is burned down; the nutes unfortunate enough to have been there when a mob descended are found with their bodies distorted, desecrated: "[o]ne wears a car tyre around its neck, burned down to the steel wires. The body is intact, the head a charred skull. One has been run through with a Siva trident. One has been disemboweled and the gape filled with burning plastic trash" (338). Tal ytselself narrowly avoids being caught in a violent mob hungry for yts blood. The barely-suppressed hatred of nutes, of the "un-sex" (ibid), comes yowling into the light of day, mirroring a similar hatred that McDonald spends the novel setting up, a hatred of AIs.

The attention to detail that McDonald pays to the surgical process nutes undergo and the continuous description of them with inorganic and electronic language serves to cement a connection between nutes and AIs. They are both inhuman, nutes having altered their bodies to match an inhuman (because not mired in binary gender) consciousness and AIs having an already inhuman consciousness (because not originated in a human body) that cannot be made human even through insertion *into* a human body. One of the most advanced AIs on the planet has attempted to become a part of, or at least become more able to relate to, humanity; McDonald reveals late in the novel that an odd young woman named Aj, who can see information about anyone or anything thanks to "gods," is not a normal human being. Her body may be human, but her mind is an AI's, downloaded into a complex system of biological circuitry and surgically implanted into a human body. The same surgeons who performed the

surgery on Aj's human body (the mind of which had been brain dead) were the ones to perform the gender-elimination surgery on Tal. Though this revelation of connection comes almost at the novel's close, it serves to reinforce the suggestion throughout earlier parts of the novel that nutes are not human, and further that human society will not allow them safe entrance into the cultural norm; Aj is shot and killed for being an "abomination" (546), and while Tal escapes death, yt is resigned to exile, so great is the danger yt finds ytsself in after yts involvement with Khan. Unlike Warreven, yt has no plans to return, having "always known" that theirs is "a deformed society" (156) and a dangerous place to be thought less than human.



## CHAPTER 10

### CONCLUSIONS/EXCLUSIONS

Sf is a mirror of the world in which we live, “not only a reflecting *of* but also *on* reality” (Suvin 10). Crucially, that “mirror is not only a reflecting one, it is also a transforming one, virgin womb and alchemical dynamo: the mirror is a crucible” (5). Transformation is key to sf as a genre; so too is an understanding of what it means to be human. Sf asks continuously, what does it mean to be human? What is humanity, precisely; how is it measured, apportioned, revoked? Moreover, how do we hold onto that thing-we-call-humanity in the face of the massive cultural, technological, and biological changes through which our species must go if we are to survive? The fictions that sf produces to answer these questions allow us to turn away from those unrealities with a better sense of how to address the realities of our lives and our time. The narratives that I have examined here help us to address a reality of the past fifty years: that some humans are straining against the artificially imposed constraints of the gender binary, and still more humans are deeply, profoundly uncomfortable with that fact. In real and unreal worlds, for some it is easier to say that to be other than a man or a woman is not human than it is to recognize and accept such a seemingly huge difference.

Rarely do such people have a clear idea of what it means to be human in the first place. None of the novels considered here have a really clear idea of it, either; none of them seem able to say, definitively: *this* is humanity, and *that* is something altogether other. Each of them does have its own idea, or ideas, of what is *not* human, of who or what does not receive, is not ascribed, does not *deserve* to have humanity bestowed upon it. What is *not* human is that which

is not man or woman, which is not one or the other, but both, or neither. What is *not* human is that which defies easy categorization into one of two groups; the not-human breaks those groups, expands them, makes them irrelevant. The not-human (the Gethenians, the ooloi, the intersexes, the nutes) expose/s what the word humanity all too often *actually* refers to: a social construction based on just-as-constructed essentialist notions of gender distinctions.

Where essentialist notions can be discarded, and difference can be embraced, new worlds of possibility open up, literally. Where essentialism continues to reign supreme and difference remains an object of fear, people, whether we deign to call them human people or not, suffer. Oddly enough, the more recent of our narratives paint a darker picture of human reactions to gender disruption; only *The Left Hand of Darkness* paints a genuinely optimistic view of a human future where contact between the binary and non-binary is viable with minimal violence, bloodshed, or animosity. By no means does a sampling of four narratives represent the genre as a whole or its attitudes towards a subject; as mentioned at the outset of this essay, recent years have seen an outpouring of collections of short works focusing on gender disruptions. Still, it seems significant that these longer works of sf, which have more space in which to explore these new and different gender configurations, by and large explore conflict, not coexistence. The mirror is a crucible; the heat is only rising there. When we, inevitably, must turn away from sf back towards our own reality, we might do well to take that heat with us when we go.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For specifics on the Sad Puppies (and their more radical offshoot the Rabid Puppies), c.f. Beth Elderkin's article "Hugo Awards Celebrate Women in Sci-Fi, Send Rabid Puppies to Doghouse."

<sup>2</sup> By "transgender" I am referring not only to people who transition from one binary gender to the "opposite" gender but to a much broader population of people who can be categorized as somehow gender non-conforming, whether that nonconformance is manifest in identity, expression, experience, or otherwise.

<sup>3</sup> Examples include the Amazon original series *Transparent*, transgender actress Laverne Cox's (also transgender) character in the Netflix series *Orange is the New Black*, and the news media's avid coverage of the drama that has played out as Caitlyn Jenner has transitioned from male to female.

<sup>4</sup> The term transsexual has fallen out of use among transgender communities, since it's often thought of as "an old fashioned pathologizing term" (Henry 31); it puts its emphasis on individuals who have medically transitioned and undergone some sort of gender-affirming surgery, whereas the term transgender has a broader definition and decreased focus on medical/surgical transition.

<sup>5</sup> For more on such communities, c.f. Kelsie Brynn Jones's article "Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism: What Exactly Is It, And Why Does It Hurt?"

<sup>6</sup> A cisgender person is "someone who is comfortable with the gender they were assigned at birth" (Henry 215), that is, a non-transgender person.

<sup>7</sup> Although Fausto-Sterling's original essay in 1993 reported the frequency of intersex births to be 4% of live births, her return to the subject in 2000 in "The Five Sexes Revisited" puts that number closer to 1.7% (20).

<sup>8</sup> Gender expression is "how a person displays/portrays their gender to others through dress and/or societal gender roles" (Henry 216).

<sup>9</sup> To pass in the transgender community refers to passing through public spaces without being recognized as transgender (Henry 80-2, 110).

<sup>10</sup> For information on various historical instances of gender-nonconforming people, c.f. *TransAntiquity: Cross-Dressing and Transgender Dynamics in the Ancient World*.

<sup>11</sup> It may well be that the same could be said of Eastern societies; however, my primary area of knowledge in these matters is in the so-called West, and the texts I am examining all emerge from the Western world, so I can make no definitive statement on Eastern cultures regarding modern day notions of or experiences with such gender disruption.

<sup>12</sup> Among these are Alexis Lothian's "Grinding Axes and Balancing Oppositions: The Transformation of Feminism in Ursula K. Le Guin's Science Fiction," Mona Fayad's "Aliens, Androgynes, and Anthropology: Le Guin's Critique of Representation in *The Left Hand of Darkness*," Wendy Gay Pearson's "Postcolonialism/s, Gender/s, Sexuality/ies and the Legacy of *The Left Hand of Darkness*: Gwyneth Jones's Aleutians Talk Back," and J. Pennington's "Exorcizing Gender: Resisting Readers in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness*."

<sup>13</sup> Le Guin's reflections can be found in her 1988 essay "Is Gender Necessary? Redux."

<sup>14</sup> Note that it is Ai who uses the word king; the Gethenian word itself no doubt has no gender connotation, and Ai has inserted one as he does elsewhere.

<sup>15</sup> For the most part I have left the gendered language of *TLHoD* untouched, and so when Gethenians are referred to by Genly or another member of the Ekumen, I have left masculine pronouns unchanged although they are not technically accurate.

<sup>16</sup> References to the trilogy in this paper use the collected edition of the novels under the name *Lilith's Brood*.

<sup>17</sup> Because of the biological essentialism inherent to this text, I will be referring to sex and gender within this section of the paper as gender; to make precise distinctions within the two would be more extensive an analysis than the length of this essay allows.

<sup>18</sup> Although Warreven *is* a herm and the text makes no secret of that fact, he refers to himself as a man throughout most of the book, and Scott refers to him primarily with masculine pronouns, hence my use of masculine pronouns herein.

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of AI in *RoG*, cf. Krzysztof Solarewicz's "The Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of: AI in Contemporary Science Fiction," and for a discussion of depictions of India, c.f. Suparno Banerjee's "Crossing the Border: The Depiction of India in Ian McDonald's *River of Gods* and *Cyberabad Days*."

<sup>20</sup> "Yt" is the standard pronoun used for nutes (McDonald 34).

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