

Ivaging worlds: on Ursula K. Le Guin, social science-fiction, and altertopias

Ivaginando mundos: Ursula K. Le Guin, ficção científica social e altertopias

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Abstract

Ethnography-based Anthropology and Science Fiction can engage in a productive dialogue since both address what is proposed as “altertopias”. Utopias, dystopias, and cultural alterity share the possibility of imagining social and cultural organizations different from both those of the authors and those of the readers. These imaginations are intrinsically creative/artistic and political at the same time, and they critique power structures, especially when approached through a feminist stance. Inspired by the literary work of Ursula Le Guin, the article takes this further by experimenting with the inclusion of a fictional piece of “Social science fiction” that itself plays on Le Guin’s themes.

Keywords: Ursula Le Guin; science fiction; altertopia; ethnography.

Resumo

A antropologia de base etnográfica e a ficção científica podem estabelecer um diálogo produtivo, uma vez que ambas tratam de “altertopias”. Utopias, distopias e alteridade cultural partilham a possibilidade de imaginar organizações sociais e culturais diferentes das dos autores e leitores. Estas imaginações são intrinsecamente criativas/artísticas e políticas simultaneamente, sobretudo se abordadas desde uma perspetiva feminista. Inspirado pela obra literária de Ursula Le Guin, o artigo leva esta posição mais longe através da experimentação da escrita ficcional no género “ficção científica social” a partir de temas propostas por aquela autora.

Palavras-chave: Ursula Le Guin; ficção científica; altertopia; etnografia.

Ethnography-based Anthropology and science-fiction are commonly regarded as separate genres of intellectual and literary production. The former is seen as scientific and the latter as artistic. Anthropology deals with actually existing forms of social life and social worlds whereas science fiction deals with “fantasy”. Both a positivistic stance on science (especially social science and the humanities) and a romantic stance on art (especially literature) have been profusely questioned and challenged since the post-modern turn in both social sciences and the arts. This article aims at illustrating the possible porosity between Ethnography-based Anthropology and the literary genre of science fiction with a focus on sex, gender, and sexuality and resorting to a feminist and queer perspective.

Anthropology aims at making the exotic familiar to make the familiar exotic, as the well-known saying goes. Science-fiction aims at imagining worlds that do not exist but does so based on the historical, social, and cultural experience of both author and readers. That experience includes the diversity of human social constructs as recorded in the ethnographic archive and in anthropological analysis. In this sense, can one say that they both work in a *utopian mode*? By this I mean the utopias and dystopias proper – those of science fiction – and the *altertopias* of Ethnography. By *altertopias* I do not mean that the ethnographic record relates to a non-existing reality (it does not, of course, since it reports on the actual life of existing human groups), but rather that the world thus reported is alien to the reader, albeit not so to both anthropologist and the human group with whom the ethnography was produced.

In both genres and in both forms of intellectual production, we are faced with alternative worlds. The portrayal of those worlds itself opens a space for a critique of the reader’s common-sense reality. Feminist and queer imaginations, specifically, work for changes in social relations and identities that necessarily engage in *altertopian* endeavors, since they are in opposition to actually existing heteronormativity, and both Anthropology and science-fiction are of enormous potential as fields of inquiry and imagination with a politically transformative potential. Anthropologists can immediately think of Haraway’s (2016) speculative and science-fiction inspired work on the future, or the ethnographically based theorization of Marilyn Strathern (2001) and her proposal to overcome the Western template of understanding gender as based on the sexualized concepts of “men” and “women”. Their political effect can

not be underestimated: one imagines the future as an overcoming of present challenges, the other presents an alternative cultural construct that challenges our certainties. In this sense, politics requires *imagination*: “we could have been, or we could be like them” (the ethnographic other, or *alter*); “we could have been or become like them” (the other, or *alter*, in science-fiction).

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The literary work of Ursula K. Le Guin (1929-2018) has been the subject of extensive analytical and critical work, the review of which is outside the scope of this article. I would rather focus – based on my anthropological experience and on my predilection for Le Guin’s oeuvre – on aspects of her approach to gender and sexuality, as well as political-economic utopias and dystopias. Specifically, I have been paying attention in her work to three aspects. Firstly, how it shows that our gender and political-economic orders can be seen as dystopian, including those utopian political projects that were implemented or experimented with; Secondly, how her work calls for utopian models that are small-scale, ecological, and egalitarian – and very much inspired in the ethnographic archives but without conceding to pre-modern nostalgia; Thirdly, how productive the porosity between Anthropology and science-fiction can be for our discipline’s contribution to the imagination of a feminist-and queer-inspired world, as well as a critique of our present situation.

Ursula K. Le Guin’s science-fiction *oeuvre* deals, among others, with two fundamental topics of concern here: gender and sexuality, on the one hand; and political-economic utopia and dystopia, on the other. Can her feminist approach to the subject and subjects of her stories be seen as a form of queer imagination *avant la lettre*? Also, does her approach to anarchist utopias, counterpointed with capitalist and anthropocenic dystopias, avoid the simplistic dichotomies of the political debates of the pre-Fall-of-the-Berlin-wall era? From a biographical point of view, Le Guin’s upbringing in her father’s (Alfred Kroeber) ethnographic field sites and museum institution has – as she has admitted – inspired her work. For this purpose, and to highlight the aspects mentioned in the previous paragraph, I will focus on her novels *The left hand of darkness* (1969), *The word for world is forest* (1972), *The dispossessed* (1974), *Always coming home* (1985), and, generally, in what critics have called the Hainish Cycle in her work.

My reading of Le Guin has been centered, throughout the years, on the abovementioned cycle of novels and stories. The cycle was not intended as such by Le Guin, it was not “a series” that she had planned. It is rather an *ex-post connection*, rather than collection, of novels and short stories set in several different imaginary planets. These planets’ populations were the result of colonization by the original humans from planet Hain. Both Hainish genetic experimentation and local evolutionary processes led to different sub-species of humans and different cultural complexes in different planets.

Furthermore, in many novels we get to know a planet through the narrative of a *Mobile*, an ethnographer of sorts, who is supposed to report on the population, without interfering in their lives and history, in order to help the *Ecumene* (the cooperative, anarchy-like federation of planets colonized by Hain) decide when and if to establish contact and provide technology (mainly communication technology that allows for cooperation and exchange of knowledge).

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Baker-Cristales (2012) uses the wonderful expression “social science fiction” when referring to Le Guin’s ethnographic sensibility. She notes how “ethnographic writing (is) neither fiction nor science” (Baker-Cristales, 2012, p. 15) and resorts to Jameson’s (2005) notion of how “the belief that storytelling and imagination are entirely distinct projects from science and truth-telling is a product of a particular, very circumscribed, social-historical system – modern capitalism” (Baker-Cristales, 2012, p. 17). As Jameson (2005, p. 286) has conveyed, rather than predicting, science fiction’s purpose is to “defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own present, and to do so in specific ways distinct from all other forms of defamiliarization”. Baker-Cristales notes how often the protagonists of Le Guin’s novels are anthropologists by another name. “By using ethnography as a textual model for fiction, Le Guin aims to transcend some of the limitations of fiction – the end of the story” (Baker-Cristales, 2012, p. 19).

In the words of Fredric Jameson (1975, p. 4), “one of the most significant potentialities of Science Fiction as a form is precisely this capacity to provide something like an experimental variation on our own empirical universe”. This experimentation is usually codified as *analogy* and *extrapolation* (Jameson, 1975). It is complemented by *world reduction*, a taking away of certain characteristics,

whether technological, institutional, or cultural, of our habitual cultural world (Modern, Western, Capitalist...), thus setting the stage for speculating the outcome of that removal, a sort of “take away this variable and see what happens”.

In *The left hand of darkness*, Le Guin (1969) describes a world without gender. People in planet Gethen – who are human, as everyone in the Hainish Cycle planets, albeit modified by local evolution – are hermaphrodites¹ and do not experience permanent libido or sex drive. Like in many species we know, they have estrus, or cycles of sexual availability, called *kemmer*. When on kemmer, if two persons are attracted to each other one of them will develop secondary female characteristics and the other male characteristics. There is no way to tell which will be which and a person can “become” both male and female in different kemmer cycles in their lifetime. Jameson (1975, p. 7-8) also commented on the Gethen:

Rather than stand in favor of a wider tolerance for all kinds of sexual behavior, it seems more appropriate to insist [...] on the feminist dimension of her novel, and on its demystification of the sex roles themselves. The basic point about Gethenian sexuality is that the sex role does not color everything else in life, as is the case with us, but is rather contained and defused, reduced to that brief period of the monthly cycle when, as with our [non-human] animal species, the Gethenian are in “heat” or “kemmer”.

So, instead of eliminating sex, Gethenian biology eliminates sexual *repression*, according to Jameson (1975, p. 8):

For if Le Guin’s Gethen does not do away with sex, it may be suggested that it does away with everything that is problematic about it [...] The dream of some scarcely imaginable freedom from sex, indeed, is a very ancient human fantasy, almost as powerful in its own way as the outright sexual wish-fulfillments themselves.

1 This is the expression that the author uses, which of course resonates as politically *passé* to contemporary readers, albeit being an actual scientific *definition* applicable to several species.

Le Guin connects Gethenian absence of a permanent sex drive and the absence of gender to the wider theme of societal organization and conflict: there being no gender oppression or violence, Gethen is a society uninterested in growth and power, and does not therefore see the point in war between either factions or nations.

The theme of gender and sexuality, and its connection to wider societal predispositions, is prevalent in Le Guin's works – from societies where women are in power, to those where there is no distinction between sexual orientations. In *The dispossessed* (Le Guin, 1974), the anarchist organization of the planet Anarres is not depicted only on the grounds of communal possession, central organization of the distribution of labor and resources, or on the ecological care and avoidance of disproportionate growth or accumulation. It is also characterized by what could be called as “free love” and the absence of structured marriage, cohabitation, or marriage alliances – as opposed to its nemesis planet, Urras (and also its origin, Anarres being a colony settled by radicals that have fled from Urras), where capitalism is full-fledged as well as gender and sexual structures very similar to our contemporary patriarchal ones.

Is Anarres a utopia like so many others in mainstream, run of the mill science-fiction? Not quite. Le Guin seems to want to say that it is an *experiment*, an on-going one, where hesitation and doubt have a place. That is what the main character, Shevek, embodies, when he decides to play the role of the scientific emissary to Urras, where he is both attracted to and disgusted by the niceties of an affluent society, while back home in Anarres he is also ambivalent about the political choices and, most of all, the unavoidable fact that even in progressive utopias a new hegemony tends to be established, social pressure to conformity occurring as well.

The above-mentioned reference, by Jameson, to the plot strategy of “world reduction” (let's remove capitalism, the nation state, industrial production, cars, and airplanes, and see what life could be like) is applicable to Le Guin. She does something like this in *Always coming home*, a novel that is not part of the Hainish Cycle. It is an invented ethnography. It follows the style of early ethnographic efforts and is reminiscent of Malinowski's writing template. However, it is also an *archaeology of the future*, not a rendition of the past or of a contemporary culturally different society. It depicts California in a *future* when people have gone *back* (but, as certainly Le Guin would say, *forward*) to indigenous ways

of living, especially in what regards keeping small-scale, ecologically balanced societies, with close social ties based on communal modes of existence. Indigenous *but of today – and tomorrow*. This neo-tribal society exists while an Internet-like technology is available, kept by automated entities that do not interfere with human life but simply collect, organize, and provide information.

As Baker-Cristales (2012, p. 24) has said,

Cultural critique, in both the case of ethnography and in Le Guin's fiction, is a critical assessment of the world as it is thought to be, a rejection of what is. The other side of this cultural critique is utopia, a dreaming of what could or should be [...] As Michel-Rolph Trouillot pointed out, utopian writing began to diverge from realist accounts of the world early in the 16th century, but the two are necessarily linked – what he calls the “savage-utopia correspondence”.²

The connection between Le Guin's concern with gender and sex, on the one hand, and her concern with apparently utopian modes of social, economic, and political organization, on the other, was also observed by Jameson (1975, p. 12-13):

The existence of modern technology in the midst of an essentially feudal order [in *The left hand of darkness*] [...] It becomes difficult to escape the conclusion that this attempt to rethink Western history without capitalism is of a piece, structurally and in its general spirit, with the attempt to imagine human biology without desire...

Donna Haraway (2014) also refers to the connection between *Always coming home* and the problematization of the Anthropocene (actually, the Chthulucene, in her formulation), when she acknowledges her inspiration on Le Guin – together with anthropologists Marilyn Strathern and Anna Tsing – and how she helped her realize that utopias shouldn't be big systems and signifiers, but actual small-scale human attempts at relation and connection with other species and the world. Haraway (2016) is the leading contemporary

2 See Trouillot (2003, p. 19). Trouillot's work can be a source of critique of homologies between Western utopian thought and narratives of the cultural difference of colonized peoples. Le Guin's social science fiction avoids the trap of both the noble savage and the savage primitive.

author acknowledging the influence of (and dialogue with) Le Guin, when she writes that “Le Guin’s carrier bag theory of narrative comes to the rescue, along with biologist Deborah Gordon’s theories about ant interactions and colony behavior, to elaborate the possibilities of ecological evolutionary developmental biology and nonhierarchical systems theories for shaping the best stories. *Science fiction and science fact cohabit happily in this tale*” (Haraway, 2016, p. 7, my italics). Haraway is referring also to stories that deal with non-human characters, but her assessment would certainly apply to stories starring humans in the Hainish cycle. What is at stake is the radical change of *perspective*. Le Guin (1989, p. 97-98) herself wrote inspiringly on this:

Copernicus told us that the Earth was not the center. Darwin told us that man is not the center. If we listened to the anthropologists, we might hear them telling us, with appropriate indirectness, that the White West is not the center. The center of the world is a bluff on the Klamath River, a rock in Mecca, a hole in the ground in Greece, nowhere, its circumference everywhere. Perhaps the utopist should heed this unsettling news at last. Perhaps the utopist would do well to lose the plan, throw away the map, get off the motorcycle, put on a very strange-looking hat, bark sharply three times, and trot off looking thin, yellow, and dingy across the desert and up into the digger pines.

In *Returns: becoming indigenous in the twenty-first century*, James Clifford (2013) revisits the well-known story (among anthropologists) of Ishi, and he does so from a contemporary perspective, one that does not see Native American realities, especially in California, as something of the past, as exterminated, but rather as growing and expanding albeit in new ways. He retells the story of Ishi, popularized as “the last wild man”, who lived part of his life in Alfred Kroeber’s (Le Guin’s father) museum at Berkeley. He also tells the story of Theodora Kroeber’s (Le Guin’s mother) popularization of Ishi’s story and symbolism in her books, especially her children’s book³. He goes on to narrate the story of Orin Starn’s investigation of Ishi’s brain at the Smithsonian Institution and the Indian efforts, in California, for repatriation of the

3 *Ishi, last of his tribe* (Kroeber, 1964).

remains, as well as the polemic at Berkeley over the need or not for apologizing for Kroeber's and the university's actions in the past (a campaign championed by Nancy Scheper-Hughes, and countered by one of Le Guin's brothers, literary scholar Karl Kroeber). And, of course, he cannot avoid mentioning Ursula.

Why and how? Because in a way he establishes an opposition and contrast between Le Guin's work, especially the abovementioned *Always coming home* (Le Guin, 1985), and "Kroeber's purified pre-contact reconstructions of California" (Clifford, 2013, p. 106). In a sub-chapter titled "Utopia", he says how Ursula's work "draws on folklore, popular culture, Taoism, post-sixties feminism and environmentalism" (Clifford, 2013, p. 111) and how much these are themes that are central to Ishi's world:

[...] colonial domination and miscomprehension; the compromised but real possibilities of cross-cultural understanding; complicity and friendship at fraught frontiers; preservation of traditions and the dynamics of change; the communal arts of living in balance with others and in scale with the environment.

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For many years I used Le Guin's (1972) novel *The word for world is forest* in Introductory Anthropology classes. It helped, through the guise of science fiction, to convey the sense of doing ethnography as a process of cooperative knowledge building between anthropologist and the social groups (through specific persons) – and how much ethnography-based knowledge is the outcome of processes of porosity and juxtaposition between scientific, literary, interactional, and interpersonal processes that result in a *new* type of knowledge that is quintessentially human(istic).

The *altertopia* of the context of *The word for world is forest* mimics the process of ethnographic discovery, as well as depicts the conflicts of power resulting from colonial and capitalist encroachment in many communities. It does so through the guise of fiction, something that is more effective on young students than descriptions of our "real" History (always prone to trigger emotional or ideological reactions that hinder learning).

Clifford (2013, p. 119) focuses precisely on this book:

In Le Guin's parable [...] anthropological humanism emerges as both essential and impotent in situations of colonial/anti-colonial antagonism. Lyubov [the main character, an anthropologist of sorts] is unable to reconcile inter-personal loyalty, political commitment, and scientific comprehension: he will not emerge unscathed with his intercultural understanding.

The word for world is forest depicts capitalist and colonialist exploitation of native resources (in a planet of the Ecumene, the loose federation centered in Hain), together with extreme racism and extermination of the "savages", whose rich culture – and, indeed, alternative (*altertopian*) social and ecological organization – is dismissed⁴. It is at the very other end of the line connecting Kroeber's anthropology and the Native American experience of Kroeber's time, on the one hand, and today's Native American situation as well as contemporary utopian visions on the verge of the Anthropocene, on the other.

Then, in Kroeber's time: the "last wild man", the unavoidable result of the triumph of civilization, something to feel sorry about but unstoppable for supposedly good reasons ("evolution", "civilization", the colonial/capitalist utopia...), and anthropologists whose mission was to salvage and register that which was about to disappear. To salvage the savage, so to speak.

Now: the renaissance of Native American identities, with casinos and local and state politics, performative arts, comedy, self-representations, newly invented or consolidated tribal entities, mixed and urban identifications, etc., and anthropologists who consider the difficulties of cross-cultural dialogue and believe not only in constant, ongoing mixture, cultural reinvention and in decolonizing knowledge, but also in the unavoidable doubts and conflicts that utopias and civilizational projects entail – as does Le Guin.

As Clifford (2013, p. 121) says, poetically: "Ishi in a loincloth, Ishi in work clothes, Ishi with feathers, Ishi in a suit and tie". Becoming indigenous after colonization (Clifford's expression) is, after all, what we can find in *Always coming home*. In her theoretical essay inspired by that novel, "A non-Euclidian view of California as a cold place to be", Le Guin (1989, p. 85, my italics) says:

4 It would inspire the script for the movie *Avatar*.

I am not proposing a return to the Stone Age. My intent is not reactionary, nor even conservative, but simply subversive. It seems that the utopian imagination is trapped, like capitalism and industrialism and the human population, in a one-way future consisting only of growth. All I am trying to do is figure out how to put a pig on the tracks.

And in the same essay:

Utopia has been Euclidian, it has been European, and it has been masculine. I am trying to suggest, in an evasive, distrustful, untrustworthy fashion, and as obscurely as I can, that our final loss of faith in that radiant sandcastle may enable our eyes to adjust to a dimmer light and in it perceive another kind of utopia [...] It may look very like some kind of place Coyote⁵ made after having a conversation with his own dung. [...] [A yin utopia] would be dark, wet, obscure, weak, yielding, passive, participatory, circular, cyclical, peaceful, nurturant, retreating, contracting and cold. (Le Guin, 1989, p. 88-90).

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Maybe the trigger for this article was my difficulty in imagining the bodies of Gethen people. That is how “imaginative” became *ivaginative*, for in my efforts to picture Gethenians I always ended up picturing a vagina, certainly because it is an *altertopian* organ for my male body. It is important to distinguish my use of the differently spelled “ivagination”, which is mostly playful, from the philosophical concept of “invagination”. For Derrida (1980), invagination describes narratives that fold upon themselves. It is an aspect of “différance”, opening the “inside” to the “other” and denying a stable identity to both. But I should be more accurate: not just the vagina. A clitoris will engorge exponentially in the “male” person during *kemmer*, and the vagina will widen significantly in the “female”. And both gonads – testicles and ovaries – reside inside both persons. As does the uterus. One thing becomes obvious when the picture turns clearer: the gestational potential that resides in the uterus is in both per-

5 The coyote is a recurrent mythological character in many Native American cultures, especially in California. it often assumes an ambiguous nature, at times a divine figure, at others a trickster.

sons. They are, in “our” sense, in our intrinsically biologically gendered world view, both women, in the sense that they are both potential gestating humans. Would I dare say that Le Guin was wrong, that Gethenians are all women? And that the presence of gender is tantamount to the presence of the masculine? Its absence would be general, human femininity, humanity as feminine. What, in my reading, is common to all Gethenians is the uterus. The Gethenian theme can thus be seen not just as a matter of gender balance, or gender oscillation, or gender interchangeability, or any variation thereof, but as referring to gender itself as a temporary phenomenon beyond being human. That could be seen as Queer *avant la lettre* – before queer became, in common parlance, a rather flat synonym for individual choice and performativity.

Social Science Fiction and the Ethnographic mode seem to go hand in hand, instead of being at odds. Le Guin’s novels, like all good science fiction, succeed in being internally consistent and logical. Science-fiction is not mere fantasy, for things in it must make sense according to its own established premises. In Social Science Fiction one must be even more careful because the material upon which the fictional work is done is human experience, relationality and sociality, and it needs to make sense to us, readers of the here and now. And it always does, at least with Le Guin, because the worlds she imagines are the worlds that we are constantly imagining in the “what ifs?” that we pose resorting to the materials at hand – bodies, social constraints, institutions, political projects, “nature”, possible ontologies... The ethnographic mode is one of creating intelligibility, through defamiliarization and refamiliarization, only achievable because the material used is common to interpreted and interpreter.

In a world where the effects of colonialism-cum-capitalism have created new indigeneities; in a world where modern utopias seem to have become more disillusionments than illusions; in a world now marked by all that the neologism “Anthropocene” encapsulates; in this world, Le Guin’s invented knowledge of other worlds, and the anthropologists’ knowledge of worlds created by others, provide materials and imaginative designs for *altertopias*.

If Le Guin’s father, Alfred Kroeber, was “salvaging the savage”, Kroeber’s daughter, Le Guin, provides us a glimpse of what it can be to “savage the salvage”. The poetic notation of that change would be the replacement of the masculine m of imagination by the feminine v in *ivagination* – not an “image” but a

life-giver, a *genital*.⁶ Le Guin (2017, p. 1035) herself wrote thus about her Gethenian experiment:

I was not recommending the Gethenian sexual setup: I was using it. It was a heuristic device, a thought-experiment. Physicists often do thought-experiments. Einstein shoots a light ray through a moving elevator; Schrodinger puts a cat in a box. There is no elevator, no cat, no box. The experiment is performed, the question is asked, in the mind. Einstein's elevator, Schrodinger's cat, my Gethenians, are simply a way of thinking.

Following her inspiration, and in order to take seriously my approach to the porosity between science-fiction and Anthropology, what follows is my own work of fiction. It is clearly inspired in the Gethenian theme – in fact, it can be understood as a “take” on *The left hand of darkness*. It was meant to be passed on to students of gender and sexuality as part of a pedagogical sequence consisting of: a) the presentation of culturally diverse gender orders and regimes (Connell, 1987); b) their exposure to Le Guin's fiction (not just *The left hand of darkness*, but also *A fisherman of the inland sea*⁷); c) my own fiction, as a way of putting together the possibility to imagine and the conventional and systematic nature of social organization that can be described by anthropologists with internal coherence. Fiction meets Anthropology in Social Science Fiction in the process of *ivagining* worlds.

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- 6 As mentioned before I have been reading mostly Le Guin's novels from the so-called Hainish Cycle. I have not dealt with her vast work on the fantasy genre, the *Earthsea* series. But as I was writing this essay, I was reading her early work, before both series. It is based on Orsinia, an imaginary *Mitteleuropa* country and the action takes place in the period of liberal and nationalist revolutions, namely against the Austrian Empire. It is very curious to see Le Guin's fascination with a specific historical past and geographical location, especially one where and when “utopias” thrived – nationalism, socialism, zionism, communism, utopian socialism – that today have clearly gone awry.
- 7 This story takes place in planet O, where local marriage (*sedoretu*) consists of a Morning (moities being Morning and Evening) woman and man and an Evening woman and man; the heterosexual pairs are called Morning and Evening according to the woman's moiety; the homosexual pairs are called Day – the two women – and Night – the two men.

Evolution

From the notes of Eva g Sirdi, written approximately 150 years ago in the margins of a copy of the "Holy Ala'm" and discovered in the region of the Great Lakes of Northern Barbaria, selected and transcribed by Bei ag Arik, Doctor in Human Evolution by the University of Golmak.

"It was the morning of my return from my second expedition and once more I was arriving empty handed. Seven years before, at the end of my first expedition, Ad had been waiting for me with an understanding smile. Ad had received my letter, sent by commercial ship, in which I told my frustration for not having found what I was looking for. Ad's smile had then been also one of encouragement: 'Do not worry, there will be a next time and, who knows, you'll then succeed'. Seven years and one more letter full of disappointment later, how would it go? One can take one, or two, or maybe even three consecutive disappointments. You take a deep breath and get back up on your feet again. But can the person you share your life with see the other fail time and time again? Would the smile be understanding and encouraging once more?"

"Like seven years before, you could hardly see the harbor through the mist. The journey to the Northern Hemisphere must be done in the right time of the year, to take advantage of the favorable ocean currents and avoid the harsh climate. Consequently, the return trip always took place in the Southern Fall months, a season of thick fogs, penetrating humidity, and a feeble, pale light, as if filtered by layers of gauze. The contours of harbor and town took a while to focus. First you would see the fickle light of the whale-oil lanterns held by relatives waiting for you. Some higher, some lower, probably held respectively by adults and children. Slowly, the dark shapes of the Araken's palace up in the Hill became perceptible, together with the sails of other ships. But even before the bodies of the cherished ones became visible, you could hear a band playing a welcoming saruetz."

"Expeditions to the Northern hemisphere were always State events. An expedition was an expensive endeavor and the satisfaction of curiosity, or the search for knowledge (what, so the saying goes, the ancients called Science) were the State's last priority. The Araken, our State council, wanted us to find precious metals more than anything. In that regard the expedition had gone quite well: two months of slow and painful sailing to the North; the good fortune of having found a potentate of Northern Barbarians enjoying a period of

peace with their neighbors and therefore willing to negotiate with us; the childish naiveté with which those barbarians accepted our gifts of worthless monkey skins – apparently so important for their ritual bartering in prestige competitions between their chiefs – in Exchange for metals whose value they were far from even imagining; the sumptuous reception that was offered us; and, at last, a one and a half month return trip with exceptionally calm seas.”

“The crew threw the thick and heavy ropes. The fog insisted on hiding the contours of the bodies waiting for us. Would Ad be there? Would Ad have decided to stay home, not knowing what to do with my frustration? If my mission as commercial envoy of the Araken had gone well – as had the other one, seven years before – the same could not be said of my other mission, my mission. Once again, I had gone up the wide river that penetrates the jungle up from the capital of the Northern potentate that we traded with. Once again, I had, with relative ease, hired a large group of carriers and a trustworthy guide who was very knowledgeable in the native legends about the existence of what they called the *agan-uruk*, the dimorphic creatures. Once again, I had been able to reach the edge of the great mountain chain. That time I had even climbed all the way up to the Great Lakes region, where the creatures supposedly live, despite having lost a handful of carriers, taken by the strange disease that infests the woods and marshlands, and that I was lucky to avoid, some may say thanks to the amulets that the head-priest of the Araken had given me. During that journey I had even managed to obtain a piece of a creature in one of our traps – a foot, to be exact, similar in all aspects to our own feet, therefore from either a dimorph or any normal native of the land. I had not found anything remotely like a camp or a village of any sort. Nothing.”

“I remember the ship scratching the stone of the pier. I could already see the shapes of people. Agitated, running back and forth, shouting names, kin looking for kin. Ad wouldn’t do that. Ad always reserved the expression of emotions for smiles, looks, body movements. Most people experienced a ship’s arrival as a once in a lifetime event. Their lives unfolded almost entirely in our port city of Golmak, maybe in the outskirts too, or in some portion of territory at a horse-ride’s distance. To travel is to adventure, to adventure is to travel. Although both expressions have a slight phonetic difference – *armek* and *armëk* – they mean the same to the common folk: risk, danger, daring, challenging the infinitely calm routine of life in Golmak. Ad never wanted to travel with me. Ad did share

my interest and curiosity for research and knowledge. The same indomitable urge to know how things work, well beyond the explanations in the Holy Alám or the Laws of the Araken – the latter being no more than pragmatic transpositions of the former. Ad had other ways of searching for knowledge. Reading was a favorite activity, reading like there was not enough time in life to read everything that has ever been written, whereas I... I would travel-adventure. That was why we had decided that it would be wiser that Ad, not me, should be the one to someday get pregnant, to be the uru, the genitor from inside.”

“I remember how suddenly the fog lifted. There was Ad, an unmistakable shape, behind the band that was playing off-key a repetitive saruetz, and the high dignitaries and lineage heads that I had to salute, one at a time, with deference and respect, and from whom I received congratulations and promises of rewards. Behind all of them, Ad was the true center of my attention: the same beauty as in my previous return seven years before, the same demeanor, the same attitude, staying calmly behind other people, not wanting to be a part of the excited crowd. I like it that way: Ad’s attention, eyes, and body were focused on me. And when I got close, it was relief that I felt. Ad’s smile seemed to be saying, once more, ‘You can always try again.’”

“How many times does one make love with the same person as if it were the first time? Few people can reply without irony: ‘Once’. That day Ad and I became part of the group of happy few who can say ‘three’ – the very first, when we met, the second when I came back from my first expedition, and the third on that foggy day. Still at the harbor, Ad hugs me gently and for very long. And whispered: ‘We’ll talk about your trip tomorrow’. I recall feeling Ad’s breasts harden. Ad must have felt the same with my penis. And immediately, in those brief seconds of desire’s work, when one’s desire pulls the other’s desire and vice-versa, I felt the same happening to Ad’s penis and Ad felt the same happening to my breasts. And both Ad and I felt, under our penises, the anxious moisture of our vaginas growing.”

“‘Maybe now we should talk about the expedition’. Suggestions such as this, when coming from Ad, mean decisions already taken. Ad knew that I would have two important meetings the following day. The first, with the Araken, I would attend alone, and not a shadow of a problem was foreseeable. On the contrary: the metal booty that I had obtained from the Northern barbarians was such that I could almost expect to be granted a title of nobility,

not to mention land and riches. My status in the Araken seemed to have one direction only: forward and upward. The second meeting, I would attend with Ad, since we were both full members of the Guild of Sages, a semi-secret group of fifteen people dedicated to the search of knowledge of the world, of a whole planet Earth to be discovered. We were all well versed in the exegesis of the Holy Ala'm; we had all learned how to read, write, and think in theological schools and we all had, in some moment or other in our youth, seriously considered the pursuit of a priestly career. But we all had decided instead to engage in the pursuit of knowledge and curiosity, to try to recover the 'Science' that our ancestors had practiced millennia before."

"What will you tell the Guild about the trip?" – and Ad's voice was now in the opposite register of the music of sex from a few hours before. 'Don't you think it's better that after this second attempt you abandon your pursuit?' 'But I won't abandon my pursuit, Ad, even you still support me on that, don't you?' 'You know I do. But you also know that I do it because I know that you believe that you are right. But if you insist on the search for the dimorphs, Ev, it can be...' 'Dangerous?', I completed. I knew the risk was real. Although the members of the Guild of Sages shared a code of honor that placed the search for knowledge above other loyalties, it was also true that several members of the Guild were simultaneously members of the Araken. The Araken had 101 members, representing all the lineages of Golmak. They all knew each other from the priestly schools – that was what united us as an elite and separated us from the common folk. In such circumstances it was easy, too easy, for any rumor or suspicion to leave the Guild and rapidly contaminate the Araken."

"As Eva g Sirdi, member of the Sirdi lineage, one of the oldest in Golmak, I felt protected. Not having pursued the priestly career had not been a disadvantage, since that was not expected of all young people. Priestly teaching was expected for all, not the profession. My choice of a commercial career had been respected, and even more so after my successes with the Northern Barbarians. Even my semi-secret life in the Guild could be seen as an eccentricity of the kind allowed to the powerful. However, there was a rumor in town about how my commercial trips were a ruse for the satisfaction of my curiosity, a word that although not outrageous, had a titillating, provocative overtone, a taste of the forbidden. The true problem lay elsewhere: the nature of my search and curiosity, the question that I was asking, the answer that that question suggested."

“Once, after my first expedition to the North, Ad ordered me, very harshly, to sit and pay attention. ‘Listen, Ev, listen very carefully. Sometimes a priestly education too early in life leads those who have the knowledge of the sacred texts to be those who forget them sooner. Listen to this:

Upon creating the Universe, Ala’m rejoiced in the beauty and perfection of Their work. The sky, deep blue when lit by the moon or light blue when warmed by the sun, was a thing of perfection and tranquility. The sea, reflecting the colors of the sky, leaped its waves, now gently, then furiously. The earth, green and flat, dark and mountainous, connected sky and sea. Such was A’lam’s dwelling. To inhabit it with life did Ala’m create the plants that grow from earth, cast their seed and generate their own twins. Not satisfied with the plants, did Ala’m create the animals that move on it and did Ala’m make them more intricate than the plants they fed upon. He called some female, he called some male, and from the union of female and male new and different creatures were born. But seeing Ala’m that much was the dispute between females for males and between males for females, They made a new being, one that would feed on plants and animals. In the divine image did They create it, without female or male, and granted it with the gift of curiosity so that it could roam the world and possess it and, in the journey, find Ala’m Themselves, the one that is everywhere and nowhere.

“‘Why are you Reading me that, Ad? I know the Holy Ala’m. By heart. ‘Because you can’t take away from people that minor sentence. Minor, but of the greatest importance: in the divine image. At least you can’t do it yet. And only Ala’m knows when you can...’ ‘But what I defend is somehow there, in the text’, I argued, ‘Ala’m was not satisfied with two-sex animals. One can say that Ala’m made them evolve. And since we do not descend from, say, a snake or a mockingbird, we must descend from people that still had the two-sex characteristic, such as monkeys do. My theory is not incompatible with the sacred texts. Nor with the ability that Ala’m gave me to... question. You know that is my standing, Ad’. Ad knew. Ad also knew the legends and myths that I had registered in the North and that told of a mythical people with two sexes.”

“Ad accepted my theory and as a curious person, as a member of the Guild, also had a practical mind and thought that it was impossible to demonstrate

my hypothesis: 'You will never find your missing link, I'm afraid. I would give anything to help you achieve that goal and yet I would also give everything to have you give up your travels.' Differently from the tasteless stories told by the common folk, our arguments did not invariably finish with love making, with the perfect symmetry that the uneducated like, the two members of the couple taking turns in penetrating one another, time and time again in the endless pursuit of the perfect amorous equilibrium. Our arguments were... arguments, as if we were in the Guild of Sages, and always ended in an impasse, a dead-end. 'So, Ad, your problem is that you think that there is no missing link. That there isn't a species like our own but in a previous evolutionary stage, a stage with two sexes?' 'No, Ev, that is not my problem'."

"I didn't understand Ad's fear until, two weeks later, I received the summons from the Court of Inquiring of the Araken. I had never been present in a Court session. All that was known about that most rigid and secretive institution on Earth was the product of rumor, cautionary tales, scaring legends made to instill obedience and consensus. The most terrible tale had involved a relative of mine, Ca. My uru or genitor from inside – the person who gave birth to me – did not share genitors with anyone, did not have ere, neither from the inside nor from the outside. My ulu, or genitor from the outside, however – the one who had inseminated my uru – shared genitors with Ca. They was, therefore, ere of my ulu. My alik. I was still an adolescent when my uru and my ulu embarrassingly announced that alik Ca had been banned to exile in a foreign land. They never wanted to explain to me why. Whenever they tried to do so they would give up, and I felt that they were embarrassed, that they could find or proffer the right words. Only years later did I come to know the truth and through indirect ways: Ca had been denounced to the Court of Inquiring for using only one of his genitals (the vagina) in the sexual act, and for refusing to use the other. How bigoted people can be when they impose their notion of 'sexual plenitude'! So narrow-minded, a law that criminalizes that! Today, as someone who dedicates life to the pursuit of knowledge and the satisfaction of curiosity, I think that my alik Ca was probably just ill, the victim of some recessive disease from the time in evolution when we had not yet achieved our stage of perfect unimorphs."

"I never knew who denounced me to the Court. The Court accepts anonymous complaints and guarantees anonymity. The Court just could not accept

that a member of the Araken and of one of the most prestigious lineages, and with priestly training, would use the sacred texts to find in them a hint, an opening, for a, as the sentence said, 'sinful confabulation' on the origins of humankind in two-sexed creatures. Ad's fear was confirmed. The love of my life watched the trial without flinching and when testifying supported courageously the merit of the work of the Guild and the right to be free to speculate and pursue curiosity. When asked about opinion on my theory, Ad replied honestly that we did not agree on that. But the Court used that against me: "The fact that not even the trespasser's partner agrees with the sinful delirium confirms the enormity of the deviousness and heresy of the curiosity path that the trespasser has chosen to follow."

"I couldn't even say goodbye to Ad. And there won't be another return journey to Golmak. Nor ship, or long weeks at sea, or precious metals to transport, or festive receptions, titles or riches, fog in the harbor, Ad's smile, hair, hands, eyes, breasts, cock, cunt, sweat, voice, smell. They have only granted me one wish: that the place of exile be the Northern Barbarian potentate of my last trip. But, if in Golmak I had been banned for questioning the literal interpretation of the Holy Ala'm and the consequent symbiosis between ecclesiastical and political powers, in the Barbarian lands of the North I was seen, in the purest and simple, and therefore most brutal way as a perversion. I ended up being banished twice, from both home and the shabby barbarian encampment on the shores of the Great Lakes. I am now roaming deserted landscapes. I brought with me this copy of the Holy Ala'm, my only Reading, my only Writing paper. And a charcoal portrait of Ad. I live like a hermit and, too often, like a madperson. I talk to myself. I argue with myself. I rest motionless for long periods of time, until hunger makes me look for food. Slowly I give up."

This seemed to be the last note by Eva g Sirdi. However, the mentioned charcoal portrait of Ad contained, in the back, a brief and final note, certainly written in two different moments. It is, for all intents and purposes, the note that made the member of the medieval Guild of Sages the pioneer of the modern science of human evolution:

"Exhausted, I woke up to the vision of a camp. No idea how I got there. A campfire beside me. Shabby tents made of canes. Tiny creatures (thought they were infants) inspect me with curiosity. They laugh. They are disgusted too. They point at my genitals and breasts. They touch them with sticks. And they talked! Don't understand the language, but they talk! The work of Ala'm,

praised be They! Then I watched them closer. ‘Mutilation’, I thought. ‘Abnormality’, too. Some of the creatures had a penis, a bag for exo-eggs, like lower animals, where the vagina should be. Some had just the vagina, uncovered by a hanging penis, although somewhat hidden by more flesh. These are the agan-uruk, they have to be! Agan-uruk. The “divided people”. Dimorphic. Dimorphs. Found what I’ve been looking for! [...]”

“[...] Too late. Henceforth I, most advanced representative of the higher stages of evolution and Ala’m’s creation, will be just an object of disgust and curiosity, the strange unimorph of the tribe.”

*

This fiction was inspired by the Gethenian theme of *The left hand of darkness*. It was developed to include not only the aspects of sex, gender, and sexuality, but also the social organization of power and knowledge, and plays with classical portrayals of the tropes of expedition, discovery, otherness (taken farther than cultural difference, including, therefore, questions of evolution). It also plays with time and chronology, picturing Earth society in a future that is an apparent return to our current past; and placing contemporary human bodies as “predecessors” in the evolutionary scale. This allows for the imagination of an altertopia that is simultaneously a fantasy and a “system” that draws inspiration from the archives of ethnography. There is, of course, danger in moving back and forth between fact and fiction, real lives of real humans, and those of imaginary characters. But in imagining bodies that are apparently radically different one ends up realizing the familiarity of the components; desire, sex, and the social organization of them can be imagined as otherwise, as different from our own, especially in what concerns inequality and power. Furthermore, gender disappears, relationality and sociality do not.

This kind of social science fiction is necessarily permeated by feminist and queer values and perspectives, not taking for granted neither heteronormativity, nor binarism or the body. Although some ethnographic archives do provide us with a variety of gender and sexuality orders and regimes, and even with the non-centrality of gender in the Western conceptual sense, they do not provide us with the absence of gender.

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Recebido: 30/09/2022 Aceito: 27/05/2023 | Received: 9/30/2022 Accepted: 5/27/2023



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