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Capitalism, Ecosocialism and Reparative Readers in Ursula Le Guin's *The Word for World Is Forest*

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Abstract: Ursula Le Guin's *The Word for World Is Forest* emerged as a reaction to the Vietnam War, which ravaged human and nonhuman lifeworlds. Le Guin offers two competing discursive systems through which to interpret human and nonhuman alterity—Terran industrial capitalism, grounded in physical and symbolic violence, and Athshean ecosocialism, rooted in an ethics of non-violence and forest-centred nominalism. Le Guin appears to suggest that both “readings” of Athshea are locked in an intractable, adversarial logic, typical of the “paranoid” reading practices that Eve Sedgwick would theorise twenty-five years later. In its sensitivity to the spectrum of negative affect covering anticipatory anxiety about forestalling pain, symmetrical suspicion, and fear of humiliation, the novella offers an uncanny prefiguration of paranoid practices. Le Guin suggests that the way out of the paranoid clash of civilisations can be found in two “reparative” reading stances—Selver's reinterpretation and rearrangement of components of the oppressor's culture into new, unexpected wholes (hermeneutic reassemblage) and the alien observers' valorisation of disinterested curiosity over action as a categorical imperative (cerebral equivocity). Le Guin thus seems to offer a reparative poetics *avant la lettre*.

Keywords: deforestation; science fiction; queer theory; reparative reading; Ursula Le Guin; Vietnam War



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1. Introduction

Despite its traditional emphasis on science and technology, science fiction can be a powerful medium to express environmental concerns. The ecological turn in science fiction can be traced to the 1960s, when feminist, Marxist, anti-colonial and ecological struggles provided the impetus for narratives of eco-catastrophe. By imagining natural disasters on a planetary scale, science fiction writers were able to draw attention to the calamitous effect of anthropogenic activity on the natural world and vulnerable forms of sentient life. This “counter-cultural militancy that rejected pulp SF's quasi-imperialist vision of white men conquering the stars in the name of Western progress” (Latham 2007, p. 107) can be seen in Thomas M Disch's *The Genocides* (Disch 2000), Frank Herbert's award-winning *Dune* (Herbert 2020), which inaugurated the *Dune Chronicles*; and Ursula Le Guin's *The Word for World Is Forest* (Le Guin 2015). Le Guin's novella, which won the Hugo Award in 1973, emerged as a response to the Vietnam War, wherein the casualties were both human (five million or 13% of the population, see Gustafsson 2010, p. xi) and nonhuman (five million acres of forests, see Zierler 2011, p. 2).

The despoilment of the nonhuman world during the Vietnam War prompted the formulation of the concept of ecocide. During the conflict, U.S. soldiers had to confront the communist guerillas of the Viet Cong or National Liberation Front. As David Zierler (2011, pp. 1–2) explains, the US military resorted to herbicidal warfare to expose the guerillas. It combined two herbicides, i.e., weed-killers, 2,4,5-T and 2,4-D, already in use for farming and industrial activities to produce a new compound, Agent Orange. After exposure to such herbicides, plants experienced abnormal and uncontrolled growth until they shrivelled and died. Through the spraying of Agent Orange between 1961 and 1971,

the US army defoliated approximately five million acres of forests, the scarred legacy of which included disease and birth defects for the Vietnamese population as well as irremediable deforestation and the reduction in species diversity for the nonhuman world. Zierler observes, “the herbicidal warfare program targeted not specific weeds but entire ecosystems. In Vietnam the forest was the weed” (Zierler 2011, p. 2). In this context, Le Guin’s *The Word for World is Forest* can be read as a powerful refutation of this militaristic premise—for the Athshean society she imagines, the forest is not the weed, it is the world.

The Word for World is Forest (henceforth *Forest*) envisions a dystopic future for Earth, in which forests no longer exist. Wood, now the most valuable planetary resource, must be obtained from other planets within an interstellar capitalist economy. The Terrans have therefore colonised the tropical planet Athshea in order to extract and export its wood back to earth, which has been reduced to an urban desert. The Terrans’ systematic deforestation of Athshea goes hand in hand with their enslavement and extermination of indigenous Athsheans. On the surface, the narrative appears to be driven primarily by action: the Terrans oppress and exploit the Athsheans and their environment; the Athsheans, an inherently non-violent people, break with tradition and violently attack the Terrans; they engage in guerrilla resistance under the leadership of their visionary leader Sam Selver; and they succeed in expulsing the Terran regime from Athshea. Despite this strong narrative telos, the novella’s animating force is in fact hermeneutic. Le Guin offers two competing discursive systems through which to interpret human and nonhuman alterity—Terran industrial capitalism, grounded in physical and symbolic violence, and Athshean ecosocialism, rooted in an ethics of non-violence and forest-centred nominalism. She represents profit-driven industrialism through the capitalist, racist and misogynist eyes of Captain Davidson while Athshean ecosocialism is filtered through points of view of the Terran military anthropologist Raj Lyubov (who is passionately committed to the Athshean cause) and the Athshean insurgent Sam Selver. I posit that both positions—Terran industrial oppression and the radicalised Athshean ecosocial consciousness—are locked in an intractable, adversarial logic, typical of the “paranoid” reading practices Eve Sedgwick would conceptualise in 1997. In fact, despite its engagement with economic modes of production and political issues of territorial sovereignty, the novella is primarily attuned to the *affects* of a military conflict. In its sensitivity to the spectrum of negative affect covering anticipatory anxiety about forestalling pain, symmetrical suspicion and fear of humiliation, the novella offers an uncanny prefiguration of paranoid practices. Le Guin shows how the way out of the paranoid clash of civilisations can be found in two “reparative” reading stances—Selver’s ambivalent reinterpretation and rearrangement of components of the oppressor’s culture into new, unexpected wholes (hermeneutic reassemblage) and the alien observers’ valorisation of disinterested curiosity over action as a categorical imperative (cerebral equivocity).¹

From this vantage point, Le Guin’s characters are not only actors who drive the narrative but also “readers” of alterity. Le Guin’s fiction can be seen as a literary correlative to the hermeneutic conception of cultural anthropology formulated by the iconoclastic anthropologist Clifford Geertz. In *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Geertz 1973), a work contemporary to *Forest*, Geertz argues that if cultures are symbolic systems, anthropologists are readers of signs and texts. For Geertz, doing “ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of ‘construct a reading of’) a manuscript” that is “written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour” (Geertz 1973, p. 10). Le Guin’s *The Left-Hand of Darkness* (Le Guin 2000) concretises this hermeneutic metaphor by presenting the gender-fluid Gethenian culture through two interpretative frames—that of the native Gethenian Estraven and the Terran anthropologist Genly Ai, who must grapple with the idea that biological gender can fluctuate within the same individual among Gethenians.² As John Pennington has argued, Genly Ai’s “predicament is the reader’s predicament, which is to struggle with gender identity” (Pennington 2000, p. 355). Readers are forced to become “androgynous” since they are “asked to read as both a man and a woman,” as Estraven does: “They must read as the ‘other’ or ‘alien’” (p. 355).

Borrowing the feminist concept of a “resisting reader,” Pennington argues that *The Left Hand of Darkness* “asks that both male and female readers become resisting readers, who must identify against their gendered selves and critique those stereotypes” (p. 353). Ultimately, Genly’s dilemma, like that of Le Guin, is fundamentally a linguistic one: “How can Le Guin create a genderless alien society” using “a shared language that is by its nature gender charged?” (Le Guin 2000, p. 352) sets herself a similar challenge in *Forest*: How can one create a non-anthropocentric alien society using a shared language that is by nature anthropocentrically charged? Building on and extending Pennington’s insights, I argue that in *Forest*, Le Guin requires that we be not only resisting readers, identifying against our varying internalisations of gendered, racialised, capitalist and anthropocentric discourse, but also reparative readers, sensitive to the negative affects of “paranoid” resistance and receptive to alternative affects of intimacy, pleasure and creative self-renewal.

2. Terran Captialism

The presence of multiple narrators and points of view in *Forest* enables Le Guin to orchestrate a hermeneutic struggle over ways of naming, reading and knowing Athshea. She uses the character of Captain Don Davidson, the Commanding Officer of a Terran logging camp on Athshea, to demonstrate that the principle of anthropocentrism is at the origin of the discursive projects of capitalism, racism and patriarchy. Captain Davidson is the caricatural embodiment of this triple intersectional oppression in the first chapter, rendered entirely from his narrative focalisation. Addressing the ecological officer Kees Van Sten, he explains: “When I say Earth, Kees, I mean people. Men. You worry about deer and trees and fibreweed, fine, that’s your thing. But I like to see things in perspective, from top down, and the top, so far is humans” (Le Guin 2015, p. 14). Davidson draws a hard ontological line between the human (Earth peopled by Men) and the nonhuman (deer, trees, fibreweed). But as Matthew Calarco has argued, anthropocentrism not only creates a hierarchical divide between the human and the nonhuman, “but also *within and among* human beings” such that “certain groups of humans” are located “alongside animals and other nonhuman beings on the lower side of the value hierarchy” (Calarco 2014, pp. 417–18). In Davidson’s “top down” hierarchy of sentient life, the Athsheans, who measure one meter in height and are covered in green fur, are subhuman “monkeys” and therefore evolutionary failures: “As ETs they were about standard, but as men they were a bust, they just hadn’t made it” (p. 16). So blatant and flat is Davidson’s bigotry that he seems entirely unaware of his own contradictions. (The Athsheans and Terrans have both evolved from a common ancestor—the highly advanced Hainishmen.) Elsewhere, he blurs this seemingly categorical evolutionary divide between Terrans and Athsheans (disparagingly referred to as “creechies”), conflating the latter with Terran women: “Why are women scared of rats? Don’t look for good sense from women or creechies” (p. 18).

Both the indigenous Athsheans and the Terran women supply the needs of Terran men like Davidson. The novella opens with Captain thinking of the new shipload of Terran women due to arrive. Their role is to satisfy the sexual needs of the Terran men and to increase the Terran settler population on Athshea. Davidson imagines the shipload of “breeding females for the New Tahiti Colony” (p. 11), a “line of 212 buxom beddable breasty little figures” of “prime human stock” (p. 11). By foregrounding the sexualisation of women in the opening, Le Guin demonstrates her awareness that the “Vietnam War was a sexualized and racialized assault on the Southeast Asian body politic” (Ly 2017, p. 150). The polysemy of figures (a sexualised silhouette, a number on a balance sheet) is reinforced by the way Davidson’s mind oscillates between the women and a crop failure report: “the report from Dump Island of crop failures, massive erosion, a wipe-out” (p. 11). Her novella can thus be read as a memorialising echo, via the mediation of science fiction, of female Vietnamese subjectivities. Scholar Lynn Ly offers the following account of testimonies of delegates from North and South Vietnam as well as Laos at the Indo-Chinese Women’s Conferences in Canada in 1971:

The delegates revealed the ways in which they were subject to ritualized sexual violence against enemy and ally troops, and other indiscriminate warfare technologies such as defoliants and bombings. They laid bare how torture techniques forced them to be naked and electrocuted at the genitals, how Agent Orange complicated the births of their children, and how women were used to satiate the hungers of military men. The wars constructed—literally and figuratively—Asian heterofemininity into a pornographic spectacle of bestial torture and monstrous reproductive capacities for the troops and for the average American viewer. (Ly 2017, p. 150)

Davidson's and his men's pornotroping of women is systematic: "those babies were real good greedy girls" (p. 12); "Bring me back a Collie, Cap. Blonde 34-22-36" (p. 19); "you could tell they were the fresh ones [...] No more nipplepeeps. Fashions had changed; too bad" (p. 20). Similarly, Davidson's approving estimation of the women, all "sound and clean," is echoed later when he derives satisfaction from the thought of transforming the "tree-jumble into clean sawn planks" (p. 15). His thoughts thus shuttle between human and nonhuman "stock"—the women and the trees, both of which he expects to be "sound and clean" for ready exploitation. We later learn that Davidson takes his pleasure from raping Athshean women as well, including an Athshean named Thele, who wastes away after the encounter. She is the wife of Sam Selver. Her rape and death act as the psychosexual catalyst for the uprising the Selver will lead.

Here, Le Guin seems to anticipate the theories of key Black ecofeminist scholars like Delores Williams who draws structural analogies between "the dominating culture's historic abuse and exploitation of African-American women's bodies in the nineteenth century" and contemporary abuses of nature in the twentieth century (Williams 1993, p. 24). Both Black female bodies and arboreal bodies are "vulnerable" to abuse by those "who own the means of production" (p. 26); the exploitation of both sets of bodies is "rationalized" on the basis of slavery or technology "providing greater profits, comfort, and leisure" for consumers (p. 24). In *Forest*, arboreal bodies are dislocated and shipped to Earth; female Terran bodies are deracinated from Earth and transplanted in Athshea, echoing the uprootment of Africans from their homeland between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. (Le Guin, it must be noted, never specifies the racial identities of the Terran women.) Female Athsheans are also brought to Terran camps where they are vulnerable to abuse, thus recalling the abuse of Vietnamese women at the hands of US military personnel, as described by the delegates. Such abuse bespeaks "Western disrespect for the unity of nature's placements, for nature's own cycles of production and reproduction" (Williams 1993, p. 27). While one must be wary of essentialising white, Vietnamese and Black female bodies,³ it is instructive to approach them, as Gayle Rubin (2011) teaches us, as structural positions produced by hegemonic arrangements of power, even as we remain attuned to their specific histories and cultural singularities. The reduction of women to statistical figures in the novella also prefigures the ideas of Black scholar Hortense Spillers (1987), for whom the Black woman's identity has been founded in the historical misrecognition of her flesh by white patriarchal capitalists as fungible units of accounting, profit and insurance.

Davidson's understanding of sentience is grounded in an arbitrary universal of a triumphant masculinist imperialism: "Can't keep us down, we're Men" (p. 11). Physical violence is legitimized through the symbolic violence of renaming: Athshea is named "New Tahiti" by the colonising Terrans; Terrans reserve a particular racial slur for Athsheans, calling them "creechies" or the Voluntary Autochthonous Labour Corps (p. 53); and the sexual and reproductive labour performed by the shipped Terran women either makes them "Recreation Staff" or "Colony Brides" (p. 12). By making us enter Davidson's misogynistic and bigoted subjectivity through free indirect discourse (rendering his thoughts and personal idiom in the third-person), Le Guin creates a hermeneutic situation similar to that of *The Left Hand of Darkness*. In line with Pennington, one may argue that here too, she forces us to become resisting readers who constantly reject Davidson's, and by extension, Terran culture's, oppressive colonial, sexist and racist logics.

3. Athshean Ecosocialism and Radical Nominalism

But the novella also uses two “readers”—Raj Lyubov and Sam Selver—to critique the inherently alienating and dehumanising nature of colonial capitalism. By embedding readers within the text, as is the case in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin offers another “meta-reader-response narrative” (Pennington 2000, p. 355). In a heated debate with Davidson and other Terran officers, Lyubov exposes the Terran discourse of industrial progress as one of natural despoilment and colonial oppression: “We have killed, raped, dispersed, and enslaved the native humans [Athsheans], destroyed their communities, and cut down their forests” (p. 53). Underscoring the Athsheans’ non-aggressiveness, he argues that while the Athsheans recognised Terrans as a fellow-species, the Terrans “have ignored the responses, the rights and obligations of non-violence” (p. 53). Lyubov also articulates a major tenet of Athshean ecosocialism—the recognition of local ecological limits over the unchecked reproductive logic of profit (Otto 2012, p. 102). He warns that if they continue logging at their present rate, they may “reduce the major habitable lands” of this tropical planet to “desert within ten years” (p. 59). Terran industrialism comes across as an “elite-driven system that denies workers (and with colonization, indigenous peoples) their control of the tools, raw materials, and sites of material production” (Otto 2012, p. 102). From the Athshean point of view, the forest does not exist “only as things to be exchanged globally for the profit of the owner class (exchange values)” but “as goods necessary to satisfy human needs (use values) and, importantly, obedient to local ecological limits” (Otto 2012, p. 102).

Put another way, Terran industrial capitalism reduces sentience to surplus in an act of nominal *reductionism*: “the alien forests became wood” (p. 15, emphasis mine). In contrast, the Athshean worldview, articulated primarily by Selver, is premised on polysemy and nominal *radicalism*.⁴ Instead of designating, and therefore apprehending, the trees as “wood,” an inert commodity, the Athsheans use the same word (*Athshe*) for “forest” and for “world” (p. 72). Thus, in the following extract, one has to constantly “translate” the word “forest” as “world” to fully understand Selver’s tirade against the “yumens” (the Athshean term for Terrans). He is trying to communicate what Lyubov has explained to him about Terrans to his fellow Athsheans who cannot understand why the Terrans are destroying their planet. I have included the “translation” in square brackets accompanied by an equals sign:

“[Lyubov] said the yumens are from outside the forest [=world]. That’s quite clear. He said they want the forest [=planet]: the trees for wood, the land to plant grass on.” Selver’s voice, though still soft, had taken on resonance; the people among the silver trees listened. “That too is clear, to those of us who’ve seen them cutting down the world [=forest]. [. . .] They have left their roots [=dreams] behind them, perhaps, in this other forest [=world] from which they came, this forest with no trees. (pp. 40–41)

Here, Davidson’s blithe assertions about Terran triumphalism are repeated, but with an ironic interpretative difference. They are dislodged from a capitalist project and transposed onto an Athshean knowledge system. In a spectacular move of radical nominalism, Le Guin makes it such that the earth, which is Davidson’s (and the reader’s) standard of reference, appears as an aberration. So “alien” does capitalism appear that it provokes a crisis in the Athshean system of representation. In a world where the same word designates forest and world, how can one name or even imagine a deforested planet? The headwoman Ebor Endep struggles to find equivalents in her own language, naturally adapted to lush, tropical contexts of heavy rain, for Terran desertification: “‘They make the forest into a dry beach’—her language had no word for ‘desert’” (pp. 39–40). Such defamiliarising evocations of deforestation require that Athsheans twist their own language into oxymorons (“this forest with no trees,” “a dry beach”) in order to represent what is to them unrepresentable. At such moments, we become Athshean readers or aliens, alienated from habituated internalisations of hegemonic discourses, as Pennington would argue.

4. Paranoid Readers

But Le Guin suggests that there is something inherently toxic about both stances—Terran industrial oppression and Athshean insurgent ecosocialism, particularly as articulated by Lyubov. This is powerfully showcased in the third chapter which stages a debate between the Terran and Athshean positions, represented, respectively, by Davidson and Lyubov. In their negative affects of adversarial binarism, mutual suspicion, anticipatory anxiety towards surprise and humiliation, and claims and counter-claims to absolute truth, the Terran military personnel as well as Lyubov represent what Eve Sedgwick would call “paranoid” readers. Though Sedgwick formulated her theory of paranoid readings to describe how scholars position themselves in relation to existing scholarship, her arguments take on a particular force when applied to the characters of the novel. While Sedgwick is interested in “epistemologies of enmity” (Sedgwick 2020, p. 7) that structure academic research, the novella can be seen as a literalisation of such combative metaphors since the action is structured around a military confrontation.

Sedgwick states that the first salient trait of paranoid reading is that it is “anticipatory.” The paranoid stance is one predicated on the pre-emptive injunction that there be no “*bad surprises*” (p. 10, emphasis in original). To avert such bad surprises requires a peculiar epistemological relation to any kind of knowledge judged relevant in averting surprises. Aversion to bad surprises is the primary cause for argument in Chapter Three. Terrans and non-Terrans alike believed that the Athsheans were “intra-species non-aggressive” (p. 48). However, after enduring four years of military occupation and oppression under the Terrans, the Athsheans resorted to violence, killing two hundred and seven Terrans and burning the logging camp run by Davidson. The army personnel see this not as a humanitarian crisis, but a failure of military intelligence. As Davidson’s superior Colonel Dongh insists:

[T]here was a general consensus by both the first Exploratory Missions and our own research staff of specialists here headed by Captain Lyubov, giving us to understand that the New Tahitians are a primitive, harmless, peace-loving species. Now this information was obviously erroneous. (pp. 53–54)

Dongh’s sense of military pride and order is wounded because of the *unexpected* nature of the attack rather than the attack itself.⁵ It also triggers the proleptic temporality of a paranoid reader who “can never be paranoid enough” (Miller cited in Sedgwick 2020, p. 10): “they won’t catch us *off guard again*, we were erroneously briefed concerning the nature of these natives,” Colonel Dongh assures his interlocutors (p. 58, emphasis mine). The attack could have been *anticipated*, he insinuates, had it not been for “erroneous” information provided by specialists like Lyubov.

Lyubov is keenly aware of the pre-emptive epistemology at work. He too is reeling from this “bad surprise” that undermines all his research based on participant observation over the past five years: “And amongst the ashes, all his knowledge of the High Intelligence Life Forms of World 41. Dust, rubbish, a mess of false data and fake hypotheses” (p. 46). Lyubov, Davidson and Dongh reproduce and reflect each other’s paranoia about the “truth-value of the original axiom” (p. 7) concerning the Athsheans’ pacificism. In their “symmetrical epistemologies” (p. 10) around the question of truth-value, they show how paranoia is “mimetic” and “reflexive”: it needs to be “imitated in order to be understood” and “understand[s] only by imitation” (p. 10).

Lyubov’s reaction in particular is deeply visceral, rooted in the body and in affect: he has a migraine (p. 45); his voice becomes “weak and husky” (p. 60); he loses his temper and his “poise” (p. 60); and finally, he cries at the end of the exchange (p. 61). In addition to his profound repugnance vis à vis the Terrans’ heinous treatment of the Athsheans, Lyubov is smarting from the humiliation of being proven wrong in front of his peers and the alien observers: “He had written long papers to explain how and why they couldn’t kill men. All wrong. Dead wrong” (p. 46). As Sedgwick explains, academic positions tend to be articulated from positions of “strong humiliation or humiliation-fear” organised around

the principle of “minimizing the experience of humiliation” (Tomkins cited in [Sedgwick 2020](#), pp. 13, 14). Davidson too is subject to humiliation when Lyubov discusses how the masculinist Captain was pinned down by the one-metre-tall Athsheans. While the soft-hearted Lyubov does not in fact “want to humiliate [Davidson] in front of others,” he does want “to corner Davidson in his lies, to force him into speaking truth once” (p. 50). While “accusations of rape and murder” flatter Davidson’s self-image of virility, “that image was endangered: Lyubov had called up a picture of him, the soldier, the fighter, the cool tough man being knocked down by enemies the size of six-year-olds” (pp. 50–51).

Davidson’s masculinist ontology merits special attention from the perspective of the paranoid reader. Sedgwick reminds us that Freud traced paranoia to the repression of same-sex desire (p. 6). It is tempting to underscore Davidson’s paranoid performances of his own heterosexual normativity in which “Men” exercise power over human and nonhuman bodies that occupy the structural position of the Other: “Thinking Men, he thought Women” (p. 12); “A lot of men couldn’t handle creechies” but “he could tame any of them” (p. 12); “For this world, New Tahiti, was literally made for men. Cleaned up and cleaned out, the dark forests cut down for open fields of grain, the primeval murk and savagery and ignorance wiped out” (pp. 12–13); and “The fact is, the only time a man is really and entirely a man is when he’s just had a woman or killed another man” (p. 66). However, as Sedgwick, quoting Guy Hocquenghem points out, paranoia, in its repression of homosexuality, is less illuminating as “a uniquely privileged site” for studying homosexuality in the Freudian tradition than as an opportunity for examining “the mechanisms of homophobic and heterosexist enforcement against it” (p. 6). Davidson’s heterosexuality is of a piece with his homophobia and misogyny. He imagines that Lyubov, “like a lot of intellectuals,” was “effeminate” and that he “resented Davidson’s virility” (p. 21). Elsewhere, his contempt towards a fellow-officer’s paranoia can be read as a reflection of his own: “[Atranda] was so afraid creechies were going to attack the camp that he acted like some woman afraid of getting raped” (p. 68).

Davidson embodies the paranoid position of “terrible alertness” vis à vis “the dangers posed” by “hateful” and anxiety-inducing objects ([Sedgwick 2020](#), p. 8). In contrast, the depressive position entails using one’s “resources to assemble or ‘repair’ the murderous part-objects into something like a whole” but “*not necessarily like any pre-existing whole*” ([Sedgwick 2020](#), p. 8, emphasis in original). Sedgwick emphasises that the paranoid and depressive positions are oscillations along a common spectrum rather than mutually exclusive categories. From this perspective, Lyubov and Selver represent the paranoically structured depressive position from which “reparative” processes of psychosocial reassemblage can begin. Lyubov’s concern to not humiliate Davidson, his avowed enemy, springs from the compassionate stance of a reparative reader. He also sees Athsheans not as “hateful and envious part-objects,” but as something “available to be identified with and offer one nourishment and comfort in turn” ([Sedgwick 2020](#), p. 8). Having “worked hard together,” having “taught each other” and having “spoken without reserve,” Lyubov and Selver are bound by “liking and loyalty” ([Le Guin 2015](#), pp. 75–76)—and love. “Among [Melanie] Klein’s names for the reparative process,” writes Sedgwick, “is love” (p. 8). When, after the Athshean attack, Selver and Lyubov meet, the former both takes a part-object from the literally “murderous” ([Sedgwick 2020](#), p. 8) Terran culture (a formal handshake) and reassembles it within the Athshean culture of touch. He first shakes Lyubov’s hand “Terran fashion” and then takes his arms to stroke them just above the elbow. This brings “reassurance” and sustenance to the psychically battered Lyubov who understands that caresses have “social” and not just sexual and maternal significance for Athsheans. Terrans polarise “the formal handshake and the sexual caress” because they see touch as paranoically implying “threat or aggression” (p. 76). In contrast, this “black was filled by the Athsheans with varied customs of touch,” “infinitely modifiable” (p. 76).

5. Reparative Practices of Hermeneutic Reassemblage and Cerebral Equivocity

Selver is the ultimate reparative reader in *Forest* because he understands the salvatory value of hermeneutic reassemblage: he takes from a hostile culture an alien element—murder of one's own kind; selectively identifies with it; and unexpectedly extracts from it a reassembled mode of survival. For the Athsheans, *sha'ab* means god and translator. Since they see dreams as "the central experience of vision," a Dreamer or translator (who can only be male, as compared to political leaders who can only be female) is one who "translated the language of dream and philosophy, the Men's Tongue, into the everyday speech" (p. 84). By identifying and adopting violence, Selver becomes a new kind of translator or god. He brings "a new word," that of murder, into the language of his people and only "a god could lead so great a newcomer as Death across the bridge between the worlds" (p. 85). Selver leads a violent, successful insurrection, which acts a mimetic, reflexive mirroring of Terran violence. However, in the final confrontation with Davidson, Selver reinterprets a Terran praxis of bodily and symbolic violence as a paradoxical project of poisoned reciprocity and the non-infliction of physical harm. Partially identifying with Davidson (the rapist of his wife Thele), he says, "we're both gods [...] We bring each other such gifts as gods bring" (p. 122). While Davidson has brought the gift of murder, Selver gives to him "my people's gift which is not killing" (p. 122). Davidson will be exiled on the island of Rendep. This island was deforested by the Terrans and there is now "nothing to kill"—"No trees, no people," only "dreams of them" (p. 123). Davidson is condemned to wrestle with his own demons and "dreams" of Athsheans, part-objects of his paranoia.

But the most extreme reparative readers are perhaps the two alien observers who witness the debate between Lyubov and the other Terrans in Chapter Three. The first is a Cetian called Or and the second, a Hanishman called Lepennon (the Hainish are the highly evolved ancestors of the Terrans). Sedgwick reminds us that a key premise of the reparative position is a shift from the "self-reinforcing" and "self-defeating strategies for forestalling pain" to "a sustained *seeking of pleasure*" (through the reparative strategies of the depressive position)" (p. 15, emphasis in original). In Freudian terms, a reparative reader dares to set aside the reality principle in favour of the pleasure principle. The Terrans, including Lyubov, are enmeshed in pain-forestalling logics: the militaristic characters anticipate future Athshean aggression while Lyubov wishes to avoid further injury to the Athsheans. They are united in the knee-jerk defensive mechanisms triggered by the fear of a "bad surprise." The two aliens, on the contrary, are *pleasurably* surprised, and seem to see the conflict in heuristic terms as an occasion for intellectual discovery. Lepennon has read Lyubov's report on Athsheans' "conscious control of paradoxical sleep" with "interest" (p. 46), in a way that seeks not to discredit his position but to learn from it. This procures pleasure to the consistently marginalised Lyubov who finds this appreciation "pleasant" (p. 46). When Lyubov explains that the Athsheans are not devoid of violence but have developed practices of "controlled dreaming" and competitive singing as ritualised aesthetic expressions of violent urges, Lepennon's "white skin pales further with pure excitement" (p. 52). However, when Lyubov urges Lepennon at the end of the discussion "to do something to save the forests, the forest people," Lepennon "said nothing" (p. 61). One may add that he *does* nothing. His "gaze" is simply "reserved, kindly, and deep as a well" (p. 61).

The position of the aliens would seem morally reprehensible, even heinous, particularly if the reader identifies with Lyubov and the Athsheans. Like Lyubov, the reader is at a loss to understand how the alien observers, who are keenly aware of the oppression and injustice at work, simply stand back and appear to do nothing. Part of this stance is linked to their political status as observers. As such, they would not wish to violate the Terrans' sovereignty. But this does not fully account for the affect—or lack thereof—linked to their position of neutrality. Surely their demystified knowledge ought to lead to outrage and therefore intervention? It is here that Sedgwick is perhaps most illuminating.

The starting point for her theory of reparative reading is an anecdote about the surprising reaction of her friend, the activist scholar Cindy Patton, about conspiracy

theories around the spread of the HIV virus. Faced with the hypothesis that the virus may have been spread by the US military, Patton does not give in to outrage, nor does she undertake an examination of the truth-value of the statement itself (Was the spread of HIV deliberately engineered by a homophobic state?) through a zealous investigation of tracing and exposure. Instead, she embodies an alternative narrative consequence—a “calm response” (p. 8)—that cerebrally takes stock of what such knowledge can perform and do: “what would we know that we don’t already know”? (p. 4) Sedgwick insists that far from being “a denial of the reality or gravity of enmity or oppression” (p. 7), her activist friend is practising a “non-paranoid knowing and utterance” (p. 8). In such non-paranoid stances, an “unmystified view of systemic oppression does not *intrinsically* or *necessarily* enjoin on that person any specific train of epistemological or narrative consequences” (p. 7, emphasis in original). Knowledge thus turns out to be “separable” from the question of whether one’s energies ought to be devoted to countering the real or perceived threat. Put differently, paranoia consistently conflates “a way of knowing” and the “thing known” (p. 10). For the paranoid, to know is overdetermined as a “categorical imperative” to action vis à vis the thing known. The reparative reader represents the “refusal of the either/or” (p. 34). Le Guin’s provocative proposition that the alien observers’ newfound knowledge of Terran oppression does not enjoin on them a specific narrative consequence of action is an intellectual risk of extraordinary brilliance.

Lepennon, who is genetically closer to the Terrans, is a more classic type of reparative reader drawn towards love. In the final pages, he is sensitive to the depth of feeling that bound Selver to Lyubov and is anxious about the irreversible appearance of murder in Athshean society. In contrast, the Cetian Or, who does not appear in the final pages, appears to attain a piercing, non-paranoid objectivity that seems to come at the cost of a more reparatively attuned stance to the humanitarian and ecological crisis. As the narrator observes, “The most winning characteristic of the rather harsh Cetian temperament was curiosity, inopportune and inexhaustible curiosity” (p. 51). Cetians “died eagerly, curious as to what came next” (p. 51). Thus Or, insensitive to the Terrans in the room, blithely continues Lyubov’s hypothesis that the Athsheans have come to see the Terrans as not of their (i.e., human) kind: “‘And therefore can be killed, like animals, yes, yes,’ said the Cetian *enjoying logic* but Lepennon’s face was now stiff as white stone” (p. 53, emphasis mine). Significantly, when faced with the contradictory behaviour of Terrans who consider Athsheans as subhuman but have intercourse with them, the Cetian can only feel a peculiarly analytic kind of disdain: “Contempt came into his face. ‘You have not thought things through,’ he said. By his standards it was a brutal insult” (p. 54). Perhaps Le Guin could only articulate a position of such cerebral curiosity and equivocity (at no point does the Cetian intervene to change the course of events) from the most “alien” of aliens, an alien unrelated to the human species. Le Guin would seem to provide anticipatory support to Sedgwick’s argument that action need not be a categorical imperative to knowledge.

6. Conclusions

To recapitulate, Le Guin offers a powerfully intersectional reading of the Vietnam war that counterpoints various “readers” of alterity—primarily paranoid readers like Davidson and his like; reparative readers like Lyubov, Selver and Lepennon; and—if one may insert a distinction where Sedgwick does not—non-paranoid readers like Or. However, Le Guin appears to go further than Sedgwick in her examination of the *irreparable affects* of a reparative reading. While the Athsheans succeed in repelling the Terrans, violence is now woven into the social fabric of their society. As Selver puts it, “There is no use pretending, now, that we do not know how to kill one another” (p. 127). Le Guin seems to suggest that the structure of a reparative reading inherently involves some form of self-alienation as the Athsheans appear to be alienated from their own ethics of non-violence. She thus seems to offer a more nuanced intuition of reparative practices, which carry in them the potential to procure pleasure, but also painfully prick our consciences with an awareness

of the residual corporeal, mental, cultural and ecological violence registered in psychic and social imaginaries in the aftermath of horrific violence and trauma.

More broadly, Le Guin seems to have accurately read the Vietnam War as a struggle over narrative and hermeneutic frames. As Lynn Ly has argued, the conflict was an “epistemic event as much as a geopolitical one” that “produced truths about sexuality, desire, freedom and difference on both sides of the Pacific” (Ly 2017, p. 148). The excavation and interrogation of such truths continues today in the transpacific work of Hmong American poet Mae der Vang (2021), whose collage poems testify to the suffering of the Hmong in the 1970s and 1980s, when a mysterious substance apparently dropped by planes killed thousands. In contrast, Ly cites the example of the lesbian activist Rita Mae Brown who complained that solidarity with Vietnamese women during the war overshadowed “the poor, the Black, the Latin and the Lesbian” in the U.S. who “aren’t exotic” and “aren’t remotely glamorous,” but were “also fighting for their lives” (p. 149). From this angle, Le Guin can be seen as offering a corrective to such foreclosures to transpacific solidarity. A striking example of the “shared language and politics” across gay, lesbian and anti-war movements was the “out and proud” slogan, referring both to coming “out of the closet” and getting US troops “out of an imperial war in Vietnam” (Ly 2017, p. 149). Ly also observes that Vietnam War scholarship “rarely dialogues” with gay, lesbian and queer theory, despite the fact that the war coincided with gay and lesbian movements that “were gathering steam in the early 1970s” (p. 148). In this context, Le Guin’s understanding of the psychosexual dynamics of the Vietnam War and the role of reparative hermeneutics in *Forest* can be seen as one of the rare instances of the unexpected, prickly and pleasurable bridging of Vietnam War scholarship and queer theorisations of power.

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Notes

- ¹ I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers who suggested I pay more attention to the ambiguous positions of certain characters in the novella. This reviewer also provided two invaluable references—Delores Williams and Mai Der Vang.
- ² That both Ai Genly and Raj Lyubov are anthropologists further reinforces the structural and thematic affinities between the two texts.
- ³ While the novella mentions Black male characters, the racial identities of the shipload of Terran women are not stated. However, the Terran and Athshean women seem to occupy similar structural positions as fungible producers and reproducers of pleasure, progeny and labour.
- ⁴ The term radicalism takes on a powerful ecological charge in the forest-centred language of the Athsheans. Le Guin returns to its etymological origin in biological (from *radix* or root in Latin). For example, Selver, after his initiation into violence, “was changed radically: from the root” (p. 77). Later, she writes, “To change or to be changed, radically, from the root” (p. 84).
- ⁵ The character of Colonel Dongh also serves as an ironic reminder of the Vietnam War and its guerilla tactics, which he explicitly references (Le Guin 2015, p. 103).

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