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URSULA K. LE GUIN:
OTHERWORLDLY LITERATURE FOR NONHUMAN TIMES

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Dedico este trabalho às seis pessoas que iluminam a minha vida, são elas meu pai (*in memoriam*), minha mãe, minha irmã, meu marido e nossas duas filhas, Alis e Leah. Que sorte a minha.

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Florianópolis, 24 de junho de 2018.

I think the idea of progress an
invidious and generally
harmful mistake.
I am interested in change,
which is an entirely different matter.

Ursula K. Le Guin

RESUMO

Neste estudo, examino três ficções de Ursula K. Le Guin, são elas A Mão Esquerda da Escuridão (1969), The Word for World is Forest (1974, sem tradução para o português) e Os Despossuídos (1976) com o objetivo de identificar se estes trabalhos desafiam alguns dos valores que nos trouxeram ao Antropoceno, a nova Época Geológica em que nos encontramos (Zalasiewicz, J. et al., 2014). O argumento que desenvolvo envolve a ideia de que a literatura de "fora-da-terra" de Le Guin reflete e ressoa com este momento nosso, quando fica claro que não é mais possível fingir que (1) os usos instrumentais da natureza, em nome do progresso, não têm consequências; e (2) que as fronteiras que os humanos ergueram contra seres e coisas não humanas são reais. Uso três e não apenas um livro porque, diante dos desafios do Antropoceno, que incluem mudanças climáticas, a acidificação dos oceanos, perda da biodiversidade, entre outras questões, cada livro explora maneiras diferentes de lidar com desafios parecidos. Desta forma, as obras podem, juntas, colaborar com o nosso processo de pensar sobre os desafios listados acima. Para desenvolver a análise, uso a "Teoria da Sacola", da própria Le Guin, assim como teorias da "virada não-humana", que levam em conta a nossa transição do Holoceno para o Antropoceno, a era do mundo marcada pelos humanos. Leio os trabalhos de Le Guin tendo em mente, principalmente, as teorias articuladas por Donna J. Haraway, Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Gloria Anzaldúa e Greta Gaard. Os planetas onde as três tramas se passam são marcados por extremos: invernos rigorosos e ininterruptos, terras inférteis, falta d'água e a abundância esmagadora de árvores são alguns dos elementos com os quais as personagens têm que lidar. Os protagonistas precisam, com frequência, resistir a mudanças, lutar contra opressores e implicar-se em colaborações humanas e não humanas para garantir a prosperidade de ambos. Informada por uma perspectiva não-humana e ecofeminista, investigo como os habitantes desses planetas desenvolvem e utilizam uma ética que pode nos ser útil, no Antropoceno, para continuarmos como espécie e para coexistir com corpos e coisas não humanas nesta Terra.

Palavras-chave: Ursula K Le Guin. Ficção Especulativa. Antropoceno.

ABSTRACT

This study examines three of Ursula K. Le Guin's novels, namely The Left Hand of Darkness (1969), The Word for World is Forest (1974), and The Dispossessed (1976), with the aim of finding out whether these works challenge some of the values that have led us into the Anthropocene, our new Geological Epoch (Zalasiewicz, J. et al., 2014). The argument I make is that Le Guin's otherworldly literature resonates with and reflects this moment of ours, when it becomes clear that humans can no longer pretend (1) that instrumental uses of nature in the name of progress do not have consequences, and (2) that the borders humans have effected against nonhuman beings and things hold true. I use three and not one novel alone because, in view of the challenges of the Anthropocene, which include climate change, the acidification of the oceans, biodiversity loss, and so on, each work tackles different ways of dealing with similar challenges, so the novels can, together, collaborate with thinking the aforementioned issues. To develop the analysis, I use Le Guin's "Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" and "nonhuman turn" theories that take into account our transition from the Holocene Epoch into the Anthropocene, the age of the world marked by humans. I read Le Guin's novels especially against theories developed by Donna J. Haraway, Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Greta Gaard. The planets where the three novels are set are marked by extremes: severe and continuous winters, barren lands, water shortage, and the blinding abundance of trees are some of the elements characters have to deal with. The protagonists often need to resist change, fight off oppressors, and engage in human and nonhuman collaborations for both realms to thrive. Informed by a nonhuman, ecofeminist perspective, I investigate how these planets' inhabitants develop and engage in ethics that may be useful for us, in the Anthropocene, to both exist as a species and coexist with nonhuman bodies here on Earth.

Keywords: Ursula K Le Guin. Speculative Fiction. Anthropocene.

SUMMARY

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Hypotheses and Objectives

To read a good novel well is to follow it, to act it, to feel it, to become it—everything short of writing it, in fact. Reading is a collaboration, an act of participation. No wonder not everybody is up to it.
Ursula K. Le Guin – The Wild Girls

Ever since scientists Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer suggested the term "Anthropocene" in 2000 to describe the effects of human activities on the Earth's surfaces, it was soon adopted by scientists and taken seriously by the Stratigraphy Commission of the Geological Society of London. The Anthropocene Working Group of the Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy[1] has, in its turn, recommended to the International Chronostratigraphic Chart turning the working term into a geologic Epoch (Zalasiewicz, J. et al, 2015). In geological terms, the nomenclature aims at describing the new geological Epoch that follows the Holocene in the Geologic Time Scale, representing a boundary between two Epochs. In stratigraphy, boundaries have to be marked by a "golden spike," an event or series of events that leave marks on the Earth's strata, that is, on the rocks. The "anthropos" prefix conveys the notion that changes resulting from human actions on this world are so immense and ubiquitous that we are now behaving as geological forces, such as large meteors, volcanoes, and earthquakes. In the Humanities, the term has been widely discussed and troubled and is usually linked to ponderings on the effects of human exploitations of the Earth and human exceptionalism, as well as the ethics that this ranking of humans, animals, and things has resulted in.

Human exceptionalism, strictly speaking, might have led us into this new Epoch. Donna J. Haraway defines this exceptionalism as "the premise that humanity alone is not a spatial and temporal web of interspecies dependencies" (2008, p. 11). The effects of exceptionalism are the instrumental use of nonhumans (animals and things; "everything" – organic and inorganic matter) and the forging of a border that separates humans from other beings and things in their surroundings, an attitude that is justified with a discourse of progress on

[1] A component body of the International Commission on Stratigraphy, Zalasiewicz, J. et al explain.

the part of humans, who occupy the top of the imagined hierarchic scale of beings and things that live on this Earth. This reasoning is, Humanities scholars argue, behind the actions that have led us into the Anthropocene, and that is what I intend to demonstrate in the following pages by way of analyzing three literary works by author Ursula K. Le Guin.

The nomenclature "Anthropocene," however, has been greatly challenged. In a recent book alone, *Anthropocene Feminism*, published in 2017, most articles explore the word, especially the ones by Rosi Braidotti and Stacy Alaimo. The latter starts her piece with the question "Who is the 'anthro' of the 'Anthropocene'?" pondering on who could inhabit such a name? (Kindle Edition), and suggesting that we have become too big to see clearly our impact. We have, she argues, assumed a "sanitized distance" from the problem: so one must trade the telescope, in order to stop seeing the world as a whole, and start using the microscope in order to work with situated knowledges (a term articulated by Donna Haraway) that allow us to feel more empowered to act and promote some sort of effect toward solving the problem. Donna Haraway herself has also been challenging the term ever since it was first used, even suggesting alternative ones, such as Capitalocene and Cthulucene. Val Plumwood, in 1993, was also confronting the notion of the "human" in "anthropocentrism" and its effects on nature, as were Haraway, Anzaldúa, and so many others. Although the discussion is not new, it has gained such momentum with the urgency of our ecological crisis that it becomes paramount to tackle the Anthropocene in its many unfoldings: as a geological category, as a cultural term, as material for thinking our relationship with nature.

In this dissertation I analyze moments from three literary works by Le Guin, namely *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), *The Word for World is Forest* (1974), and *The Dispossessed* (1976), focusing on issues of progress, borders, and the effects that an environmental awareness might have in promoting a different, less predatory way of relating to nature, here understood as both nonhuman and human. By environmental awareness I mean two things. First, the suggestion that awe, and hence awareness, may lead to humility on our part (Terry Gifford, 2014). Second, that, as Greta Gaard (1993) argues, an ecofeminist conception of the environment must always be permeated by the realization that "no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature" (p.1). In other words, when I invoke the idea of environmental awareness, I am always bearing in mind that it is a call to humility, an

attempt to remove the human from the pedestal of *his* making; and a feminist understanding that the same rationale that oppresses nature is applied to the oppression of minorities based on species, race, class, gender and physical and mental abilities. In fact, Val Plumwood (2003, first published in 1993), one of the main articulators of ecological feminisms as theoretical tools, argues that nature must be added to the classic trio of feminist categories of analysis, politics, and action, namely gender, race, and class, claiming that a better understanding of the axis of oppression is possible once nature, the "missing piece," is added to the framework (2).

Le Guin is most commonly associated with the genres of Science Fiction and Fantasy, "boxes" she often refutes for their failure to account for the complexity of her work. I intend, however, to read these three novels (one of them is in fact a novella) focusing more on their environmental aspects, and the environmental issues they advance, than on what makes them Science Fiction (henceforth SF) or Fantasy. In fact, Patrick D. Murphy (2009) shows that connections can be drawn between SF and environmentalism since the former's infancy, as environmental conscience is already found in works by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mary B. Shelly, and Jules Verne, among others. Murphy puts forth that common to and frequent in both genres are the questions "what is nature? what is a human being" (373), and adds that environmentalism was and is, in fact, a method found by SF writers to address the ethical issues that arise from these questions. I believe I will be able to demonstrate in the pages that follow that not only does Le Guin address these questions in the novels (henceforth *The Left Hand*, *Forest*, which is the novella; and *The Dispossessed*), but she also extrapolates them by troubling what is nature, human, and nonhuman in settings where environmental issues are prominent. In carrying out an analysis of passages from the novels with such a focus, I expect to identify how they can contribute to the debate of the Anthropocene, climate change and environmental awareness within literary studies more specifically, and more broadly within the humanities. In what regards SF, I actually embrace Donna J. Haraway's (2016) argument that the letters stand for many things at once, namely speculative fiction, speculative feminism, science fact, string figures, and speculative fabulations, among other things. For Haraway, we either think in entanglements or we do not think at all, as there is no way to account for the world in the exceptionalism rationale anymore. She considers Le Guin to be a SF writer and thinker, so whenever I use SF I mean it in Haraway's terms.

In what concerns theory, this study is especially informed by those that respond to environmental concerns in literature and in the humanities, including those that take into account our transition from the Holocene epoch into the Anthropocene. I briefly address Terry Gifford's discussions on the Pastoral tradition because of the questions he proposes for the analysis of works that attempt to challenge the human/nature divide. I make use of literary authors other than Le Guin, such as Gary Snyder and Thomas King, to guide my reasoning about the nature and culture, human and nonhuman dichotomies. These authors are regarded as either nature or Native American writers, and their environmental awareness is similar, I would argue, to Le Guin's, the difference being that the latter uses imagined worlds to shed light ultimately on our world's environmental and ethical problems. On this note, one should add that the Anthropocene's most infamous offspring is climate change, whose effects for human and nonhuman entities call for a more ethical relationship between the two. The connection I make among Le Guin's novels, environmental and nonhuman theories, and the Anthropocene is that the planets in her three aforementioned works are marked by extremes: severe winter, barren lands, water shortage, and the blinding abundance of trees are some of the elements her characters have to deal with. These planets' inhabitants thus need to be resourceful in order to both exist as a species and coexist with nonhuman bodies and things that do not always enhance human capacities, and which are not, on their turn, necessarily enhanced by human interventions. In other words, they have to simply find a way of coexisting with nonhumans in a very mindful way, with an acute awareness of their surroundings. Having this in mind, the argument I make is that Le Guin's otherworldly literature resonates with and reflects this moment of ours, the Anthropocene. In order to pursue this argument, I will look at specific passages in the three narratives where issues of progress hinder human and nonhuman interactions, and where the notion of borders interfere both in the cooperation among humans and between humans and nonhumans. Central to these concerns are the nature/culture and the human/nonhuman dichotomies, as well as other dichotomies that spring from these two, since they represent the reasoning behind the instrumental use of nature and nonhumans bodies, paramount concerns for environmental literature.

I divide this dissertation in five chapters. In the current chapter, aside from expounding my hypothesis and objectives, I also provide a brief summary of the novels and tackle the notion of ethics. In the second chapter, I explore more deeply what the Anthropocene is and

what the novels offer in terms of questions when confronted with the issues that are raised in this new epoch. In the third chapter, I bring forth Le Guin's "Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" as an alternative to the ways we have been telling and living stories about ourselves. In the fourth chapter, I focus on issues of progress and how Le Guin's stories offer an alternative to this course we as a society are trailing. In the fifth and last chapter, I analyze "borders" in different, and yet similar, senses, to identify how Le Guin troubles binary thinking.

The general hypothesis of this work is that exploring topics like storytelling, progress, and borders in Le Guin's work may contribute to the process of envisioning more ethical relationships for the Anthropocene, along with their implications for current and future human and nonhuman lives on Earth. My argument is that literature, in this case SF literature with environmental overtones, allows for speculative thinking that may enhance the necessary task of articulating both theoretical and ethical proposals for human and nonhuman lives to remain possible on this Earth. Despite the apparently pretentious goals, this investigation does not aim to have a prescriptive value, but to develop a speculative thinking that aims at contributing to the debates on literature and environmental issues.

The specific hypothesis of this study entails the argument that Le Guin's writings here analyzed resonate with our concerns about the Anthropocene. The theoretical debates that I will bring to the discussion will ultimately shed light not only on the human/nonhuman dichotomy, but also on the nature/culture divide, which are, according to Greta Gaard, Susan Hekman, Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, Timothy Clark, and many others, at the root of innumerous oppressions of both human and nonhuman bodies[2], besides being largely responsible for the environmental chaos we currently find ourselves in. Considering that the presents and futures of an uncountable number of species, bodies, and things on Earth have been endangered and/or altered by human actions, literary works that have as setting planets whose conditions remind us of our own may aid in identifying and creating ways of living that are less

[2] Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, in the introduction to *Material Feminisms* (2008), shed light on the fact that Postmodern feminists "have argued that the male/female dichotomy informs all the dichotomies that ground Western thought" (2), but I tend to align with material and ecocritic feminists, like Greta Gaard (1993), who claims that "the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature" (1).

oppressive, predatory, and more ethical towards humans and nonhumans. Adding to this reasoning, one could argue that the genre of Speculative and SF Fiction (henceforth SF to address both, as the two genres often intertwine in the works of Le Guin) offers an provocative case for exploring alternative scenarios and solutions to the problems at hand. I do not, however, wish to address the books as if they were utopian and/or dystopian blueprints, but as spaces where ideas are developed. These ideas, I intend to show, may collaborate to the process of reassessing humans' relationship to the nonhuman world. The SF writer, in having the possibility of dealing with specific issues in a number of ways that are not restricted to the working rationale of our present reality, can "play"[3] with scenarios that could, at some point, be implemented on this Earth. In other words, the SF writer can explore alternative ways of living and dying on this Earth by using other planets as testing grounds.

The nature/culture divide that was a hallmark of René Descartes's philosophy in the 17th century and that gained momentum in the following centuries, feeding human hubris in explorations and oppressions of lives and natural resources, has been put greatly under pressure and exposed as a "convenient" articulation by many branches of critical theory. Gary Snyder (1990) speaks of the moment when Descartes profoundly rejects the organic world as a "fork in the road," and adds Newton and Hobbes to the list of thinkers that, in his words, substituted "a reproductive universe [with] a model of sterile mechanism and an economy of 'production'" (Kindle edition). Timothy Clark (2014) adds to the discussion, showing that Hobbes's arguments were for overriding the chaotic "state of nature." (76) The fork that Snyder spots in the road is what scholars see as the origin of one of the most violent dichotomies: the culture and nature one. All that is organic and nonhuman, as well as inorganic, becomes at this moment susceptible to the instrumental use by the hands of humans. In truth, this issue has been long explored and harshly criticized by philosophers and scholars such as Lucretius (who precedes Descartes), Spinoza, Alexander Von

[3] I use the word "play" in the same sense as Le Guin does in *The Dispossessed*, where "work" and "play" are the same word in Pravic (the language that is invented in order to reflect the new anarchist social order of the revolutionary people of Anarres). In having *work* and *play* mean the same thing, one may understand that Le Guin is troubling the capitalist notion of the word "work". For Lewis Call (2007), the point is straightforward: "on Anarres, meaningful, authentic, creative work is indistinguishable from play." (100)

Humboldt, and by more recent nature writers, such as Annie Dillard, Henry David Thoreau, Gary Snider, Elizabeth C. Wright, Val Plumwood, and Helen MacDonald, among many others. Within this debate, I intend to pay special attention to the works of new material feminists (Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti), ecofeminists (Greta Gaard, Stacy Alaimo, Serenella Iovino), and vital materialists (Jane Bennett). Academics, intellectuals, and activists articulating and promoting militancy under these rubrics are, in my view, some the most fascinating groups among those who have been working with the "nonhuman turn" and posthuman theories.

Myra J. Hird and Celia Roberts (2011), in pondering on the positive and negative outcomes of feeding what seems like yet another dichotomy, the human/nonhuman one, put forth the following argument:

> [O]n one hand, the nonhuman seems an obvious referent. The majority of the Earth's living inhabitants are nonhuman, and nonhuman characterizes the deep nonliving recesses of the Earth, the biosphere and vast expense. […] So a clear benefit of delineating a nonhuman is acknowledging humans are not the only, or even most important, living organisms on the planet we inhabit. (111)

The argument Hird and Roberts make for delineating a nonhuman is not to employ the term in the hierarchical sense, having the human as the superior element and the nonhuman as the oppressed one (an arrangement that is already in place), but rather to bring the human back to the horizontal level from which "He" should never have departed in the first place (although "he" often does to justify the oppression of both human and nonhuman bodies). One could add that "He" never did, in fact, leave the horizontal ground, but articulated and functioned within a discourse that produce/d/s effects that reflect this hierarchic model. Here, Karen Barad's (2003) articulations of an agential realist ontology and on the concept of intra-action become useful. This author rejects the idea that bodies and things precede their relations, arguing that there is no inter-action between and among bodies, but intra-action. Humans and nonhumans, she argues, become *in* entanglements, as there is no convenient line that separates them in the processes of becoming, only cuts whereby one enacts a border that allows one to effect an objectivity that is ontologically impossible. This objective separation between observer and observed, therefore, is contingent, temporary, and produces effects around its "borders," for in delineating the characteristics of a

thing or a body, much is left out. Barad starts her argument by saying that "language has been granted too much power" (801), so that from the start she questions the importance placed on discourse and its "power" to represent and construct matter, as if matter were a passive object, "waiting" for inscription (how could passive matter wait, anyway?).

Barad shows the limits of social constructivism and representationalism to conduct the reader into a more compelling system of representation, one where the "knower" is neither separated from the "object" nor is s/he able to fully represent the latter's "reality," only when markedly so and in what she calls a "cut," where the "knower" agentially separates herself from the object, using what she terms "apparatuses" to describe a given phenomenon that is by no way universal, but a specific intra-action between subject and object in a determined setting and moment. The only possible separation between matter and "knower" is that of "exteriority within phenomena," a term she uses to explain the myth of exteriority that is marked by the "agential cut." Phenomena, Barad explains, involves positions and momentums. Positions only have meaning when there are apparatuses, when rigid, fixed apparatuses are used. A measurement (one could call it a description), then, can only be made with the knowledge that *inside* the phenomena (which is the smallest epistemological unit, instead of the observer or the observed) the observer enacts an exteriority that will allow him/her scientific objectivity. The exteriority, the observer knows, is always within phenomena. When Western tradition, believing in objectivity, divides the world into knowing subjects and passive matter, it "cheat[s] matter out of the fullness of its capacity" (810). Barad, instead of working with representation and social constructivism, which are based on the idea of "reflection," as in what is taken to be a reflection in a mirror is the truth, prefers the notion of "diffraction", in which many representations (always partial, always a cut) are possible at once, depending on the phenomena and the apparatuses that are made available both for matter and "knower."

Barad's argument is both performative and posthuman. It is posthuman in the sense that she shows that matter is not passive, it has agency; and discourse alone cannot describe or shape it. Although discourse does produce effects, these effects alone do not "materialize matter," as matter meets discourse halfway to "make itself matter." In fact, in working with quantum theory, the argument is also that in there being no separation between matter and knower, representation can only

be achieved *together*, that is, exteriority is already *exteriority within*. In her words, she presents a

> relational ontology that rejects the metaphysics of relata, of 'words' and 'things.' On an agential realist account, it is once again possible to acknowledge nature, the body, and materiality in the fullness of their becoming without resorting to the optics of transparency or opacity, the geometries of absolute exteriority or interiority, and the theoretization of the human as either pure cause or pure effect while at the same time remaining resolutely accountable for the role 'we' play in the intertwined practices of knowing and becoming. (812)

It is in this sense, in the role both matter and human play in the processes of knowing and becoming, that Barad's theory is also performative. She uses Judith Butler's articulation of performativity to discuss the enactment of borders in the exclusions one makes in the use of given apparatuses to perform meaning. Apparatuses are "open-ended" practices as well as phenomena. She makes an analogy with a lab in saying that scientists do not have a space full of apparatuses that are made for specific purposes: apparatuses are tested, made-in-the-moment, they are interchangeable, they are not static, but are "*dynamic (re)configurings of the world, specific agential practices/intra-actions/performances through which specific exclusionary boundaries are enacted"* (816, emphasis in the original). Meanings or representations in the agential realist articulation are boundaries enacted by "cuts," and they are always subjected to changes given the apparatus that is used. Boundaries, Barad shows, "do not sit still" (817). According to her, in enacting borders we need to be accountable for what is left out. The objectivity that is made possible in the "exteriority within" frame of theorization means, for Barad, taking responsibility for the marks that will be left on bodies. She explains that agential cuts produce the effect of separating component parts of phenomena, "one of which ('the cause') expresses itself in effecting and marking the other ('the effect')" (824). This is what she calls a "measurement," which can be read as "part of the universe making itself intelligible to another part in its ongoing differentiating intelligibility and materialization" (824), but these cuts produce borders. In other words, essential to our time is the work of making evident the borders that we have been effecting so far, as they have done so much of the task of allowing for violent hierarchies to both be constructed and kept in place. I want to argue that

this is the work that some of the characters in the novels by Le Guin do. Barad contends that acting within these limitations (knowing that all we describe will never account for everything that is at stake), and knowing and acknowledging the limitations of representationalism is paramount because doing so is to "intervene in the world's becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering" (287).

While Barad's point of departure is quantum physics, Greta Gaard's (2014) is the Buddhist notion of "dependent origination". Gaard puts forth that in new materialisms "the 'entanglement' of living and nonliving matters, or of bodily natures, may find its precedent and complement in Buddhism's concept of dependent origination, the understanding that no one thing exists apart from one another" (292). Gaard's process of thinking upon entanglements is compelling because, differently from Barad, her outset is values, Buddhist values, at the same time that she uses both Barad and Stacy Alaimo, two material feminist theorists, to build up her argument:

> Dependent origination illuminates ecosystem relationships as well as operations of global capitalism and the emptiness of the separate self. Because 'values are integral to the nature of knowing and being' (Barad, Meeting 37), detrimental practices of heteropatriarchy and global capitalism alike are inseparable from the ethical platform and the way we know the world, and thus from deteriorating ecocultural and ecosystem relations. Seen this way, the concept of dependent origination sheds more light on the 'mutually constitutive actions of material reality'. (292-293)

Buddhist ethics, in this sense, orient actions and the ways in which one interacts with the world. We bear in mind that what underlines human and nonhuman relations is really intra-actions, entanglements, and the inseparability of ourselves from cultural, economic and material contexts in which we (along with human and nonhuman bodies and things) are immersed. In other words, although one can consciously make an agential cut, it is impossible to shed one's values at will. Ironically, one of the "noble truths" of Buddhism is that the origin of suffering comes from the illusion that one is a separate entity. Enacting a cut, though it may be necessary in order to effect an objectivity we have come to rely on for reasoning, is not only what causes us suffering, it is also what allows us to make others (human and nonhuman beings) suffer.

Having the previous arguments in mind, I intend to pay special attention to the entanglements of human and nonhuman bodies in the narratives. I will focus on the moments that explore ecological and environmental awareness in a way that sheds light onto issues of progress and borders, bearing in mind that our current understanding of progress could only come about by our believing in the borders we have had to create between humans and nonhumans (as well as humans and humans). The power that these borders now have depend on our constant reiteration of their existence, and in doing so the myth of hierarchy thrives, with humans enjoying a violent ride on the top of the pyramid. I believe that Le Guin's way of writing shows the thinness of these borders and the danger of the narratives of progress.

To sum up, my objective is to contribute to the debates on the Anthropocene in the Humanities by exploring how Le Guin's characters deal with and become with matters, bodies, and planets that closely resemble our own. Reading her novels against the grain of our ongoing history is fruitful, I argue, because her voice has a revolutionary quality in that it resonates with feminist, ecocritical, agential realist, and nonhuman theories, and are thought-experiments that can be used as documents to explore alternatives to our current ways of living and dying on this Earth.

This study is transdisciplinary, as it resorts to different disciplines to seek ground for establishing what the Anthropocene is, its relation to literature and to the humanities. The first phase of the research encompassed a thorough selection of texts that contemplate the genre of SF, books and articles on the linguistic turn, new materialisms, feminist materialisms, material ecocriticism, environmental literary theory, and the nonhuman turn, as well as critical and theoretical pieces on the Anthropocene and its growing impacts on and implications for the Humanities.

The literary works by Ursula K. Le Guin, namely *The Left Hand* (1969), *Forest* (1974), and *The Dispossessed* (1976), were selected on the basis of the similarities of the planets of these narratives with our own planet and the ways in which characters interact with nonhuman bodies in strenuous conditions. They were also selected because, despite the resemblances between our planet and that of each narrative, the genre of SF allows for thought experiments to extrapolate the known reality into narratives that try out alternative solutions to earthly issues and events.

The first stage of this study also entailed finding a theoretical standpoint from which to depart in the task of reading the primary

sources of this study in a critical fashion. The nonhuman turn -- which encompasses a myriad of theoretical approaches that problematize the nature/culture and human/nonhuman dichotomies, and the social constructionist views of the world -- will serve as an organizing rubric for the chosen theoretical approaches of this work.

The second stage of the investigation entailed putting down the findings, setting the theory against the working hypothesis and the literary texts, close reading those sections that illustrate the nature/culture and nonhuman/nonhuman dichotomies in light of progress and border issues. I have also attempted to verify whether, in the novels, there is an ethics that permeates the human and nonhuman encounters.

1.2 Le Guin, the Corpus, the Chosen Novels, and the Questions

Ursula K. Le Guin was an American writer whose works range from children's stories to science fiction, to speculative fiction, to fantasy, to theory, to blogging. She wrote in prose and poetry and produced many screenplays, twenty-two novels, seven books of poetry, essays, short stories, and has translated four books[4]. She was the recipient of a number of important literary awards[5] and some of her books have been kept continuously in print for over forty years, such as those belonging to the *Earthsea Cycle*. My interest in this study is to revisit three of her literary works produced in the late 1960s and in the 1970s, and analyze them in light of the debates concerning the Anthropocene.

The corpus of this work comprises *The Left Hand*, first published in 1969; *The Dispossessed*, first published in 1974; and *Forest*, first published in 1976. I have chosen these three novels because Le Guin herself groups them together as belonging to the Ekumen

[4] Information provided in the author's official website: http://www.ursulakleguin.com/BiographicalSketch.html

[5] "Three of Le Guin's books have been finalists for the American Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize, and among the many honors her writing has received are a National Book Award, five Hugo Awards, five Nebula Awards, SFWA's Grand Master, the Kafka Award, a Pushcart Prize, the Howard Vursell Award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the L.A. Times Robert Kirsch Award, the PEN/Malamud Award, the Margaret A. Edwards Award, etc."

Cycle, a speculative fictional world where there is a consortium of worlds that maintain diplomatic relations and are led by the peaceful people of Hain[6]. In fact, Le Guin only endorses speculations and categorizations made by fans and critics, as she herself did not intentionally write these books with the aim of producing a series, as she explains in her website[7]. They do, however, share common elements and can be read in any given sequence. One common element among the three books, aside from the world consortium, is the use and invention of a device called "ansible", which allows for inhabitants of distant worlds to communicate instantaneously, overcoming what could be called the "barrier" of space and time. The ansible is already present in *The Left Hand* (1969), but it is invented by Shevek, a physicist, in *The Dispossessed*, published five years later, in 1974. In *Forest*, the ansible is one of the elements that allows for aggressive Terran practices in a world called Forest to come to a halt.

There are other elements shared by these three novels that are of great interest for this study. First of all, the planets that are contemplated in the stories either lack resources or their inhabitants have to deal with extreme weather and environmental conditions. Planet Gethen, in *The Left Hand*, for instance, is called by the Ekumen "Planet Winter". From afar, the characteristics that stand out the most when the planet is being considered for the world consortium are the ice, the snow, and the cold weather. Winter also plays a major part and produces effects in the narrative, adding resistance and challenge to the trekking course of the main characters, which echoes the challenges they face in their relationship. On planet Anarres, in *The Dispossessed*, dust and draughts severely affect the lives of the people who inhabit its spaces. In *Forest*, on Planet Forest, also called New Tahiti by the Terran colonizers, who are logging the wood from this planet in order to ship it back to Terra, nature's abundance is contrasted to Terra's absolute lack of trees. The effects of the abundance and lack of resources and of the severity of weather conditions are found in all three narratives, and this agency of the planets and the bodies, human and nonhuman inhabiting them

[6] The people of Hain have not always been peaceful, though. The Hainish have a violent colonial past that is mentioned in passing by a character in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and reiterated by Le Guin in a short essay published in a volume where critical essays on *The Dispossessed* are collected. Le Guin (2005) puts forth that Hainish history is terrible, "like all human histories" (307).

[7] On Le Guin's website, she explained this matter on the Frequently Asked Questions page.

interests me in the sense that a relation can be made to what we, "Terrans", experience on our own Earth with climate change and its implications for the future.

A second element present in all three novels concerns questions of what it means to be human or nonhuman. In *The Left Hand*, the androgynous people of Gethen's "human-ness" are often questioned by Ai, one of the narrators. In *Forest*, the Athshean population is deemed "humanoids" (oppressive humans call them Creechies), in a derogatory sense, which is one of the arguments for their enslavement by the Terran "yumens". In *The Dispossessed*, Shevek, when traveling from his anarchist planet Anarres to the capitalist planet of Urras, from where his ancestors came, is often described as alien.

Human and nonhuman boundary issues surface in Le Guin's work blurring, or at least complicating, what can be understood as human/humane/nonhuman/nonhumane, as concepts of humanity and inhumanity have been frequently articulated in Western cultures with an imperial agenda in mind. Rosi Braidotti, for instance, suggests an anti-humanist approach to deal with the posthuman proposal she endorses in her book *The Posthuman* (2013). Donna Haraway (2013a), on the other hand, proposes an interspecies approach to thinking life, what it means to be human/nonhuman and the ways in which these two intra-act. Anna Tsing, in *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), contends that "[h]umans cannot survive by stomping all the others" (vii), and suggests that we should learn to live with the awareness of our condition of "precarity," which she explains to be "life without the promise of stability" (2). This lack of stability includes the end of the once stable notion of a human separated from the nonhuman and from nature. This does not hold true anymore, she posits, and we must come to terms with the fact that we must now coexist with others (human and nonhuman) in a context of clear-to-see environmental disturbance. Similarly, Jane Bennett's defense of a "vibrant matter" approach to understanding the world offers a scenario where both humans and nonhumans have agency and produce effects/affects, removing the human from the agential pedestal. But what connects the three works is, as I intend to show in the following chapters, the way they challenge narratives that "thrive on the spear," as will become clear in the third chapter, as well as notions of progress and the troubling of borders.

Developing on the notion of agency and who/what has it, Bennett (2012) brings forward the concept of "thing-power." Drawing

on Spinoza's "*conatus*,"[8] she wants to reclaim the vitality of things, for much has been said on the agency and vitality of humans to the detriment of things. By "vitality," Bennett means the ability of *things* to get in the way of humans, "block [their] will and designs", resist modification and assimilation, and to "act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (viii). Bennett explains that she attends "to the *it* as actant" (p.3, my emphasis), and tries to:

> […] name the moment of independence (from subjectivity) possessed by things, a moment that must be there, since things do in fact affect other bodies, enhancing or weakening their power. I will shift from the language of epistemology to that of ontology, from a focus on an elusive recalcitrance hovering between immanence and transcendence (the absolute) to an active, Earthy, not-quite-human capaciousness (vibrant matter). I will try to give voice to a vitality intrinsic to materiality, in the process absolving matter from its long history of attachment to automatism or mechanism. (Bennett, 3)

Bennet attempts to undo what Descartes achieved. Implicit in her theoretical setup is the notion of alliance, and though the alliances among human and nonhuman (as well as nonhuman and nonhuman and human and human) may or may not be intentional, they produce effects that can be productive, poisonous, both these things at once for one body or the other, and neutral. This perspective interests me greatly because not only are Le Guin's works an illustration of humans in entanglements with thing-powers, but the world in which we live is entirely permeated by these encounters (the act of writing this alone is made up of me and a huge range of nonhuman bodies – the computer, the books, the room, the invisible waves of the internet's wi-fi, and so on). This process of forming temporary alliances among human and nonhuman bodies is, therefore, fundamental to this dissertation. For Anna Tsing (2015), in a different and yet related perspective, indeterminacy is "the central feature of the assemblages [she follows]" (43), illustrating the idea that alliances are always contaminated in the sense that every "item" in an assemblage is working both for and against that particular configuration. A given body's drive (similar to Bennett's

[8] *Conatus* is a central notion in Spinozist philosophy. Bennett explains it as the will all entities have (organic and inorganic ones) to persist on being.

use of Spinoza's conatus) to maintain its own characteristics is constantly contaminated by all other bodies it is in relation with.

Taking up once again the troubling distinction between human and nonhuman, there is also the issue of gender, which is complicated by the fact that, as Judith Butler puts it, "a normative conception of gender can undo one's personhood" (Butler, 2004, p. 1), that is, violence can ensue towards nonconforming bodies under a given normative notion of gender. One can add to this concept the idea that the gendering of certain nonhuman bodies and things can also undo a body's or a thing's "thing-ness", and the effect that is produced almost always results in the oppression and unregulated use of the gendered "thing" at hand. In *The Left Hand*, Le Guin creates a planet where its inhabitants are ambisexual and who *gender* (as a verb) into either male or female when they enter into "kemmer", what she terms in an interview as "heat"[9]. Gethenians, Le Guin states, are a "thought experiment," as she wanted to see if by removing a person's gender they would still be human. The simple answer is yes, but she further troubles the question of what it means to be human, nonhuman, and to have agency not only on planet Gethen but also on planets Anarres, Urras, and Forest. The issue of gender in *The Left Hand*, the strangeness of Shevek, the main character in *The Dispossessed*, and the human-non-human boundary confusions regarding the Athshean species in *Forest*, which ultimately comes in "handy" to justify slavery and rapes, puts in check commonly-held notions of "nature", "natural", "human", and "non-human". Not surprisingly, nature is gendered in *Forest* and in *The Dispossessed*. When Captain Davidson, the voice of patriarchy (he is one of the officials responsible for overseeing the logging process that will take timber back to Terra), manifests his views on nature, he almost always relates it to women and expresses a feeling that Thomas Hobbes explored in the seventeenth century (and that persists in many worldviews), "that political institutions need to exist to override and neutralize the brutal, chaotic condition of the 'state of nature'" (Timothy Clark, p. 76, 2014). Captain Davidson offers a long-prevailing view of nature when the narrator discloses his thoughts. In disagreeing with conservation methods of logging that were to be obeyed on Planet Forest, the narrator explains:

[9] Interview given by Le Guin to Francesca Rheannon, host of the radio-internet show "Writer's Voice".

> [Davidson] still couldn't see why a soybean farm needed to waste a lot of space on trees if the land was managed really scientifically. It wasn't like that in Ohio; if you wanted corn you grew corn, and no space wasted on trees and stuff. But then Earth was a tamed planet and New Tahiti wasn't. That's what he was here for: to tame it. (2)

This perspective is offered immediately after Captain Davidson rejoices in the fact that recently arrived from Terra is a "new shipload of women" (1), some for "breeding", in a clear reference to husbandry practices, and others for "recreation". Women and nature are conflated in *Forest* in a way that can be easily related to current practices of oppression, violence and exploration of both human and nonhuman bodies in urban and rural settings. Le Guin shows, as I intend to explore in the analysis, the dire consequences of engaging in such practices. In *The Dispossessed*, it is in the capitalist planet of Urras that nature is conflated with women, in a taken-for-granted abundance of nature that those in the anarchist planet of Anarres have never experienced.

The process of "gendering" in *The Left Hand*, Le Guin explains in an interview conceded to the Paris Literary Review (2013), was her "ignorant approach to feminism" in that she knew only enough "to realize that gender itself was coming into question". Le Guin clarifies her point by explaining that at the time the book was first published, there was yet no "language", no terminology that one could use to discuss gender issues and say: "gender is a social construction". That is something that we now have, and owe a great deal to Monique Wittig and to Judith Butler's investments in Gender theory, but in 1969 the discussion was novel, and one way to talk about it was to take a leap into "thought experiments" that would allow one to explore what an androgynous world would look like. Le Guin does revise her decision to use male protagonists in most books of the time, and in revisiting, in 1987, an article printed in 1976 entitled "Is Gender Necessary? Redux" she acknowledges the fact that she does not "go all the way" and uses the pronoun "he" to refer to Gethenians. She acquiesces that her male readership is thus allowed safe trip to the androgynous world and back into patriarchy while women expected, and deserved, more from her. Le Guin, however, also claims that it is probably nonsensical to excessively revise old texts (she is speaking of the 11 years that have gone by since the publication of the original piece, not the novel), as it should be a fact that minds change and that she would not necessarily have written the novel(s) in the same way had she had a different mind then. Her mind is

not like that of a clam that does not open; it kept on changing and her more recent books are proof of that[10]. That is why I will not delve into the issue of why all the protagonists of the novels are male (or are addressed as "he", as is the case with Estraven): I take the issue to be evidence of the time when the novels were written, and they are revolutionary for the genre Le Guin is usually "boxed" in.

Although gender plays a major role in *The Left Hand* and in the other two novels, in the *The Left Hand* Winter, the season, also has a prominent role in the narrative, as forests have in *Forest* and the scarcity of resources has in *The Dispossessed*. The character Ong Tot Oppong, in a report submitted to the Ekumen, where she puts forth most of the information she could gather on "The Question of Sex" (the actual name of the chapter) when she is sent to the planet to gauge its potential for being part of the consortium of worlds, calls attention to the relevance of Winter in shaping Gethenians' lives. "[T]he dominant factor in Gethenian life", she infers, "is not sex or any other human thing: it is their environment, their cold world. Here man has a crueler enemy than himself" (96). In the analysis, my focus will be on the moments when one learns of the impacts of nonhuman things and bodies on humans and vice versa – I will not attempt to address the gendering of human and nonhuman bodies as "excuses" for oppression, although that would be an interesting investigation. Having this in mind, here are the questions that, according to Le Guin, she set out to explore in *The Left Hand of Darkness*: "[w]hat does it mean to be a woman, or a man, male or female? And what if you weren't?" (no page). I would like to unfold these into even more queries, now that we have entered the Anthropocene.

The questions I will address in the next chapters are the following: 1) what is the Anthropocene and how does it impact the Humanities? 2) How do Le Guin's novels shed light on and resonate with issues that are ultimately raised in the Anthropocene? 3) How do notions of progress affect the way we interact with the world around us and what are the alternatives that can be teased out from Le Guin's novels? 4) And, finally, what proposals can be found in the three novels in what concerns disrupting the idea of a separation, a border, between

[10] Here I cite only a few examples: *The Wild Girls* (2002), for instance has two women as protagonists. In *Lavinia* (2008), Le Guin gives voice to a minor character from Vigil's Aeneid. In *Always Coming Home* (1985), Stone Telling and Pandora lead us into the world of the Kesh people. Many of Le Guin's short stories also have women as protagonists.

humans and nonhuman things (nature/culture)? 5) What happens to these categories once one acquires an environmental awareness? 6) What kind of agency do humans and things have once this awareness gains momentum in the novels, and can that be transferred into a mentality one can carry close to oneself, as a bag of resources, in order to tackle the challenges of the Anthropocene on a daily basis? 7) In other words, can literature help? If not to save the world, as it will most certainly not, at least to add more thought to a way of relating to humans and nonhumans in a more sustainable, ethical fashion, that is, allowing readers to peer into modes of being that challenge the destructive narratives of progress and the violent forging of borders.

1.3 A Brief Summary of the Novels: Otherworldly Hainish Cycle

I will now offer a brief summary of each of the three novels, starting with *The Left Hand*. The intention here is not to fully explore the intricacies of each novel, only to offer a panoramic view of the main plot events, and explain how the novels are organized in terms of structure and narration. In *The Left Hand*, the book is organized in chapters that vary in form and point of view. Some chapters are narrated from Genly Ai's point of view either as a personal observation or as an official report, since he is the Terran envoy who is trying to secure Gethen's membership to the Ekumen; others are told from Estraven's point of view (he is the prime minister of one of the planet's countries, Karhide) in the shape of diary entries or first person narration; and some chapters as constructed as if they were transcriptions of myths of origin, folklore, and reports that were recorded and then sent to the members of the Ekumen. The novel, thus, bears the tone of an anthropological document, since many chapters begin with descriptions such as the one on chapter one, which reads: "From the Archives of Hain. Transcript of Ansible Document 01-01101-934-2-Gethen: To the Stabile on Ollul: Report from Genly Ai, First Mobile on Gethen/Winter […]" (1), or the one on chapter 4, which tells a traditional story and is described as "An East Karhidish story, as told in Gorinhering Hearth by Tobord Chorhawa, and recorded by G. A., 93/1492" (43). Many chapters do not offer headings to their contents, and these are the ones where either Genly Ai or Estraven narrate the events that unfold. Ai is sent by the Ekumen to planet Winter to seek this planet's alliance with the

consortium of worlds. The events unfold against the backdrop of the mission that Ai is supposed to carry through.

The Left Hand is a speculative fiction about planet Gethen and its ambisexual inhabitants, humans that "acquire" a sex once a month in a biological process called "kemmer," which not only manifests on the surfaces of bodies but also in the form of desire[11]. Up until that moment of the month, Gethenians hold no characteristics that would define them biologically (an arbitrary parameter used by Earthlings, usually referred to as biological determinism) as either "female" or "male". Gethenians cannot be referred to as "it" either, says Ong Tot Oppong, an incognito investigator who is sent to Gethen before the "First Mobile" Genly Ai, in order to probe whether the planet has potential to enter the consortium of worlds coordinated by the Ekumen. Gethenians, she puts forward, are potentials, they navigate the gender spectrum from aliens' perceptions, and that alone, since for Gethenians there is no binary notion that would violently define themselves as "either/or". Genly Ai's journey into Gethen takes him first to the country of Karhide, then to the country of Orgoreyn, and back to Karhide. When Ai arrives on Gethen, the planet's biggest countries, Karhide and Orgoreyn, are in the middle of a dispute over a strip of land on the border called Sinoth Valley. For the first time in these countries' history, there is the impending risk of war.

In Karhide, Genly Ai trusts that Estraven will be able to moderate a conversation between him and the King Argaven XV, but the latter is utterly threatened by the idea of having his power diminished in the face of a consortium of 83 worlds, which comprises more or less three thousand nations (34). Estraven clarifies on the king's insecurities and on his response to the idea of the Ekumen: "I forgot, being too interested myself, that he's a king, and does not see things rationally, but as a king. All I've told him means to him simply that his power is threatened, his kingdom is a dust note in space, his kingship is a joke to men who rule a hundred worlds" (17). The Ekumen, however, as Ai puts forth, co-ordinates rather than rules over its members. The whole purpose of the Ekumen is to facilitate the communication among

[11] Desire is a relevant factor here. In *The Left Hand*, the notion of desire is not fully explored; it is a fact one learns from Genly Ai and Ong Tot Oppong, but no explicit mention is made to sexuality. In the short story "Coming of Age in Karhide," (2002, first published in 1995), twenty-six years after the publication of the novel, there is explicit mention to the fact that one's gender does not orient desire.

worlds that are many light-years away. The goal is the exchange of ideas, not necessarily the transit of people due to time and distance constraints (although that does happen continuously in the effort to study and seek alliances with other worlds and to intermediate relations, as happens in *The Word for World is Forest*). The Ekumen are certainly not interested in war; as Ai explains to King Argaven, the planets are so far away from one another that wars "are worth no one's trouble, across space" (34). Estraven, in passing along Ai's plans to the king, gains for himself the status of traitor and is banned from Karhide. But aside from attempting to aid the envoy in his mission, Estraven has his own views on the matter of the Sinoth Valley dispute, as he does not believe that the land should be the source of violent conflicts and has been aiding Karhiders who now live in the region back into what has long been part of his country's borders in order to prevent them from losing their lives in forays or getting arrested by the Orgota and taken to prisons, called Farms.

Crucial to the novel is the fact that Gethen is a planet that has not known wars. There are, as Ai puts it, "[q]uarrels, murders, feuds, forays, vendettas, assassinations, tortures and abominations, all these were in their repertory of human accomplishments; but they did not go to war" (48). In the radio announcement that makes public Estraven's banning from Karhide, people are encouraged to seek justice with their own hands, as the announcer declares that "If [Estraven] be not gone out of the Kingdom and all Domains in three days' time, or if in his life he returns into the Kingdom, he shall be put to death by any man without further judgment" (28). It is right after this public proclamation that Ai has his first meeting with the king since his arrival. It does not go well, as Estraven has predicted. The situation serves for the reader to learn more about the Ekumen. The king is granted the chance to assuage some of his own concerns and curiosities about Genly Ai, and begins by asking if all humans from *Terra* as a black as he, to which he answers that "some are blacker" (35). The King is startled by the fact that all known humans outside of Gethen are "permanently in kemmer;" he deems these worlds as "societ[ies] of perverts" (36). Ai has been in Gethen for nearly two years and is still not accustomed to see Gethenians as androgynous, or ambisexual, striving to assign them gender roles that simply do not account for what he sees. On the night before this encounter with the King, Ai has dinner with Estraven and ponders on his own incapacity to see beyond the binary structure of gender, saying that he sees a Gethenian "first as a man, then as a woman, forcing him into those categories so irrelevant to [Estraven's]

nature and so essential to [his] own" (12). The king feels the same estrangement toward Ai and the people he represents, referring to him as a monstrosity (36).

This detour is to highlight two issues that are driving forces in the narrative, namely gender and the conflict over the Sinoth Valley. Gender permeates Ai's and Estraven's relationship throughout the story, but it is ultimately a relationship of understanding other systems of being in the world. Estraven is not only ambisexual, he is also an inhabitant of a world that functions on a starkly different ethics than our own in what concerns relationships with human and nonhuman others. In there being no space for patriarchy in Gethen, humans are not ranked according to their gender, and neither are nonhuman beings or landscapes instrumental to narratives of progress such as those that rule our living here on Earth. The conflict concerning the Sinoth Valley is also central in that it is the event that threatens to disrupt Gethenians' way of living in a radical way, and both Estraven and Ai voice their concerns over the fact that they might witness this world's first war. After Estraven is accused of treason, he leaves Karhide and is given shelter in Orgoreyn. As he is no longer the Prime Minister, King Argaven's cousin Tibe takes his place. Tibe's discourses are full of references to nationalism, patriotism, and other speech markers that alarm both Estraven and Ai because of their potential for preparing the terrain for war. Ai, in realizing that his engagements with the King on the matter of the Ekumen will render no positive results with Tibe who is clearly not on his side, uses this chance to explore the other cities of Karhide and ultimately decides to visit Orgoreyn to probe whether that country will be more open to the Ekumen than Karhide. What unfolds in Orgoreyn is a series of events that show that things are not always what they seem. Genly Ai is taken in by the Orgota government as if he were a truly welcome figure. Ai, who is suspicious of Estraven, as he does not really understand where the latter stands in what concerns the conflicts that have taken place in Karhide since Ai arrived on Gethen, finds it a nuisance to have him around once he starts to explain what the Ekumen are and what are their proposals for the nation and the planet. The transparency Ai seeks is not what he finds in Orgoreyn, and the commensals (the Orgota politicians) end up sending Ai to jail without even divulging the presence of an Ekumen envoy to the people of the nation. Estraven rescues Ai from prison and they begin a long, tiring, and humbling journey from Orgoreyn back into Karhide, where Ai's goals are finally reached and Karhide accepts the invitation to join the Ekumen. It is in this trekking course that both Ai and Estraven truly

confront natural phenomena with awe, which leads them to a state of humility toward the nonhuman. The task and the landscapes are so daunting that they effect a profound change in each one of them and on their relationship.

The novella *The Word for World is Forest* is structured in chapters whose third person biased narrations vary from focusing on Captain Davidson's perspective, the violent Terran military officer who oversees the process of logging wood on some of the regions of Forest (Athshe in the native language and New Tahiti or World 41 in Terran terms); Selver's, the Athshean native who leads the resistance against the "yumens," and Lyubov's perspective. The latter is the Terran anthropologist who studies the Athsheans and their ways. He befriends Selver and it is through him that we have access to some of the most striking contrasts between Terran and Athshean humans. Through Davidson's perspective, Athsheans are, of course, despicable, and through Selver's, Terrans are no better and no worse than anyone, and therein lies a great difference. In Athshe, which is 27 light-years away from Earth, Terrans are logging the wood to take it back to "worn-out Earth" (12), a "desert of cement", as Kees Van Sten, an ecology expert, puts forth (14). Their methods are already revealing themselves ineffective and too close to home. The story begins with reports reaching Cap. Don Davidson that the island where they first logged, now called "Dump Island," "was just rocks and gullies now" (10); it has suffered massive erosion and the crops that were planted there were a complete failure. Added to the aggressive depletion of the planet's natural resources is the enslavement of the native humans by the Terrans, serving them for both work and sex. Selver, whose wife was raped by Davidson, leads a resistance guerrilla against the yumens. Things do not necessarily go "back to normal," since changes that cannot be unchanged took place and transformed the planet and its inhabitants forever. Peace is restored at a great price and the ways Athsheans conduct their lives on Athshe is resumed. The novella is grounded on the notion of resistance, motivated by a perception that enough harm had been done already, and that allowing depredation and slavery to go any further would lead the planet and its inhabitants to a path of no return, mirroring the Earth that has encouraged Terrans on this sort of violent mission in the first place. Athsheans are a people that live in profound harmony with the environment and their presence often goes unnoticed as they seem to blend in with the environment when they are among the trees. Their practices are not predatory, and prior to the arrival of Terrans they had no knowledge of the act of killing each other.

Forest, for Terrans, evokes claustrophobic feelings. It is composed primarily of dense forests and the seas. There are no sandy beaches and open spaces in the forests; it is "either/or" – trees or water. Even Lyubov, who feels much more comfortable than other Terrans on Forest, feels "oppressed and uneasy in the forest, stifled by its endless crowd and incoherence of trunks, branches, leaves in the perpetual greenish or brownish twilight" (105), and that is because, the narrator informs us, he, "[l]ike most Terrans on Terra […] had never walked among wild trees at all, never seen a wood larger than a city block" (104-105). In time, the feeling changes and he grows accustomed to the trees and begins to like them. *Forest* is a story of re-appropriation, of refusing to go down a certain path in the knowledge that it will be incompatible with life as Athsheans know and want it. It is also a novella in which the Earth echoes some of our fears as to what might happen to it if we continue on conducting things in the business-as-usual mode. In being a novella, it is much shorter than *The Left Hand* and *The Dispossessed*, but its powerful message is worth exploring, as I will argue in the next chapters, in order to think the issues of progress and borders and their implications.

The Dispossessed (1974) is a dystopian novel about a physicist named Shevek, who lives in the anarchic planet Anarres. Because of the walls he sees building up around him, the growing limitations imposed by the society over his work, Shevek travels to his planet's moon, Urras, a capitalist society, the former home to his ancestors who rebelled against the system for a more egalitarian society. His intention in travelling to Urras is to pass on an idea, the idea upon which his own society was created and has at times forgotten about, and also to, by means of his unmatched scientific knowledge and critical thinking, create and spread a physics formula that will make it possible for nine worlds to communicate instantaneously, overcoming the limitations of time itself. The inspiration he lacks on his own planet he finds on Urras when someone hands him a book on Einstein's – spelled Ainstain – relativity theory and in the several reflections he makes on the concept of *possession*. Urras is key for his epiphany, for his own society could not show him what he needed to learn about possession, since they worked not with having, but with lacking and sharing, due to limited natural resources.

Predominant in *The Dispossessed* is the effort to unbuild the conceptual walls, the borders he sees around him and in the society where he lives. These walls, I would argue, can be interpreted as the binary constructions that lead us to understand that alliances are

invariably hierarchic, and in the novel this corresponds especially to possessing and not possessing, to gender, and to human and nonhuman interactions, but they can also be found in portrayals of class and race. On Anarres, human and human and human and nonhuman interactions are permeated by an ethics that is more effective in the task of unbuilding walls than the one found on Urras, but this does not mean that the people of Anarres do not build walls themselves. The novel ultimately shows that unbuilding walls and troubling dichotomies is a task that requires constant vigilance, self-questioning, and effort, but they have also developed a vocabulary that takes specific note of this tendency to organize things into hierarchic models. While on Urras carrying out research, Shevek remarks on the Urrasti use of language (Iotic), saying that he was aware of their strange obsession with the notion of inferiority and superiority, and that while the Anarresti (Pravic) would say that an issue that is deemed as important would be described as "more central" to the matters at hand, a Urrasti would use the word "higher" "as a synonym for 'better' in their writings" (15).

Anarres resembles, as mentioned before, one of the many possible futures of Earth under the threat and reality of climate change. The planet's temperature is high, the weather is dry, and few biological species manage to adapt. Its human inhabitants, however, work hard at making life work in this unlikely home. As in *The Left Hand*, there are no large animals on Anarres. On Forest, however, there are, and the humans are causing trouble for hunting deer for sport. The alliance between the human and the nonhuman makes itself inevitable for life on Anarres to thrive, and the Anarresti live under the shadow of the luscious Urras, the sister planet that to them is the moon. Anarres, in turn, is their moon. The Anarresti, upon arriving on the planet after the revolution on Urras, had to afforest parts of the planet, which from afar seemed open to life but was, in fact, much more ruthless. Some parts of the planet are fertile, and they house farming and fishing activities, but the area that is suitable for growing crops is restricted to a small strip of land that goes along the coast. There is a great region called Dust, which is mostly uninhabited. "In the previous geological era," the narrator informs us,

> Dust had been an immense forest of holums, the ubiquitous dominant plant genus of Anarres. The current climate was hotter and drier. Millennia of drought had killed the trees and dried the soil to a very fine grey dust that now rose up on

> every wind, forming hills as pure of line and barren as any sand dune. (46)

Respiratory diseases are a major health issue on Anarres, and dust "was their enemy, the fine, dry stuff that clogged the throat and lungs" (47). Compared with the abundance and fertility of the natural resources of Urras, Shevek feels that everything Anarres has to offer is "meagre: barren, arid, and inchoate" (65), and there is also the silence. There are no birds on the planet, so while Urras is full of noises that betoken the liveliness of natural life, on Anarres there are no such sounds. One of the many things we can learn from the Anarresti in the Anthropocene is that, under the planet's condition, there is only one possible way of going forward and ensuring the maintenance of life as they know it: an ethics that – even though in the novel the nomenclature of the ethics, of this set of values, is anarchism – does not make instrumental use of humans and nonhumans. Many words can be used to define the sort of human-nonhumam and human-human ethics Le Guin explores in these books. Some scholars call it alliance, others call it intra-action, interaction, entanglements, and so on, and I intend to explore these ethics in the following sections of this dissertation, focusing on the narratives of progress and border, and examining how Le Guin's proposals trouble them.

1.4 A Word on Ethics

In discussions on ethics, definitions abound and vary. They vary, however, within the spectrum of "morals". Beginning in a very commonsensical place, the *Oxford Dictionary* (online) defines ethics as the "[m]oral principles that govern a person's behaviour or the conducting of an activity," "[t]he moral correctness of specified conduct," and, finally, as "[t]he branch of knowledge that deals with moral principles" (no page). As an adjective, "moral" is defined by the same dictionary as "[c]oncerned with the principles of right and wrong behavior," as "[c]oncerned with or derived from the code of behaviour that is considered right or acceptable in a particular society," and "[h]olding or manifesting high principles for proper conduct." As a noun, it means "[a] lesson that can be derived from a story or experience," and "[s]tandards of behaviour; principles of right and wrong" (no page). Ethics, thus, is very much grounded in notions of right and wrong, but who gets to decide what is right or wrong?

When looking up the word "ethics" in Catherine Villanueva Gardner's "Historical Dictionary of Feminist Philosophy" (2006), one finds no specific definition but a list of words or concepts related to ethics, among them: animal ethics, black feminist ethics, ecofeminism, feminist ethics, lesbian ethics, and so on. Within this list, there are two concepts that guide the notion of ethics that I am interested in working with, namely ecofeminism and feminist ethics. Ecofeminism is, among other things, the view that tackling environmental issues from a feminist perspective is beneficial, just as holding an environmental perspective is beneficial for feminism itself, as Gardner puts forth. She claims that environmentalism and ecofeminism diverge in the sense that the latter rejects both andro and anthropocentrism, seeing these two "centrisms" "as the root of both the domination of humans and the domination of nature," adding that not only are they values that denote "maleness—for example, power, reason, and civilization," but they are also the mainstays of these kinds of oppression (70), and are used to justify the oppression of both women and nature. This oppression is supported, Gardner claims, "within the traditional Western framework of dualist thinking: civilization/nature, reason/body, active/passive, and so on" (70), and many feminist and ecofeminist scholars would add to this list the pair human/nonhuman, which comprises one of the main dualisms in hierarchical organizations of the world. Both women and the nonhuman, natural world, have in the Western tradition been articulated as "capricious and unruly, and thus needing to be tamed through force: technology in the case of nature, or physical violence in the case of women", Gardner contends. Indeed, the woman and nature connection has been one of the main concerns of feminists and ecofeminists alike, as Stacy Alaimo (2016) points out when she maintains that the problem lies not only in the notion of essentialism that springs from the woman and nature connection, but also in the idea that nature is a "vast biophysical world that is not human and not cultural," stressing it as "a foundational term for a set of dualisms that are fundamental to how Westerners make sense of things" (531). Greta Gaard (1993), in this sense, claims that "the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature," adding that "ecofeminism works under the assumption that the attempt to end oppression towards women can only succeed if there is an equivalent attempt to liberate nature" (1). Gardner echoes this claim by saying this is ecofeminism's point of departure. It is fitting, then, that *The Left Hand* tackles precisely the gender issue in daring to imagine

what an ambisexual humanity would be like while at the same time addressing issues that explore the human-nonhuman entanglements in harsh environmental settings. *Forest* and *The Dispossessed* also address issues of gender and environmental ethics in ways that engage with both feminist and ecofeminist agendas.

Gardner suggests that offering a definition of "feminist ethics" is a challenge, but one possible road for doing so is to see it as a "critique of the ideals, concepts, and concerns of traditional ethics", in the sense that those carrying out this task

> challenge the canonical tradition for its lack of concern for women's interests, its neglect of issues of particular importance to women (the private realm in particular), its denial of women's moral agency, and its devaluation of the moral experience of women and the characteristics culturally associated with the "feminine." (91)

The implication here is that the morals and values that govern behavior, as the Oxford Dictionary suggests, are based on the values of a patriarchal tradition. As Gardner concludes, feminists working with ethics contend that "the traditional picture of the moral agent is a construct of male ideals and is antithetical to the lived experience of women" (91). Aside from that, feminist ethicists have argued that this agent is often deemed as unbiased and holding values that do not mark his cultural and geographical locations (or gender), and thus are deemed applicable in a universal fashion, in a way that is not situated. As women have not been (and often are still not) considered "rational," Gardner adds, and as the roles they have been assigned to perform have not always been seen as pertaining to "individuals," such as those of mother and wife, traditional ethics excludes women and, I would add, nonhumans and humans that are deemed less than human.

Indeed, discussions about ethics, for feminism, are never easy. Le Guin herself (1989 [1978]), in a speech given to a Planned Parenthood symposium in 1978, starts by providing a definition of "ethics" and "moral," and shows that too often they fall under the categories of good and evil, right and wrong. She adds that, while ethics engulfs the whole of the guiding principles of a population, the word "morals" is more restricted to personal issues: "[it] may or may not conform to law. It may or may not coincide with the edicts or advice of a government, a church, or a body of concerned people like us" (18). Le Guin suggests that resorting to ethics as a guide to issues on planned parenthood, or pro-choice notions, does not work, as the values that rule notions of

ethics are out of date and have not been devised with women in mind, so we must look for women to develop an ethics that suits them, that considers them, that includes them. As she puts it, "almost all the rules, laws, codes, and commandments we have—all our ethics—were made by men: by men and for men" (19).

Morals, on a personal level, Le Guin notes, are also a matter of survival, highlighting that *survival* is not necessarily a matter of staying alive. Sometimes it includes death, as it "may be chosen for the sake of the survival of the clan, the nation, the species, or life itself" (p.18). This argument has also been used in the past to justify the killings of millions, as in the Holocaust, but here, as it is Le Guin who is exploring the argument, it is certainly not meant for that. The areas that make the least sense in being regulated by men, and whose results, Le Guin posits, have been calamitous, are the ones of "conception, pregnancy, childbirth, and the responsibility for children" (19). We must, as we have been doing, develop a morality that includes woman as we go along. The author brings forth the arguments of Irene Claremont, who claims that it is men who developed the notion of the sacredness of life, and women adopted these values as their own; they are not intrinsic to either man or woman. She is striving to argue, Le Guin adds, that women's wish (or not) to have children has been articulated into "ethical coercion, until it [became] a bondage, a hideous sentimental trap" (19).

As an example of ethics versus morals, Le Guin uses Claremont's words once again, showing how the latter--, in interviewing women who had been exposed to thalidomide[12] and were then faced with the prospect of having malformed babies --, was shocked by the prospect that it was men who got to decide whether women should keep their babies or not. Making that decision must not, Le Guin observes, be a matter of ethics, but of morals. It is morality that we must work on, she seems to suggest, adding that:

> [I]f we can trust in ourselves and so let women think and feel that an unwanted child or an oversize family is wrong—not ethically wrong, not against the rules, but morally wrong, all wrong like a thalidomide birth, wrong like taking a wrong step that will break your neck—if we can get feminine and human morality out from under the yoke of a dead ethic, then maybe we'll begin to get somewhere on the road that leads to survival. (20)

[12] A drug that was once used as a sedative and, when used by pregnant women, causes the malformation of fetus.

The discussion on motherhood is not one I will explore in this dissertation, but it is noteworthy that two years prior to Le Guin's speech, Adrienne Rich had published the seminal book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1995, first published in 1976), which, among other things, exposes how the experience of motherhood is turned into an institution under a patriarchal ruling, and the validation of women becomes subjected to maternity. Rich's ponderings on motherhood are especially relevant not only in the sense that they echo Le Guin's, but also because they precede Haraway's (2016a) formulations on the idea of "making kin" in the Anthropocene. Rich is deeply suspicious of societal values that a woman with a child is more "morally credible or morally capable than any other woman," adding that a child might be or is often used as a credential of sorts, "a badge of self-righteousness," and she challenges the "implicit belief that only 'mothers' with 'children of their own' have a real stake in the future of humanity" (xxiv). All of us, with no exception, have a real stake in the future of humanity, and as Haraway (2016a) puts it in her articulations on the notion of "staying with the trouble," "[w]e become with each other or not at all" (5).

Haraway's idea of staying with the trouble represents a way of thinking that suggests that, instead of caving in to the sense of desperation that comes with knowing too much about what is really at stake (in terms of global warming, growing population, sixth extinction) or having blind faith in what has been commonly referred to "technofixes" that will somehow save us in the end, one should find ways to stay with the trouble and make "oddkin," -- an expression Haraway uses to describe the unexpected, unintentional, and sometimes unlikely collaborations we need to, and even unthinkingly do, make every day. Drawing a parallel among the three arguments, when Haraway says that "[k]in is a category that all sorts of people do their best to domesticate," I think of Le Guin's efforts to show that an ethics imposed on women is an attempt to domesticate the personal moral into an ethics that does not serve women, and I think of Rich's suspicion of the notion that women can only truly relate to whom/what is related to them by blood. Oddkin (that is, kin to people *and* things *and* nonhumans) is, and should be, central to an ethical approach that operates outside of a human exceptionalism fairytale. As Haraway puts it, "[m]aking kin as oddkin rather than, or at least in addition to, godkin and genealogical and biogenetic family troubles important matters, like to whom one is actually responsible" (2). In fact, the idea of "response-

ability," or the ability to respond, is quite eminent in Haraway's work and involves, among many other things, finding a way of being on this world ("a hardy, soiled kind of wisdom," p. 117, an ethics, one might say, as in a set of values) that allows us to recover the Earth "in multispecies alliance, across the killing divisions of nature, culture, and technology and of organism, language, and machine" (118). And for that she uses Le Guin and her carrier bag theory of fiction, which will be further explored in the third chapter. For now, suffice it to say that in her ponderings on what to take in her bag to think issues of kinship and morals is Le Guin, her stories, and her theory of the carrier bag.

Joana Zylinska is one of the many scholars attempting to tether the notion of ethics to discussions on the Anthropocene. In her work, *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene* (2014), she strives to propose an ethics that is somehow focused on the stories we tell, claiming that they "have a performative nature" in the sense that "they can enact and not just describe things" (11), no matter how limited or broad their effect may be. In her work, Zylinska aims at proposing a "viable position on ethics as a way of living a good life when life itself is declared to be under a unique threat," (11) and she intends to explore what this "goodness" or "good life" could mean. She draws from Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia* the idea of looking for things, good things, to hold on to in the midst of narratives on the apocalypse in the time of the Anthropocene. Her will to seek an ethics entails the effort to combine a number of philosophies and thoughts (especially feminist thought) to come up with a more positive approach to the impending threats we face in this geo-historical time, focusing on what it means to live the aforementioned "good life".

It often seems that Zylinska is gluing together fragments of thought without ever coming up with an actual ethical proposal, but as a thinking exercise there are several considerations worth mentioning. In fact, it is worth mentioning that Zylinska offers a disclaimer of sorts in the first chapter, suggesting that the work she is proposing is of a "post-masculinist" nature, where ideas and thoughts are advanced in a "more speculative, less directional" (14)[13] fashion. This reasoning refuses, in a sense, the masculinist notion of "rationality," admitting instead degrees of uncertainty of any sort of reasoning not by setting itself as "anti-rationalist," but as an alternative form of rationality that "remains more attuned to its own modes of production" (15). I take the last claim to

[13] Zylinska explains that the "post-masculinist" notion is developed by Darin Barney.

mean that the cuts -- , Barad's agential cuts referred to before -- , are made evident in Zylinska's approach. This is in keeping with Le Guin's refusal of the arrow as the main tool for storytelling, as will become clear in the next chapter. The material world, in Zylinska's view, informs itself to us, but the outcomes of our thoughts are ultimately a result of this encounter, never an unbiased account of the human. Zylinska explains that the idea for writing this book came about in the midst of preparations for the wedding of two artists, Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle, and a lake, Lake Kallavesi. This, and other weddings the artists have already performed (they have married the Earth, the Sun, and other nonhuman things), aim at "enacting the naturocultural kinship in which *love is not enough*" (14, emphasis in the original). In fact, as a side note, it is noteworthy that one of the most famous quotes from the *Star Trek* TV series is "to survive is not enough,"[14] suggesting the same larger-than-just-being approach to impending crises. Loving and caring for the human and nonhuman beings and things that surround us, as well as simply surviving on a planet we have actively helped damage, is not enough, and developing an ethics that suits this rationale and orients our actions is useful because it may allow us to transform some of the ways of being on this Earth that are simply not working for ours and other countless species and things. In marrying a lake, they are not simply declaring their love for it, they are effecting a promise to help it thrive and to protect it. They are conferring it back an agency that it already has, but that has been epistemologically removed from it at the onset of the mechanistic view of nature and its instrumental uses.

Zylinska espouses Timothy Morton's argument that, in modern society, under the fact of ecological damage and climate change, there is a crisis in thinking, so for both scholars the Anthropocene calls for an injunction for us to become responsible for both the geo and the biosphere and to think of them as concepts, not merely as things that exist "out there". In this sense, the Anthropocene is, for her and in her work, an "ethical pointer" first and foremost, and secondly a "scientific descriptor" (19). The Anthropocene invites critical thinking and the formation of an "ethics of reparation of thought" (20), where, with creativity and critical thinking, other ways of going about "being" in this world, ways that do not see the geo and the bios as not "us," as simply instrumental. Inasmuch as there is a critical levelling of forces and

[14] Source: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0708801/quotes; here one can find the exchange among Roga Danar, who utters these words, Prime Minister Nayrok, and Counselor Deanna Troi.

values, the non-hierarchal view of humans and nonhumans makes her reasoning and call for a minimal ethics post-anthropocentric, as it "does not consider the human to be the dominant or the most important species, nor does it see the world as arranged solely for human use and bereft" (20). The ethics she works to develop is "an ethics of life, with life understood both philosophically and biologically. Its starting premise is that we humans are making a difference to the arrangements of what we are calling 'the world'," adding that, although we are not the most important element that is acting upon the world (even though our mark is violent and our effects will live long after us), we are able to develop an ethics that responds to the actions we *are* responsible for (20-21). One of the ways of developing such an ethics and stabilizing values that are fruitful for this moment is through narratives, and as a process, that is, in a way that does not postulate finished concepts. It is an ethics, she proposes, *in media res*, in the process of its making.

The way Zylinska develops the impression of scale is by addressing issues that are big or small, or so appear at first sight, often interchanging the telescope for the microscope. This interchangeable perspective is useful because large scale issues promote a sense of awe, and therefore might both shock us into action and leave a sense that the world out there is too big and there is nothing that can be done to remedy the situation that presents itself; a negative kind of awe, so to say. When the scale is small, there is a sense of power that can be encouraging both in a vicious way (inviting instrumental uses) and in an action-oriented way (there is a sense that *something* can be accomplished). For Zylinska, this change in perspective, or this interchangeable perspective, is fruitful because it can be seen as an encouragement to see by not "losing sight of the complex entanglements of matter," and come to terms with the idea "that we are not really able to 'see' much at either end of the physical spectrum," as it may all seem either too small or too large for us to have a real grasp of things (29, emphasis in the original). And the word entanglement is related, in Zylinska's reasoning, to Karen Barad's articulations on the agential realist theoretical framework, where existence is relational and never individual. Paramount to this notion is the idea that, as meanings are effected *in relations*, there is a "temporary stabilization of matter into entities," and no definitive definition of any human or nonhuman entity (30).

The formation of an ethics, Zylinska contends, provokes the stabilization and organization of the world around us, and in doing so it has an ontological charge, where the ethics precedes ontology "not on a

linear scale but rather in the sense of making a prior demand on us" (32). What this means, in relation to Barad's notion of intra-action, is that as things become in relation and do not preexist relations, added to the fact that ethics offer the temporary stabilization of values that guide human relation with things that are beyond the human, her proposal for a minimal ethics addresses this minute instance where "the human is able to take at least some degree of responsibility—materially, conceptually, and morally," (33) and can come up with an ethics that is more beneficial to the world around her.

Following a bit longer the idea of an interchangeable perspective between the telescope and the microscope, Stacy Alaimo's (2017) discussions on the Anthropocene and how we tend to address it keeping in mind the image of the planet as a huge, affected system, there is the risk of losing perspective of what is happening at the biological and chemical level. Alaimo begins her argument by criticizing the term itself and raising the question of "[w]ho is the 'anthro' of the 'Anthropocene'?" adding that "[i]n its ostensible universality" formulates a subject position that is a challenge for anyone to inhabit (Kindle edition). In doing so, there are echoes of the "man" feminism has for at least decades troubled, "the disembodied, rational subject" (Kindle edition). Her main critique is that the formulations on the Anthropocene, on giving way too much emphasis on the "man" (the one above) and rocks, excludes or disregards other life-forms that are on their way to meeting "a catastrophic dissolve". She focuses on shells in the increasingly acidifying oceans, and in so doing replaces the telescope[15] for the microscope. There, she finds the

> 'ecodelic,' scale-shifting dis/identification, which insists that whatever the 'anthro' of the 'Anthropocene' was, is, or will be, the 'Anthropocene' must be thought with the multitude of creatures that will not be reconstituted, will not be safely ensconced, but will, instead, dissolve. (Alaimo, Kindle Edition)

[15] Alaimo provides a number of examples that show how the preferred way of depicting the Anthropocene in the news and in Art is with the use of images of the Earth, the round, telescopic Earth, and in doing so there is the risk of missing the details of what is happening on the ground; the forced displacement of humans, coral reef bleaching, climate change, disruption in the patterns of bird migration, whale migration, and so on.

This change in perspective removes the focus from the human, which, in the context of this new geological epoch, occupies at least two contending positions, that of a species that is constructed as disembodied, hard to inhabit, and that of a species that has "accomplished" the daunting task of changing the planet. This blame often comes, Alaimo suggests, "coated with a veneer of species pride." A change in perspective, Alaimo shows, is beneficial because it brings the human back to the discussion, for in affecting "the planet" the scale is too large, and the impact of the change too long (for millennia to come), and in doing so we are removed from the scenario that really shows "the extent to which human agencies are entangled with those of nonhuman creatures and inhuman substances and systems" (Kindle Edition).

2 SECOND CHAPTER: The Anthropocene and Le Guin as Thinking Tools

2.1 The Anthropocene and the Humanities

It is appropriate to feel loyalty to a given glacier; it is advisable to investigate the whole water cycle; and it is rare and marvelous to know that glaciers do not always flow and that mountains are constantly walking.
Gary Snyder – The Practice of the Wild

The Anthropocene, to put it simply, is our new geological Epoch, following the Holocene. The "anthropos" prefix was proposed in order to reflect the idea that anthropogenic changes (changes resulting from human actions on this world) are so large and ubiquitous that humans are now geological forces, behaving like volcanoes, large meteors, earthquakes, that is, promoting large scale changes and long term effects. The precise moment when the Holocene became Anthropocene is still under discussion, but Jan Zalasiewicz et al. (2014) suggest the moment when the first nuclear bomb was exploded, on July 16, 1945, at Alamogordo, New Mexico. The fallout that resulted from this and the subsequent bombs that were exploded at a rate of one bomb every 9.6 days from 1945 to 1988 can be literally seen in what is termed the "chemostatigraphic record," a measure used in geology to analyze the chemical deposits in the strata. This boundary coincides with "the Great Acceleration" of the mid-twentieth century, when humans started using plastic, aluminum, and great amounts of resources to keep up with the then recently inaugurated Western model of production and consumption. Zalaziewicz's research group also proposes other two boundaries. The first is known as the "early-Anthropocene", which dates back thousands of years and is related to our beginnings in agricultural activities, and the second one with the early stages of the Industrial Revolution, in the 1800s. For the moment, the Anthropocene is a working term both in geology and in other realms of academic research, mainstream media, and popular culture. Interestingly, in response to a piece entitled "Is the Anthropocene an issue of stratigraphy or pop culture?", by Whitney J. Austin and John M. Holbrook (2012), with a tone of incredulity regarding the reach of the term into popular culture, Jan Zalasiewicz et al. (2012) respond that:

> We regard broader popular interest as positive. The Anthropocene has provided a longer-term perspective of humanity's activities and brings stratigraphic principles and practice to a wider audience. Also, the phenomenon of contemporary global change—perhaps unlike the formal determination of past geological time units—potentially concerns everyone.

This sort of public collision of ideas adds to the argument that the Anthropocene has reached different areas of debate, and in this section I will tackle some ways in which the term has been deployed in the humanities.

For geologists, Zalasiewicz et al. (2014) explain, the Geologic Time Scale is the most precious tool, since it allows for the creation of a time framework encompassing the 4.6 billion years of the Earth's history. The strata, that is, the layers of rock that formed within this period of billions of years, are analyzed having this time scale in mind. In them lie the cues to the creation of boundaries between Epochs, Periods, and Eras. About strata, Jan Zalasiewicz (2008), in *The Earth after Us*, proposes a question for 100 million years from now: when we are long gone (unfortunately, that is plausible, given our current climate change situation and business-as-usual approach to dealing with its threats), what would possible future explorers find in the rocks as evidence of our existence? He delves into this scenario in an engaging way by presenting the following perspective: humans have been on this Earth for 250 thousand years, while the meteor that is believed to have led the dinosaurs to extinction hit the Earth 65 million years ago. Dinosaurs inhabited the Earth for a 200 million-years period, and the Earth itself is 4.6 billion years old. Against the deep geological time of the world, our existence is nothing but insignificant. But aside from exposing this awe-inspiring perspective, Zalasiewicz shows how the Earth itself is registering the narratives of all that happens on its surface and what is expelled from its interior into the strata. In literary terms, the strata is where the narrative of the world is written by time. The Earth, he puts it, "is a treasury of strata, a gigantic machine for producing strata that contain within themselves countless narrative possibilities of the histories of former oceans and rivers, of lakes and shorelines and arid deserts" (17-18). It seems amazing how much the history of the Earth, in the way Zalasiewicz explains, resembles what we know for a fact about human and nonhuman lives. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Opperman (2014), in the introduction to *Material Ecocriticism*, address a similar

issue quite beautifully, by making a pointed connection between the science of geology and nonhuman theory:

> […] the world's material phenomena are knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be 'read' and interpreted as forming narratives, stories. Developing in bodily forms and in discursive formulations arising in coevolutionary landscapes of natures and signs, the stories of matter are everywhere: in the air we breathe, the food we eat, in the things and beings of this world, within and beyond the human realm. All matter, in other words, is a 'storied matter'. (1)

Rocks, in this sense, are not alone in registering the narratives of the world, since every human and nonhuman body is storied in the passing of time. One of the arguments Zalasiewicz propounds is that it is really up to those who live in the world now the type of narrative we wish to leave on the strata (or "weave" on the strata, in reference to Donna Haraway's formulations on cats' cradle and collaborations on storytelling, 2016). Will it be one that resembles the event of the extinction of the dinosaurs, with the sudden rise in temperature and, perhaps, ours and other species' extinction? Or will humans witness the arrival of the so-called explorers, 100 million years from now? The narrative does not, however, depend entirely on humans. A meteor led dinosaurs to extinction. Humans could have a similar, geologically-driven fate. Who is to tell?

The term Anthropocene, as has been indicated in the previous chapter, is filled with contradictions. Donna Haraway (2015), for instance, has challenged it for its focus on the impact of human actions on the Earth. She proposed the word "Capitalocene"[16] to convey the effects of capitalism as a system on the Earth instead of the effects of humans as a species, who are often alienated from the effects of their labors. She has also proposed a much more complex term, Cthulucene, which I will later address, for dealing with the effects of the Anthropocene. Haraway (2014), however, accepts the word

[16]In the piece entitled "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationcene, Cthulucene: Making Kin," Haraway explains that the term was first used by Adreas Malm and Jason Moore, but it has been widely attributed to her since she started using it in public lectures from 2012 on. Haraway and Moore (editors) have published a book together in 2016 entitled *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*.

Anthropocene in the geological sphere, but believes that a term more representative of the system of extraction of energy, its uses, and the uneven distribution of wealth originating from the system across the globe should be considered. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2013) also troubles the term by expounding that humans do not *evenly* burn fossil fuel or engage in other Earth disrupting practices across the globe. His argument differs somewhat from Haraway's in that for him, although Capitalism does indeed produce harmful effects, from the point of view of the Earth it would make little to no difference to adopt a more egalitarian economic system if we were still to have fossil fuel as our main source of energy. A fairer, more egalitarian economic system, he ponders, could bring about even more harmful effects in a society fueled by fossil sources of energy, as more people would be able to emit polluting gases into the environment. Capitalism, in spreading misery in order to produce wealth for few, keeps emissions "low", he adds, with an ironic tone. He does not endorse capitalism, it should be noted, but points, instead, to the inefficacy of the main energy source we currently use.

Haraway, in exploring the implications of the Anthropocene, invites us to *think* over our "newly gained" responsibility for so many other species, bodies and things. She invokes Virginia Woolf's injunction in *Three Guineas* (1938), where the latter replies to a fictitious letter from a member of the government. In the letter, the politician asks Woolf advice on how women can aid in preventing war. For our current moment, the question can be translated into "how can we improve this situation we have put ourselves in, in which climate change threatens to end with innumerous lives on Earth, including our own?" To this question, one could speculate that Woolf would give the same answer:

> Think we must. […] Let us never cease from thinking—what is this 'civilization' in which we find ourselves? What are these ceremonies and why should we take part in them? What are these professions and why should we make money out of them? Where in short is it leading us, the procession of the sons of educated men? (Kindle edition)

So one might think in the Humanities, and think *with* literature. Why should one take part in these ceremonies of destruction of ourselves, of countless other species and of the environments? Where is this wild capitalism, this "procession of the sons of educated men", as Woolf put it, leading us? Think we must, and the humanities have been outpouring with ways of thinking a world that is now scarred by anthropogenic

changes. Intersections among ecofeminisms, material feminisms, posthuman and nonhuman theories have flourished with useful working terms and theoretical articulations for scholars to engage in.

When the term "Anthropocene" was first suggested in 2000, by Paul J. Crutzen, geologists reacted tongue-in-cheek (Zalaciewicz, 2014). They are, after all, accustomed with geological forces that yield effects of such unimaginable magnitude that it was difficult to believe humans could produce real impacts on the planet. In an interview, Crutzen (2014) explains that, in the 1970s, the commonly-held view among scientists was that nature was too big and humankind too small, so "scientists in general did not show much interest in the environment then" (31). It is noteworthy that, while scientists deemed humans to be too small, ecofeminists and writers such as Le Guin were already paying attention to humanity's impacts on nature. Greta Gaard (1993), a noted ecofeminist scholar, has been for at least three decades articulating theory on this ecological front. She claims that ecofeminism is a theory that borrows from many strands of feminist studies and activism, and cites some of its origins: "peace movements, labor movements, women's healthcare, and the anti-nuclear, environmental, and animal liberation movements" (1). She goes on, arguing that

> [d]rawing on the insights of ecology, feminism, and socialism, ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. Ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women […] will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature. Its theoretical base is a sense of self most commonly expressed by women and various other nondominant groups-a self that is interconnected with all life. (1)

Gaard posits that this notion of a self that is interconnected with all life works in opposition to one of the main working definitions of patriarchy and of the nature/culture dichotomy: the notion that the self/other are separate, representing the atomistic view of oneself as independent from others and from things. This call for a notion of interconnection, intra-action, and assemblage is also found in the aforementioned works of Karen Barad, and Jane Bennett, echoing this ecofeminist articulation.

One of the most salient subjects in the debate on the Anthropocene is climate change, and perhaps because it is one of the

processes whose safety lines we, humans, have caused to cross among the nine biophysical processes that must operate within safety boundaries for many forms of life on Earth to thrive.[17] Aligned with the fact that climate change is at the forefront of Anthropocene debates, Jedediah Purdy, in *After Nature* (2015), argues that the "Anthropocene is, in a sense, a slogan for the age of climate change" (2). Since the transition from the Holocene into this new epoch is still under discussion, the word is, if nothing else, a working term to address the anthropogenic changes to the Earth.

Climate change, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Débora Danowski (2014) propound, has profound impacts in the way we live and envision future lives on Earth. Climate turmoil can cause involuntary displacements due to superstorms and sea level rise, water shortage, food shortage, rise in temperatures beyond our capacity to adapt, among other things. Having this in mind, Heather Eaton and Lois Ann Lorentzen (2003), in the introduction to *Ecofeminism and Globalization*, argue that although "ecofeminism" is often taken to be an umbrella term for a number of epistemological approaches related to women and nature, three assertions are central to ecofeminist debates in the context of climate change and environmental destruction. Firstly, they demonstrate, based on reports issued by The United Nations, that women (especially Black and indigenous women) are the most affected victims of environmental destruction, and as the level of poverty increases, so does the probability and weight of impact on them increase. Secondly, there is the "conceptual claim," which is connected to Western culture's tendency to conflate women with nature, thus relegating the former to the space of the body and men to the abstract space of the mind. This claim is widely explored in feminist and ecofeminist literature. Thirdly, there is what is probably the most controversial claim, because it is a claim and a proposition to "inhabit the belly of the monster," as Haraway would probably put it: the "epistemological claim." Eaton and Lorentzen tease out from the women and nature connection the following question: "[s]ince environmental problems affect women most directly, isn't it possible that women possess greater knowledge and expertise that could prove useful in

[17] Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2014) briefly discuss the nine biophysical processes, which are: climate change, acidification of the oceans, stratospheric ozone depletion, fresh water use, loss of biosphere integrity, phosphorus and nitrogen flows to the biosphere and the oceans, changes in the uses of land, chemical pollution, atmospheric aerosol loading.

finding solutions to pressing environmental problems?" (2-3). They grant that most ecofeminists see the women and nature connection as based not on essence but on cultural constructs, and they contend that, since women are the most affected group in environmental disasters, wouldn't they be epistemologically privileged when it comes to addressing, and proposing solutions to, the problem?

Gaard (1993), in discussing ecofeminism, emphasizes a factor that is present in Jane Bennett's (2010) political project in *Vibrant Matter*. While Gaard argues that "a failure to recognize connections can lead to violence, and a disconnected sense of self is most assuredly at the root of the current ecological crisis" (2), Bennet stresses that the Anthropocene represents, for her, an "opportunity to rethink things" (viii) and invites us to engage in a more sustainable fashion with lively things and vibrant matter. She works with a guiding question that has ethical implications: "How would political responses to public problems change were we to take seriously the vitality of (nonhuman) bodies?" (2010, p. viii). For her, vitality is the capacity of things (everything is included under "things": storms, metals, edibles, commodities, and so on) "not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (viii). Central to her work is the need to give more credit to the force of things instead of taking them as inert while we (humans) hold all vitality. By taking things seriously, we may be politically more ethical towards them; our consumption habits might change, and we may see the litter we produce as "lively and potentially dangerous matter" (viii).

Drawing on Bruno Latour, she proposes to conceive of things as "actants". An actant, she explains, "is a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events" (viii). An actant can modify other entities and they can be of any size, meaning that it can also be either too small or too fast to be classified by us as a "thing". It still is, nonetheless, a "thing", a body that produces an effect. Bennett sees in the actant concept the possibility of devising a new vocabulary that accounts for the fact that things that we often deem as inert are actually vibrant matter. In doing so, an effort is made to conceptualize the notion of "distributive agency" (ix), where the world is not shaped by us, but by the whole of humans and

nonhumans in specific configurations.[18]Among the goals that Bennett has and which she explores in *Vibrant Matter* are: a) to shed a more positive light on the ontologies of vibrant matter, b) to trouble the binaries of life/matter, will/determination, human/animal, and organic/inorganic, and c) to "sketch a style of political analysis that can better account for the contributions of nonhuman actants" (x).

Bennett's motivations for exploring the vitality of nonhuman and not-quite-human things is very compelling, as she argues that her "hunch is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our Earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption" (2010, p. ix). The theoretical exercise she proposes is of great relevance for the Anthropocene: it brings human and nonhuman bodies to the same plane and allows for the development of ethical approaches to matter with this more horizontal configuration at play. It also has the potential of making one feel as part and parcel of what Haraway (2008) calls "queer confederacies" when she shows how utterly dependent on the confederation among other people, microbes, organic and inorganic life we all are.

2.2 The Nonhuman Turn

The articulations that connect the debates around the Anthropocene, climate change, feminism, ecocriticism, material feminisms and ecofeminist can be grouped under a set of concerns that has been termed the "nonhuman turn". Implicit in their goals is the troubling of dichotomies that have for long justified the oppressions of women, of nature, and of innumerous nonhuman bodies and things. For Richard Grusin (2015), this turn, as well the other "turns" connected to it, such as the posthuman and the ontological, aims at "decentering the human in favor of a turn toward and concern for the nonhuman, understood variously in terms of animals, affectivity, bodies, organic and geophysical systems, materiality, or technologies" (Kindle edition). Grusin sheds light on the fact that almost all challenges we face in current times are related to our "engagement with nonhumans" (Kindle edition), and lists a few of them: climate change and its effects,

[18] The idea of "specific configurations" also appears in Haraway (2016) when she draws the following conclusion from Thom van Dooren's work: "Nobody lives everywhere; everybody lives somewhere. Nothing is connected to everything; everything is connected to something" (35).

genocide, famine, biotechnology, privacy and intellectual property, and the like. Holding this in mind, he argues, there may be no better time for us to think our engagement with the nonhuman. In this particular work, for instance, I try to do that by thinking through and with literature.

Chinua Achebe, in a piece entitled "What Has Literature Got to Do with It?" (1990, first published in 1988), analyzes an economic crisis in Nigeria and demonstrates how having a technical expert deal with a crisis neither necessarily solves the crisis nor does it "absolve the rest of us from thinking" (176). Strictly speaking, Achebe claims that an expert can only do so much and adds that one does not need to be a specialist to identify that something is wrong and to articulate what can be done to improve the situation one has at hand. "The cry all around us is for more science and less humanities" (180), he wrote in 1988, but stories, Achebe shows, were here first (or was it people?, he plays with the reader), and remain an important tool for understanding and *thinking the world*. "*People create stories create people*; or rather, *stories create people create stories*" (182, emphasis in the original), Achebe says, and Haraway (2015) echoes this play of words by saying that "[i]t matters which stories tell stories, which concepts think concepts" (160). Both Haraway and Achebe are saying similar things, in different words: the stories we tell produce effects, and literature is entangled with change. It may lend support to maintaining the *status quo*, but it can also lend itself to produce, as Achebe says, the "kinetic energy necessary for social transition and change" (187).

Joanna Zylinska (2014) and Bennett (2015) add to this argument some speculations on the role of narratives. For the former, as mentioned before, narratives help stabilize certain ethical values that may be of use for those who are facing human-caused impending disasters. Bennett, exploring a similar argument, calls texts "special bodies". For her, literary objects, like all objects, are nonhuman agents. The ability of a text to guide the reader to "something more" is the capacity of what she calls "a distributive network of bodies: words on the page, words in the reader's imagination, sounds of words, sounds and smells in the reading room, […] all these bodies co-acting are what do the job" (Kindle edition). Her argument that texts are bodies that can serve as vehicles to lead us toward more acute human perception, and to things that are not endowed with "wordiness", such as objects, plants, and trash, to name a few. She decenters language while using it as a vehicle to something other than itself. This, one may add, is also a

central concern in nonhuman theories, that of the movement from epistemology to ontology.[19]

For Haraway (2008), the act of telling stories is to engage in world-building. The stories we tell matter, her reasoning tells us, so it is to no one's surprise that many times in her theory she draws from Le Guin's *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, which will be explored to fuller extent in the third chapter. In this theory, Le Guin (1996, first published in 1986) exposes her preference for narratives that are more concerned with the "collecting" of small things, of things that can be carried in a bag, instead of narratives that focus on the predatory journey of the hero. All of us, Le Guin claims, have

> heard all about all the sticks and spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things, but we have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for the thing contained. That is a new story. That is news. (151)

And it is not news, she shows. It can actually be considered be very old news, as Le Guin brings a piece of anthropological study by Elizabeth Fisher that suggests that the first cultural device was, most probably, a recipient in which to put things in: indispensable things such as food, energy, babies, and recipients to carry these things home in. The home itself, she adds, is a recipient. So, the bag makes sense to Le Guin, to Haraway, and also to the arguments that a number of scholars are pursuing in this moment when it seems crucial to tell stories that add to the debates on climate change. To put it differently, in the context of the Anthropocene, whether one addresses it as a geological epoch or as a working term to address anthropogenic changes, narratives that are more concerned with the ethical engagement with things are probably more aligned with actions that one must undertake than narratives that insist on the spear. Literature and the material which it refers to, *books,* can be taken as containers where authors engage with *thinking the world* we are living in. A book, Le Guin puts it, "holds words. Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a

[19] For an enlightening discussion on the movement from epistemology to ontology in feminist theory, see Susan Hekman's "Constructing the Ballast: an Ontology for Feminism", in *Material Feminisms*, edited by Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman. Indiana UP, 2008; and Claudia de Lima Costa's "Os estudos culturais na encruzilhada dos feminismos materiais e descoloniais," in *Estudos de Literatura Brasileira Contemporânea*, n. 44, p. 79-103, jul./dec. 2014.

particular, powerful relation to one another and to us" (1996, p. 153). If one is to make a connection between Le Guin's and Haraway's articulations, one could even say that a book holds not only words, but worlds, the possibility of worlds, and humanities scholars may as well tackle these materials (literature, books) in order to establish the relation between these worlds and our world.

Grusin (2015) reminds us that Western literature has for very long dealt with the nonhuman in a way that reflects a concern for humans' relation with nature, citing Thoreau, Whitman, Melville, among others. Many contemporary writers have added to the concern for the nonhuman the issue of climate change, the impacts of the consumption of meat, the use of genetically engineered seeds and agrochemicals, and environmental disasters. Ruth Ozeki, in *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), for instance, explores the effects of the 2011 tsunami that hit Japan when a character named Ruth finds a diary on the shores of Canada, on the other side of the Pacific Ocean. In the diary, an American-Japanese teenager narrates her ponderings on life and suicide. In the midst of the narrative, the author discusses things such as the ocean gyres, the Pacific garbage patch, the impact of the use of fossil fuel on the Earth and other human nature-disrupting practices. In an earlier novel, *All Over Creation* (2002), Ozeki exposes the effects of GMOs (Genetically Modified Organisms) on the lives of two families who live off the land. She presents the reader with forms of resistance that can take unlikely shapes, as in the case of the "seeds of resistance", an anti-GMO activist group that does public interventions and maintains a website of erotic videos (the actress of the videos normally covers herself with vegetables and uses them for pleasure) to fund their activist travels across the United States. Author Helen Macdonald is another example. In the memoir *H is for Hawk* (2015), she blurs the boundaries between human and nonhuman with a goshawk named Mabel, whom she trains in the wake of her father's death. Macdonald shows how, at times, it is more comfortable for her to relate to a bird of prey than to her human counterparts. *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (2012), by Robert MacFarlane, narrates his walks while pondering on human effects on the Earth, always maintaining a dialogue with authors who have preceded him and taken on the similar task of describing the changes around them, as Thoreau does in the 19th century essay entitled *Walking*.

The genres of SF are also fertile terrains to ponder over the waning boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, as mentioned in the first chapter. Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007), for

instance, is an engaging thought-experiment that begins with a tech-driven society of the past and the terraforming of our Earth. The message one gets is clear: what we are doing here now, on Earth, we have already done on other planets that we have once called home: we are merely insisting on errors from the past. Margaret Atwood's acclaimed MaddAddam Trilogy (*Oryx and Crake*, 2003; *The Year of the Flood*, 2009; and *MaddAddam*, 2013) also depicts a post-apocalyptic world that, similarly to Ozeki's *All Over Creation*, deals with genetic engineering, but takes it to the extreme. Those who manage to survive must share the world with new, strange creatures that set doubt on what is natural, human, and nonhuman. *Station Eleven*, by Emily St. John Mandels (2015), paints a different scenario with similar conclusions. After a flu epidemic spreads across the globe, killing off most of the world's population, it becomes clear that nature quickly takes over what we tend to see as human-made, and the balance of power that once might have seemed so obvious (the obsessive idea of "man over nature") is overturned in plain sight. Literature, like the humanities, is outpouring with works that speculate what is happening and what might happen if we continue to overlook the practices that have led the world to enter (according to human parameters, of course) the Anthropocene Epoch. The focus on progress, where the use and exploration of resources (and thus depletion) is central, and the effecting of borders between humans and things are practices that, I argue, should not be overlooked.

2.3 The Novels, SF, Environmental Literature and the Anthropocene

The last decade has witnessed the emergence of a new literary category, termed cli-lit, usually understood as a climate change-oriented literature that brings awareness to environmental issues. Adeline Johns-Putra (2016) remarks that, although there has been an increase in the number of literary works that deal with the climate, as well as in academic efforts to analyze the event of "climate change as a cultural phenomenon" (266), cli-lit is not necessarily a "new" category. The label, however, is new, and its use became widespread in 2011. Johns-Putra is very careful not to use the word "genre" to describe cli-lit, admitting that the boundaries that "hold" genres change and grow in time, so she proposes considering climate change as a notion and a theme that emerges across genres. Climate change, however, is not a loose nomenclature in Johns-Putra's work, and she prefers "to define

climate change fiction as fiction concerned with *anthropogenic* climate change or global warming as we now understand it" (267, my emphasis). The results of her research show that, from 2011 to 2016, there is a visible increase in the number of published novels that tackle the issue of anthropogenic changes to the environment, much of those with dystopian and post-apocalyptic flavors (these themes, she shows, often overlap). Interesting in Johns-Putra's investigation is the focus not only on literary works but also on the state of scholarly work on cli-lit. What began as a favored focus on the theory of climate change as a cultural phenomenon has changed to a focus on literary works that deal with climate change. There is balance on both sides, but the author claims that the number of scholarly analyses of cli-lit have expanded over the last years, and the evidence appears both in academic print (in articles and books) and scholarly events.

Part of a broader discussion in ecocriticism, Johns-Putra claims that there are two main categories under which scholarly analyses of climate change literature can be grouped: a prescriptive (or normative) one, and an objective (or descriptive) one. This, she explains,

> […] concerns the question of whether ecocritical literary studies and scholars should play an active, even activist, role in educating or advocating on behalf of the environment, or whether they should maintain a conventionally objective stance and work to probe and reveal the complexities in the relationship between literature and the environment, a stance that some argue is—in its own way—profoundly educative and political (274).

What the first type of analysis tries to accomplish, then, is to offer "lessons" to readers so that they can cope with climate change and, I would argue, to prescribe tools for one to resist measures that are driving the climate to a point of no return. The second type of analysis, Johns-Putra argues, entail the ones that "seek simply to analyze the representation of the seemingly unrepresentable topic of climate change within literary conventions" (274).

Johns-Putra draws yet another distinction, one between ecocriticism and climate change criticism in critical and literary theory. As a field, the former has tended to provide a theoretical working space for "only some—and by no means all—literary scholars working on environmental matters" (275 – 275). Those of earlier ecocriticism generations focused primarily on literary texts, leaving the theory of

literature aside, especially those of continental philosophies, which were deemed as dwelling greatly on "anthropocentric concerns" (275). The latter field, that of climate change criticism in critical and literary theories, advances the idea that "the contingency and slipperiness that many literary theorists have long argued are part of a profound but unrecognized condition of our existence are now an unavoidable and undeniable part of our day-to-day lives, thanks to climate change" (275). In other words, the issues that came about with climate change have turned existential, theoretical problems, into actual problems, that is, problems that have for decades been considered a fringe concern by those who are environmentally-aware are now real issues that flood the news and scholarly inquiries. Johns-Putra posits that "instead of scrutinizing climate change, some literary theorists use climate change, along with the insights of literary theory, to scrutinize contemporary life, culture, and thought" (275), and argues that, in doing so, have added to the plights of the Anthropocene.

2.4 Utopia and the Anthropocene: When a New Word Becomes a Need

Just as the word Anthropocene came to represent not only a geological Epoch but also a way of life that has led us into this new Epoch in the first place, and the term cli-lit was created to represent a growing concern about climate change, the word "utopia" (and "eutopia", in the poem that closes More's narrative) was first used in 1516 by Thomas More and became a neologism. Neologisms, according to Fátima Vieira (2010), "correspond to the need to name what is new" (3), and they reveal what a given society is going through in that they synthesize concerns, changes, and values that, in a way, need a name. In exploring the concept of utopia, Vieira first gives a brief account of the word as a neologism that, in itself, is at the root of other neologisms (dystopia, for once, and eutopia, euchronia, anti-utopia, ecotopia, heterotopia, and so on). Vieira remarks that "with the creation of every new associated word the concept of utopia took on a more precise meaning" (3), and often different from More's meaning. More's inspiration for the notion of utopia, she shows, is a result of a Renaissance mentality, when ancient Greece and Rome were being revered as home to the most remarkable intellectuals of the past, and for that reason served in More's period as a model to be followed by Europe. It was also the period when the humanist logic came about, "based on the discovery that the human being did not exist simply to accept his or her fate, but to use reason in order to build the future" (4).

Vieira contends that, differently from the Enlightenment, when it was held that humans can attain perfection through reason, in the Renaissance, when Europe was still guided by the Christian perspective, there was a growing assurance of the capacity of humans to "arrange society differently in order to ensure peace" (4). Gary Snyder's (2010) arguments add to Vieira's when he claims that the Europeans--especially Italians--of the time saw in the Greek texts the description of a human being that is "freely intelligent, imaginative, physical, bold, and beautiful," and that the inflation of the idea of the human that came to its zenith in the Enlightenment had still not taken place in the Renaissance, when there was a rediscovery, after the dark times of the Middle Ages, "of secular culture and of human beings as natural beings in a natural world" (e-book edition).

The expansion of mental horizons that followed the rediscovery of Greek texts was accompanied by that of geographical boundaries, and perhaps the same relation can be drawn with space exploration and science fiction. David Seed (2011) argues that perhaps "[o]ne of the first images we associate with science fiction is the spaceship; one of the first plot lines we expect is the journey into space" (6), so it was not unexpected, Seed posits, to depart from More's sea journey to SF's space travels, and in the pages that follow I will revisit the connection between utopia and science fiction.

According to Vieira, More's inspiration for the word "utopia" was drawn from the letters of Vespuci, Columbus and other explorers who, in their accounts, describe encounters with other peoples, lands, spaces, so that More started using this growing awareness of "otherness" to create different spaces that contained people who might have seemed unfamiliar, and whose social organizations differed from the established ones of Europe. These inventions, Vieira shows, seemed to ask for a new word, so More reduces the Greek word *ouk* to *u*, which means "not", adds to it *topos*, which means place, and follows with a suffix, *ia*, which also expresses "place", so that "[e]tymologically, utopia is this place which is a non-place, simultaneously constituted by a movement of affirmation and denial" (4). In the same fictional work, More introduces the word *eutopia*, meaning the good place, in a poem that closes the story.

In Plato's *The Republic*, a thought-experiment is taken forth as a means to imagine "alternative ways of organizing society" (Vieira, 2010, p. 5), and centuries later More engages in the same exercise in *Utopia*. Hence, for Vieira the nature of the neologism "utopia" is anamnestic, that is, "the word refers to a kind of pre-history of the

concept" (5), as More created the word and the work under the influence of a reawakening of ancient Greek scholarship, so that he may have fashioned the word, but not utopianism, "which has as its core the desire for a better life" (Vieira, p. 6). It is in the process of expressing this desire that More promoted the change. More, Vieira expounds, established a new link between the then current Christian and the classic to layer it with the fresh feeling of agency an individual appeared to have over his/her own life. Another change, she remarks, is the strain of holding the desire along with the "negation of its fulfillment" (6), which was not seen in previous utopian works.[20] But reaching a consensus on what the term ultimately means is a challenge for Utopian Studies, as Vieira notes:

> Historically, the concept of utopia has been defined with regard to one of four characteristics: (I) the content of an imagined society […]; (2) the literary form into which the utopian imagination has been crystallized (which is a very limiting way of identifying utopia, since it excludes a considerable number of texts that are clearly utopian in perspective but that do not rigorously comply with the narrative model established by More); (3) the function of utopia (i.e. the impact that it causes on its reader, urging him to take action (a definition that should be rejected as it takes into account political utopia only); (4) the desire for a better life, caused by a feeling of discontentment towards the society one lives in (utopia is then seen as a matter of attitude). This latter characteristic is no doubt the most important one, as it allows for the inclusion within the framework of utopia of a wide range of texts informed by what Ernst Bloch considered to be the principal energy of utopia: hope. (6 – 7)

Vieira ultimately concludes that utopia can be considered as a "matter of attitude", as a reaction of some sort to an "undesirable present," and as a desire to surmount "all difficulties by the imagination of possible alternatives (7). Utopia as a literary genre has grown more inclusive and less focused on the peculiarities of what composes a utopian work; it is

[20] Vieira argues that "Although they are part of the background of the concept of utopia, Plato's *Republic*, and St Augustine's *The City of God* differ from More's *Utopia*, as Plato does not go beyond mere speculation about the best organization of a city, and St Augustine projects his ideal into the afterlife (thus creating not a utopia but an*alotopia*).

one way of expressing the "utopian thought" (7). There are, however, some trademarks that aid in identifying a utopian literary work, a structure of sorts, and it entails a journey to a yet unexplored place, where the traveler is offered an accompanied excursion of the place, and is given insight into the social organization of the society: religious, social, economic and political realms are explored. It typically involves "the return of the utopian traveler to his or her own country, in order to be able to take back the message that there are alternative and better ways of organizing society" (7).

I would like to argue that all three novels contemplated here have a utopian quality in that they all involve journeys (both for the characters and for the readers), offering insight into alternative ways of organizing the world. And even if there is no actual return of any given character, the reader does, in fact, travel, gains insight into another culture, and returns with possible alternative organizations of societies in mind (Shevek, in *The Dispossessed*, returns to Anarres; in *The Left Hand* Genly Ai does not, however, return to Earth; and in *Forest* there is no one single character that conducts the exploration of the planet. It is the reader that travels and learns something new). However, none of these social orders are perfect, as the idea of a utopian place is often taken to mean just that. Vieira calls attention to this fact, adding that one of the most striking elements of utopian fiction is that it is a "speculative discourse on a non-existent social organization which is better than the real society" (p.7), therefore not necessarily perfect. There is a catch, though. Utopian societies, Vieira points out, are "human-centered", that is, they are "built by human beings and meant for them," reckoning that there is a rigidity in the laws that rule these civilizations because "utopists very often distrust individual's capacity to live together," so the function of these rules is to "force the individuals to repress their unreliable and unstable nature and put on a more convenient social cloak" (7). In this sense, only *The Dispossessed* is more identifiable as a utopia, as Le Guin often exposes the pitfalls of the anarchist and capitalist systems she thought-experiments with.

In an introduction added to *The Left Hand* in a 1976 edition of the book, Le Guin explores issues related both to the genre of SF (a genre label she often criticizes in interviews, since it pinholes writers instead of allowing for genre complexities) and to this particular literary work; but it applies just as well to *The Dispossessed* and to *Forest*. She explains that the SF writer tries her hands at predictions. The author, Le Guin puts it, "is supposed to take a trend or phenomenon of the here-and-now, purify and intensify it for dramatic effect, and extend it into

the future. 'If this goes on, this is what will happen.' A prediction is made" (1976, p. 6). For her, it is an inaccurate prediction, an un-scientific prediction, but it is a prediction nonetheless because it works with the facts one has available in one's context. The SF genre usually involves journeys to other planets in other galaxies. Vieira demonstrates how More himself based his exploration into an unexplored place on travel literature, and in that sense SF and utopian literature show such similar inspiration that SF "has often been confused with [utopia]" (7). This approximation between the genres did not appear so obvious when SF literature began, as its focus was primarily (though not exclusively) on "the imagination of a fantastic world brought about by scientific and technological progress," but in more recent times, SF writers have shown a greater concern for social and political themes (Vieira, p. 7-8), and one might add that Le Guin has always demonstrated concern for these themes. The technicalities regarding the intersections between the genres are intriguing: while Utopian Studies scholars claim that SF is a branch of sorts of utopia, SF academics posit that "utopia is but a social-political sub-genre" (p.8).

Joanna Russ (1995) playfully bases her love for SF on the fact that it "analyzes reality by changing it" (xv), adding that the SF writer usually takes pleasure in "taking things apart to see how they work" (xvi). The reason of her admiration for the genre is interestingly similar to the place from which Vieira claims utopists come from, as they "depart from the observation of the society they live in, note down aspects that need to be changed, and imagine a place where those problems have been solved" (8). It is a reverse engineering of sorts, as in Russ's argument, and a reorganization of the pieces, as in Vieira's. On a similar note, Susana Funck (1998) claims that "[w]riters write out of a literary tradition, negotiating between inherited and oppositional views, reading their plots as they write them in the light of what is culturally available" (9). That is, both the SF writer and the utopian writer create worlds from what is culturally available, but the former, one could claim, adds a prediction to what is available, although the writer is not, Le Guin highlights, in the business of predicting futures. The utopist, on the other hand, suggests something new, some way of organizing things differently. And that is something that Le Guin does in all three novels. Her work is highly speculative, a "what if" thought experiment projected into a story. This is relevant for this study because *The Left Hand*, *The Dispossessed*, and *Forest* all take place in worlds where climate and environments produces effects in the characters' lives and in the ways they interact with their human and non-humans counterparts.

This allows one to draw pertinent parallels with our current condition on Earth since climate change, too, produces effects, and the Humanities have been attuned to this.

Adding to the debates on genre, David Seed (2011) contends that calling Science Fiction a specific genre may be problematic because doing so does not account for the hybrid nature of various SF literary works. It is more productive, he suggests, to "think of it as a mode or field where different genres and subgenres intersect" (1), since there is also the issue of science, that is, the attempt to lock in the findings of science in the narrative in an effort to promote scientific knowledge (a subgenre usually referred to as "Hard SF"). It is also important, Seed suggests, "to think of an SF narrative as an embodied thought experiment whereby aspects of our familiar reality are transformed or suspended" (2). As to its kinship to utopia, Seed espouses Darko Suvin's argument that both genres are constructed spaces, and that the accounts that describe them are not of actual places. In regards to the wave of feminist SF works that gained momentum in the 1970s and continues to this date, Seed argues that feminist "narratives are the most engaged, socially relevant, and responsive to the modern technological environment" (2). Le Guin is definitely part of this context, having produced one of her most important SF works in 1969, namely *The Left Hand*. Le Guin is, therefore, a central piece in the production of this hybrid genre(s) of SF and feminist scholarship.

Veronica Hollinger (2003) remarks that although SF has been taken as "the literature of change," it has been slow in recognizing "the historical contingency and cultural conventionality of many of our ideas about sexual identity and desire, about gendered behaviour and about the 'natural' roles of women and men" (126). It is not by chance that the epigraph to Hollinger's essay is: "Boy meets girl. Boy loses girl. Boy builds girl. (Anonymous, 'The Shortest Science Fiction Story Ever Written')" (125). SF literature is full of examples where women are underrepresented, misrepresented, objectified and/or nonexistent. However, Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Octavia Butler, Margaret Atwood, Marge Piercy, Doris Lessing, P.D. James, Jeanette Winterson, among many others, have contributed to the reshaping of the SF genre(s). These writers have done and are doing the work that Teresa de Lauretis, according to Hollinger, finds crucial: "'the telling of new stories so as to inscribe into the picture of reality characters and events and resolutions that were previously invisible, untold, unspoken (and so unthinkable, unimaginable, "impossible")'" (127-128) On top of that, Hollinger invokes some of the aforementioned feminist SF writers in order to

argue that their literary endeavors have helped not only reinvent the genre of SF, but also of utopian and dystopian fiction. Feminist SF, she adds, is not only about women, but it is "written in the interests of women […] It is a potent tool for feminist imaginative projects that are the necessary first steps in undertaking the cultural and social transformations that are the aims of the feminist political enterprise" (128), and Hollinger endorses Le Guin's terminology for explaining her own works: *thought experiments*, where one explores the "what if" scenarios that allow for revolutionary proposals on paper and, perhaps concomitantly or subsequently, on subjective and material worlds to come into effect.

Furthermore, according to Ursula Heise (2014) and Timothy Clark (2014), SF is a fruitful terrain for the exploration of human and nonhuman interactions, which is paramount for attending to the ethical issues we face in the Anthropocene. Ursula Heise claims that SF, both in print and in film, as well as in philosophical articulations, "emerged as the aesthetic genre that most persistently engages with the fate of planet Earth as a whole," as well as with "humans' relations to other species, and with the *longue durée* of evolutionary and geological time" (40). Heise lists a number of SF novels that deal with these themes and calls attention to the one thing that they all do and that can be linked to the ideas that I aim to explore. For Heise, SF novels that deal with ecological complexities "highlight how the altered environments resist and transform human bodies and minds" (41). In other words, the effects on the environment are not a one way street. Humans are affected and shaped by their (our) nonhuman counterparts as much as they shape and affect them.

Timothy Clark (2014) pursues a similar argument when he discusses literary representations of nature and of the Anthropocene. Clark invites his readers to be suspicious of attempts to portray the Anthropocene in realist literature. He points out that the moment is too unstable for realism, and the scale of time and space implicit in the Epoch are too incommensurable:

> With [the Anthropocene's] bizarre kinds of action-at-a-distance, its imponderable scale, the collapse of distinctions between the trivial and the disastrous, nature and culture, and the proliferation of forces that cannot be directly perceived, the Anthropocene becomes deeply counterintuitive. It may find its analogue in modes of the fantastic, new forms of magic realism or science fiction, or texts in which

> distinctions between 'character' and 'environment' become fragile or break down, or in which the thoughts and desires of an individual are not intelligible in themselves but only as the epiphenomenal sign of entrapment in some larger and not necessarily benign dynamic. (81)

I would like to argue that the three novels here contemplated do just that, showing how unstable the nature/culture and human/nonhuman dichotomies are and how, in the planetary scales, humans are intricately dependent on their environments. I do not, however, fully agree with Clark. Realist literature is extremely powerful in its portrayal of what we have *already* done to Earth, as the novels of Ruth Ozeki show, for instance. I do acquiescence that SF literature can produce powerful portrayals of the Anthropocene, as its terrain is not limited to the reality we find ourselves in, but realist literature can be equally powerful in showing us both what has already been done and what can be done on a larger scale, politically, and on a smaller scale, in the form of personal, micro-activism.

Terry Gifford (2014), in discussing the inextricable relation between the pastoral tradition and an environmental reading of literature, often referred to as "ecocriticism", brings to the fore concepts that overlap with a feminist ecocritical theorization of culture and literature and suggests questions that I wish to address in the following chapters. Gifford provides a long list of variations of pastoral literatures from the past and present, troubles the notion of the pastoral, the critical position of the anti-pastoral, and the revised notion of the pastoral, under the name of "post-pastoral". The post-pastoral is where the pastoral becomes relevant for the nature/culture dichotomy, as Gifford explains that it is "best used to describe works that successfully suggest a collapse of the human/nature divide while being aware of the problematics involved" (2014, p. 27). The post-pastoral is not merely a way of reading that is now contaminated by an awareness of our current ecological crisis, it is a conceptual tool to think the ways in which the human/nature divide is problematic. Gifford then suggests six questions that texts with post-pastoral potential may bring to the fore for readers, to which he provides example-responses, taking a poem by Ted Hughes as a starting point. Below I list the questions, to which I will not attempt to elaborate answers for in the following chapters, but I will keep them in mind (especially questions number 1, 4, and 6) for their import on pondering the nature/culture dichotomy:

> 1. Can awe in the face of natural phenomena, such as landscapes, lead to humility in our species? […] 2. What are the implications of recognizing that we are part of that creative-destructive process [of nature]? […] 3. If the processes of our inner nature echo those in outer nature in the ebbs and flows of growth and decay, how can we learn to understand the inner by being closer to the outer? […] 4. If nature is culture, is culture nature? […] 5. How, then, can our distinctively human consciousness, which gives us a conscience, be used as a tool to heal our troubled relationship with our natural home? […] 6. How should we address the ecofeminist insight that the exploration of our planet emerges from the same mind-set as our exploitation of each other, the less powerful? (Gifford, 27).

Although the last question is the one most related to a feminist articulation of ecocriticism, the five previous questions are very much in tune with the concerns that are taken up by those engaged in environmental discussions on the Anthropocene. My intention is not to work with the notion of the pastoral in the analysis per se, but to recognize the usefulness of exploring the questions proposed by Gifford by using Le Guin's novels to explore them and find how her literature has the potential to advance environmental discussions and the nature/culture dichotomy.

3THIRD CHAPTER: The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction: An Alternative to the Spear

Our roots are in the dark; the Earth is our country. Why did we look up for blessing—instead of around, and down? What hope we have lies there. Not in the sky full of orbiting spy-eyes and weaponry, but in the Earth we have looked down upon. Not from above, but from below. Not in the light that blinds, but in the dark that nourishes, where human beings grow human souls.
Ursula K. Le Guin

What I hope to show in this chapter is how, in *The Left Hand*, *Forest*, and *The Dispossessed*, the main characters interact with planets Gethen, Forest, and Urras and the nonhuman elements that surround them in ways that illuminate some of the ethical issues we now face in the Anthropocene. My aim is to explore Le Guin's Carrier Bag Theory and use it to look at moments when characters are confronted with notions of *progress* that differ from the ones we have witnessed since the Enlightenment (and the Renaissance), the Industrial Revolution, and the Star Wars race, and which have, ultimately, played their part in leading us into this new geological Epoch.

In the epigraph above, Le Guin (1989, first published in 1983) invites us to look down. She tricks us into looking down by making us feel as if we are looking up, searching for other planets which are never really other planets, but our own, a mirror into which one looks and finds perhaps not Earth, but reflections of and on Earth. As a writer of SF, she often takes us to distant planets that show us our own by contrast. Perhaps one can see in this strategy another useful trick: in thinking one is looking up, one is seduced by the twinkling lights of progress, a mirage offered by the narrative of outer space conquest, rather than looking down into what is apparently (and never truly so) familiar territory. One is seduced by the idea of progress and future that space engenders, but the encounter is with more familiar, and yet sometimes unknown (unnoticed or intentionally ignored) reflections of Earthly practices and environments.

In *The Left Hand*, the envoy Genly Ai is from Earth and often compares planet Gethen to Terra. The comparison is more than useful: it is at the same time a critique of some of our ways and a suggestion that things need not be the way they are, here. Thus Le Guin shows us other possibilities *of being* in the world (worlds) and *relating* to it, and to

things on it. In *Forest*, on the other hand, it is through Captain Davidson's sinister visions of what things ought to be like on Forest, like Earth, that one learns how our planet ran out of wood in Le Guin's thought experiment. For Davidson, Forest's lands should be managed "scientifically," as they were on Earth prior to the depletion of forests. "It wasn't like that in Ohio," Davidson remarks, adding that "if you wanted corn you grew corn, and no space wasted on trees and stuff. But then Earth was a tamed planet and New Tahiti wasn't" (10). Captain Davidson's logic, clearly informed by instrumental uses of nature, by the imperialistic use of the spaces that are not one's own (often sacred spaces as in the case of white settlers' colonization of the Americas) illustrates the logic of conquest that has produced so much harm to human and nonhuman beings and things: man over nature, man over Other, man over matter.

In *The Dispossessed*, the contrast between planets Urras and Anarres, through the eyes of Shevek, reminds the reader that what humans on Earth have could be better used and cared for with a more productive ethics. On the anarchist planet of Anarres, everything is lacking or difficult: resources are scarce, providing food for everyone requires mathematical and intensive labor efforts, and the weather is uncooperative. The people, in contrast, are furnished with an ethics that allows them to thrive, even if sometimes just barely (when there are draughts, which in their turn cause famines). On Urras, the capitalist planet where resources abound and the weather is agreeable, the system mirrors the Western inequality-producing machine, obsessed with the idea of progress and possession. Very much for few, very little for many: the perfect recipe for a revolution, which ultimately takes place. So Le Guin's invitation to look not to the skies, but down, has many possible readings. One can, indeed, look up in a sense, as she does, in order to look down and imagine what other different configurations might be possible for the way we inhabit our planet. And one can look deeper down, as Donna Haraway does (2016), for instance, in a constant effort to look for ways of being that aim at making kin with others (human and nonhuman) instead of focusing on human exceptionalism and individualism. Basing herself on the reasoning of Thom van Dooren, she posits that "[n]obody lives everywhere; everybody lives somewhere. Nothing is connected to everything; everything is connected to something" (p.35), calling attention to the importance of situated knowledges and a politics of location, echoing a feminist articulation most commonly associated with Adrienne Rich. Haraway, however, looks even deeper down, into what she calls the "chtonic powers of

Terra" (35) to find beings that might inform us with less imperialistic and godlike practices of the sky.

Haraway often draws from Le Guin in her theories, and repeatedly returns to "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," where Le Guin insists that the stories we tell have great impact on the formation of our ethos. If we insist on war, conflict, and competition stories, what sort of storytelling apparatus are we creating as a resource for how to live lives? Haraway (2016) reiterates these concerns in the following way:

> It matters what thoughts think thoughts.
> It matters what knowledges know knowledges.
> It matters what relations relate relations.
> It matters what worlds world worlds.
> It matters what stories tell stories.
> It matters what thoughts think thoughts. (p.38-39)

Haraway, thus, is inviting us both to think and to realize that there are material and immaterial – and consequently material to the ethical parameters one sets as model for thinking – effects to the stories we think of and tell in world-building, which is a feat that is not exclusive to speculative and science fiction, it is what one does on a daily basis. Haraway claims that "it matters," I assume, in two ways: it matters in the sense that it *makes a difference* and "it matters" in that matter is created out of ways of thinking, for our actions are guided by the "thoughts [that] think thoughts" and by the type of stories we tell (39). It is unnerving, Haraway suggests, to ignore these facts, or we would echo what Adolf Eichmann, in Hannah Arendt's analysis, did in not thinking for himself and simply executing the orders that he was given, what Arendt ultimately calls "the banality of evil". In analyzing Arendt's considerations of Eichmann, Haraway remarks that "here was a human being unable to make present to himself what was absent, what was not himself, what the world in its sheer not-one-selfness is and what claims-to-be inhere in not-oneself" (39). So Haraway wants us not to be "Eichmanns;" she conjures us to think and watch over what/how/with what and whom we think of in order to *world* our world. We must not fail, in other words, to make present to ourselves what is not there, what is absent. This careful way of thinking, I want to demonstrate, is present in all three books and is central to Le Guin's Carrier Bag theory.

Le Guin (1996) posits that the narrative of conquest was "invented" by hunters who, in prehistoric times, used the extra time they

had on their hands ("[t]he average prehistoric person could make a nice living in about a fifteen-hour work week", p. 149) to hunt mammoths and return with the real objective of the enterprise: a story. It is a challenge, she remarks, "to tell a really gripping tale of how [she] wrestled a wild-oat seed from its husk," for it does not compare "with how [she] thrust [her] spear into the titanic hairy flank [of the mammoth]" (149). The former does not produce the same hero-effect story that the latter does. But the hero's story has too much and too many characters at its service: the characters of his story and the songs and the thoughts are conjured to serve the purpose of telling the hero's story.

Le Guin summons Virginia Woolf's reinvention of the word hero in *Three Guineas*, where in the glossary she redefines the word "heroism" as "botulism,"[21] and the word "hero" as "bottle". Le Guin calls this enterprise of redefinition a "stringent reevaluation", and proposes something new, "the bottle as hero" (p.150). She wants the story, the container of meanings, to be the hero (a different, all-encompassing one), and she sees the story as a bag, similar to the recipient into which prehistoric humans gathered their seeds and oats and berries. The container is the paramount instrument for humans: it is where one can hold babies while gathering food, where one keeps the food that has been gathered, where one carries around important things.

The container, the bag, Le Guin demonstrates, was one of the first cultural devices manufactured by humans, and she draws from the work of scholar Elizabeth Fisher to make this claim. Crystalized in movie history, however, is the Ape Man's use of a "big, long, hard thing, a bone" (150), in a clear reference to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Referring to Kubrick's Ape Man, Le Guin expresses her intention to tell stories in a different fashion:

> [G]runting with ecstasy at having achieved the first proper murder, flung up into the sky, and whirling there it became a space ship thrusting its way into the cosmos to fertilize it and produce at the end of the movie a lovely fetus, a boy of course, drifting through the Milky Way without (oddly enough) any womb, any matrix at all? I don't know. I don't even care. I'm not telling that story. We've heard it, we've all heard all about all the sticks and spears and swords, the things to bask and poke and hit with, the long, hard things,

[21] Defined, in the Oxford dictionary, as "Food poisoning caused by a bacterium growing on improperly sterilized tinned meats and other preserved foods".

> but we have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for the things contained. That is a new story. That is news. (151)

It is not, however, news at all, Le Guin adds, since before we could devise the tool that killed, we probably devised the one that brought energy to one's home. Thus, Le Guin creates, inspired in Fisher's "Carrier Bag Theory of evolution," her "Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction". The author does support the line of reasoning that explains the origins of culture as an evolution focused on objects that are used for hurting and killing. She, however, wants no share in it. And it shows in her stories. *The Left Hand* could be read as a recipient where bits and pieces of things are collected to tell a larger story, one that tries to treat all its elements as equals. Genly Ai is no better or worse than Estraven, but most importantly, the landscapes, the creation tales registered in the book as recordings, the ice -- they are all elements that do not compete with one another, but form a whole.

If the ice is seen as an obstacle, one Ai and Estraven must cross to go from Orgoreyn to Karhide, it is also a blessing of sorts: "I am glad I have lived to see this" (220), Estraven remarks as he confronts the daunting landscape of the Gobrin Glacier. Ai feels the same, and it is not because the glacier is a welcoming, reassuring space. They must cross the glacier, so they put on their skis and take off, "down, north, onward, into that silent vastness of fire and ice that said in enormous letters of black and white DEATH, DEATH, written right across a continent. The sledge pulled like a feather, and we laughed with joy" (220). And Ice (the word is often capitalized in the novel) is only a part of the whole; there are over 62 words to define ice and snow in the Karhidish language.

In a conversation with Estraven, Ai manifests his wonder at the fact that Gethenians are such a "lonely species" on the planet. There are no other species that have common ancestors with the humans, no other mammalians, there are only small animals (fish and peshtry, that have the looks of foxes), and none of them can be domesticated as pets. Ai ponders on this and concludes that this "loneliness" must deeply influence the way Gethenians think. He is impressed, given Gethenians' "unbridgeable gap between [them] and lower animals" that they have managed to come up with a sophisticated theory of evolution, and supposes that this uniqueness must color not only their scientific thinking but also their emotional and philosophical contemplations. There is mention of two "religions" or philosophical approaches to life

in Gethen, the Yomeshta and the Handdara. The former, Estraven replies, would see this uniqueness as a sort of divinity, that is, men's uniqueness reflects their divinity and higher power above all other species and things on the planet. Genly Ai then remarks that this attitude closely resembles the "Lords of the Earth" reasoning that can be witnessed in other worlds and that are most commonly part of "dynamic, aggressive, *ecology-breaking* cultures" (232, my emphasis). Those of the Handdara religion, on the other hand, are, in Estraven's words, "less aware of the gap between men and beasts, being more occupied with the likenesses, the links, the whole of which living things are part." (233) Le Guin, in fact, seems intent on showing how things only seem, to uninformed observers, to be isolated (as Gethenians look, from Ai's perspective). Estraven then recites a Handdara poem[22]:

> Light is the left hand of darkness
> and darkness the right hand of light.
> Two are one, life and death, lying
> together like lovers in kemmer,
> like hands joined together,
> like the end and the way. (233)

The conversation moves on to gender, in that Ai suggests that, because Gethenians are ambisexual, they are undivided, proposing that they are

[22] In the preface to her translation of Lao Tsu's *Tao Te Ching* (1998), Le Guin explains that she had been exposed to this "Book of the Way" at a very early age; her father used to read it often and requested certain poems to be read at his funeral. Later in life, she ended up translating the work into English, and it is known that Le Guin embraces the Daosit philosophy. In the Handdara poem, the style resembles that of Lao Tsu, especially in that it proposes the notion of part and wholeness, as is common in "his" work (as Le Guin remarks in the preface, "[t]he *Tao Te Ching* was probably written about twenty-five hundred years ago, perhaps by a man called Lao Tzu, who may have lived at about the same time as Confucius.") Take the following poem, for example, entitled "2 – Soul Food": Everybody on Earth knowing / that beauty is beautiful / makes ugliness. Everybody knowing /that goodness is good / makes wickedness. For being and nonbeing / arise together; hard and easy / complete each other; / long and short / shape each other; / high and low / depend on each other; note and voice / make the music together; / before and after follow each other. That's why the wise soul / does without doing, / teaches without talking. The things of this world / exist, they are; / you can't refuse them. To bear and not to own; / to act and not lay claim; / to do the work and let it go: /for just letting it go is what makes it stay.

focused on wholeness while non-ambisexual humans are obsessed with dualisms. Estraven corrects Ai, claiming that Gethenians are dualists as well, saying duality is essential, "so long as there is *myself* and *the other*" (233).

Further along in their arduous trekking course toward Karhide, it dawns on Ai that the difference lies not on the fact that there is no duality on Gethen, or at least in the Handdara philosophy. Ai has always thought that, as an Envoy, he comes alone onto the planet that is being probed for the Ekumen in order not to be perceived as a threat. As he puts it, "I thought it was for your sake that I came alone, so obviously alone, so vulnerable, that I could in myself pose no threat, change no balance: not an invasion, but a mere messenger boy" (259). He realizes, though, that in being alone he cannot change a world, but be changed by it. Hierarchically speaking, it is more horizontal. It is "[n]ot We and They; not I and It; but I and Thou. Not political, not pragmatic, but mystical" (259). I take the word mystical, in this context, to mean the opposite of reason. Reason as we conceive it divides, compartmentalizes knowledge into assumingly comprehensible parts. Reason attempts to "wordify" what is observable and thus creates explanations for often unexplainable, complex systems. These explanations are useful for the world we live in, they involve a task that, although impossible, is also necessary for there to be some sort of consensus on the shared meaning of things; but they are also what strip things and people and cultures of what is not understandable and explainable with words. Genly Ai seems to use the pronoun "thou" as a way of expressing familiarity, kinship, intimacy. José Roberto O'Shea (2017), in fact, in giving thought to the daunting task of translating Shakespeare into Portuguese, brings forth a reflection on the pronoun "thou," explaining that it denotes, indeed, intimacy and familiarity.[23] That is, it is not simply a second person singular pronoun, especially in this context. Ai, in employing this pronoun, conveys the idea that an Envoy should, or at least in his condition *could*, befriend those from whom he is asking so much: their trust (for he has nothing to show for his words: his promise is the Ekumen, yet he only has himself to show for the people of the worlds he travels to as Envoy). In keeping with Le Guin's theory of the carrier bag, the world needs no heroes that behave as "Lords of the Earth."

[23] To ponder the importance of pronouns in Shakespeare, O'Shea invokes the work of J. Mulholland, entitled "'Thou' and 'You' in Shakespeare: A Study in the Second Person Pronoun," published in 1967 in the *English Studies* journal.

It is misleading, however, to mistake Le Guin's approach for lack of combativeness or even as her nurturing complete aversion to it. That is not the case in her theory and is not the case in her books. In the theory, she informs us that she is "an aging, angry woman laying mightily about [her] with [her] *handbag*, fighting hoodlums off" (152, my emphasis). Her handbag is both a container and a defense tool; what she needs lies in it, and she does not consider herself a hero for protecting herself; it is just something one must do "in order to be able to go on gathering wild oats and telling stories" (153)[24].

In *Forest*, for instance, there is both aggressiveness and combativeness, as is in *The Dispossessed*, in a somehow different fashion. In *Forest*, Le Guin explores a world, called Athshe, in the native language, where its human inhabitants, called Athsheans (the Terran humans' derogatory term for the natives is Creechies), rebel against the Terran humans who are destroying the forests, enslaving the people, poaching large animals for "recreation," and raping the women (also for recreation. In fact, when a shipload of Terran women arrives from Earth, they are described as being divided into Colony Brides and Recreation Staff). In the novella, we learn that humans' thirst for unending progress, after having logged planet Earth out of wood, finds another space for exploration and destruction. The story begins with Captain Davidson considering the effects of their logging one of the planet's island, which is now barren. The island's new name is suggestive: Dump Island. Davidson is pondering on a report that was handed to him, and reasons that "[i]f Dump Island was just rocks and gullies now, then scratch it; start over on a new island and do better" (p.2). The rationale that has led humans to explore other planets in search for wood is already well under way in the "Colony".

Terrans cannot carry out the logging process alone, so they enslave the natives, calling the enterprise "voluntary work," since the Athsheans are not, in their eyes, considered humans. All the Terrans that

[24] Gary Snyder, in *The Practice of the Wild* (2010, first published in 1990), sees similar storytelling possibilities in one's interactions with the wild, with the nonhuman elements that in there inhabit, for one does not need to necessarily engage in killing stories in order to tell good stories. It is an ethics for engaging with the wild, an ethics of being aware of the environment and the elements that, along with oneself, compose it: "The wild requires that we learn the terrain, nod to all the plants and animals and birds, ford the streams and cross the ridges, and tell a good story when we get back home". (no page, Kindle edition)

now colonize Athshe (also called New Tahiti, or Planet 41, by Terrans) are very much aware of the consequences of this violent endeavor. In courses that are given to them prior to their relocation from Terra to Athshe, they are exposed to the fact that slavery does not work, that is, they possess the information on Earth's failed attempts at slavery, but the premise is still the same, as one learns from Davidson: "this isn't slavery, Ok baby. Slaves are humans. When you raise cows, you call that slavery? No. And it works" (18). Davidson's cruelty knows no limits, and he adds, while discussing with a logging foreman who is uncomfortable with the slavery-like work regime they have the Athsheans under, Oknanawi, that "[Creechies] are little, all right, but don't let them fool you, Ok. They're tough; they've got terrific endurance; and they don't feel pain like humans" (p.19). The violence of these last quotes find resonance with the Western approach to slavery and the Vietnamese in the Vietnam war, as well as with the logic employed in the subjugation of women and animals.

In the 1974 documentary *Hearts and Minds*, directed by Peter Davis, the image of William Westmoreland, an American General, claiming that the Vietnamese do not feel pain like Westerners do, is counterpoised with the image of a Vietnamese child crying his heart out over the death of his father. In the general's words, "the Oriental does not put the same high price on life as the Westerner. Life is plentiful, life is cheap in the Orient, and the philosophy of the Orient expresses that life is not important". In other words, this is a narrative that fits the oppressor's intents, that justifies the hero's "righteous" stand as opposed to that of the oppressed. It is argued that *Forest* makes reference to the Vietnam War, as it was written while the war was taking place and connections can be made between the narrative and the war. Additionally, it is known that Le Guin fiercely opposed the military intervention that lasted nearly twenty years (Tony Burns, 2010). I will not, however, work with that assumption in analyzing the novella. As Tony Burns (2010) remarks, based on interviews given by Le Guin herself, the peace movements Le Guin was involved in were her chosen outlet for voicing out her political views and preferences so that she could keep her writing separate from her activism. Even though the relation between the Vietnam War and the novella may be drawn, I will steer away from going back and forth trying to make them, as that is not the goal of this study. I will restrict myself to establishing the following link: as in the Vietnam War and the Northern Vietnamese, the Athsheans fight back.

The supposed "hero" of *Forest* is hardly a hero, as he resists espousing the values that make him fight and that encourage his fellow Athsheans to fight. Selver, who was once an "aid" to Captain Davidson, rebels against the Captain, who has raped his wife. She dies from the rape wounds. Humans are much larger than Athsheans. Ashtheans are made to play human roles when it suits humans, and go back to being nonhuman, "humanoids," when it does not. Selver is the one who both engages in and refuses what Le Guin calls "the killer story" (p.152), of which we are all part, weather we want to or not, she reasons. The killer story, Le Guin puts forth, is the story that hides one's humanity from oneself: "the story the mammoth hunters told about bashing, thrusting, raping, killing, about the Hero" (152), so she decides to tell another kind of story, but they are not "wishy-washy" stories of "unaggressive or uncombative" beings (152), and all three books illustrate that point. Selver, as aforementioned, is not the hero type; he does not engage in the practices of violent self-defense with a clear conscience, or with a vigilante, punisher-like ideology, but in a way that echoes Le Guin's reasoning that one must fight the hoodlums off in order to be able to continue on telling stories that are not killer stories. But we all have, Le Guin argues, become part of this variety of story, although there are so many other types of stories, of creation stories, stories of transformation and of trickster narratives, narratives that offer alternatives to those of conquest, killing, dominating, and so on. But one must insist on telling these stories, on normalizing the bag instead of the spear.

What is key in Selver's and Athsheans' experience with the killer story, the one they have been exposed to once Terran humans show it to them, is that it cannot be washed away. Athsheans inhabit two worlds at once: the world-time ("real" world for Terrans) and the dream-time ("dream" world), and there is no clear distinction where one starts and the other ends. In fact, Selver goes back to a conversation he has with Lyubov, the Terran anthropologist who befriends him, highlighting the absurdity of the distinction humans make between the "real" and the "dream" worlds, "as if that were the difference between them," (45) Selver remarks. Terrans find Athsheans' "day-dreaming" practices a nuisance, relating them to slouchiness. Ideas flow in and out of the real and dream worlds, and by the end of the narrative, when Terrans are leaving Forest behind, a Hainish official bespeaks Selver, concerned about Athsheans' newfound ability to kill, and Selver replies saying:

> Sometimes a god comes [and] brings a new way to do a thing, or a new thing to be done. A new kind of singing, or a

> new kind of death. He brings this across the bridge between the dream-time and the world-time. When he has done this, it is done. You cannot take things that exist in the world and try to drive them back into the dream, to hold them inside the dream with walls and pretenses. That is insanity. What is, is. There is no use pretending, now, that we do not know how to kill one another. (189)

Like Pandora's box, with the Terrans there came the knowledge of the killer story, and there is no unlearning it. Lepennon, the Hainish official, offers a piece of advice: "But you must not pretend to have reasons to kill one another. Murder has no reason" (189). And it is telling that Selver does not kill Davidson when given the chance. "All the killing is done now. And the cutting of trees" (181), Selver professes. Good or bad, Selver considers Davidson a god, a messenger that has come to offer Athsheans something new, and Selver himself is a god in these terms. "You're an insane [god], and I'm not sure whether I'm sane or not. […] You gave me a gift, the killing of one's kind, murder. Now, as well as I can, I give you my people's gift, which is not killing," Selver remarks, adding that both most likely find "each other's gift heavy to carry" (180).

Sandra J. Lindow's (2012) work on Le Guin revolves around the morals of the writers' work. She hypothesizes that Le Guin's stories, and especially her characters, are more concerned about how to make a decision that is thought through than engaging in battle. Her characters are more thinkers than warriors. Lindow posits that Le Guin realizes, from an early point in her career and despite her classical training in literature (largely focused on the hero's story), that the hero's path is tricky, as it can "too easy go from doing good to doing harm" (2). Le Guin's novels, Lindow points out, usually take on the structure of a labyrinth, as her protagonists live through situations that lead them to tackle issues such as "political organization, family structure and gender identity, ultimately discovering the center of what it means to live honestly and respectfully in any world" (3). And do we not, too, live a moment that involves, as Lindow puts it, "a life-changing experience"? Faced with the fact of global warming, the threat of a sixth mass extinction, and so many other factors that are the result of our actions, how do we not stop and think of the moral implications of our choices? Do we keep on eating meat? Maintain our levels of consumption? Upgrade cell-phones on a yearly basis? Turn a blind eye on the instrumental uses of natural resources, pretending we do not know the

future consequences of our actions? Although many scholars (Haraway, as aforementioned, puts the word Capitalocene on the table to name the current Epoch) suggest that the problem is structural, it is ingrained in the economic system we inhabit, how can one know the facts and not act on them, even if individually and to little or no impact?

Le Guin is known for having a life-long engagement with the teachings of the Tao, which, as Lindow points out, is "one of the oldest guides for moral development" (2) and her work on Le Guin traces these teachings and their roles in the thought-developments and actions carried out by characters in her stories and novels, aiming to look at how she "depicts […] pivotal moral decisions that function as rites of passage and correspondingly affect the direction and quality of later life" (3), and in "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," Le Guin makes clear her intent to steer away from the killer story, and ponders the following on what concerns novels and what she aims to compensate for in her own work:

> The novel is a fundamentally unheroic kind of story. Of course the Hero has frequently taken it over, that being his imperial nature and uncontrollable impulse, to take everything over and run it while making stern decrees and laws to control his uncontrollable impulse to kill it. So the Hero has decreed through his mouthpieces the Lawgivers, first, that the proper shape of the narrative is that of the arrow or spear, starting *here* and going straight *there* and THOK! hitting its mark (which drops dead); second, that the central concern of the narrative, including the novel, is conflict; that the story isn't any good if he isn't in it. (152)

In all three novels, the main characters trouble the figure of the hero, although it is hard to say that there are not conflicts that drive the narratives, such as the possible adherence of Gethenians to the Ekumen in *The Left Hand*, as well as the threat of war; the attempt to drive Terrans away from Athshe in *Forest*, and the desire to "unbuild walls" in *The Dispossessed*. Still, resuming the troubling of the figure of the hero, neither Genly Ai nor Estraven fit the hero frame. They are not intent on conquering their ends by whatever means, although they do have a plan and stick to it as far as they can and as the circumstances allow them to. The plan, however, involves themselves and, to a considerably larger extent, nature: the crossing of the Gobrin Ice from Orgoreyn to Karhide entails a number of challenges that are much greater than any human's capacity for planning. There are no great plots

to neutralize enemies, no fighting against a great notion of injustice, nor the classic climatic moment when either of them suffers a great injustice and one fights for the other's honor. It is true that Genly Ai tries to restore Estraven's honor once he is killed, but it is only by means of words and, when these fail, he acknowledges the role of patience and understands that he is on a planet where his values fail to allow him to grasp what is really at stake. He does not force justice down King Argaven's throat; he does not see the king only through the lenses of a person who has lost a friend to an injustice, but instead sees him as "a woman who has lost her baby, like a man who has lost his son" (291). After having spent more than 80 days alongside Estraven, Ai is only beginning to understand some of the codes of the Gethenians. He does know that, with time and information, and not with the spear, Estraven's legacy will be acknowledged, for without him Gethenians would not have had, at that particular moment, access to the Ekumen. And even that is not, Genly often remarks, a great issue, since the Ekumen have time, and would attempt at establishing the world consortium with Gethen again in the future if Ai were to fail.

Selver troubles the heroic narrative by refusing to espouse the values of resistance he and his fellow Ashtheans are offering Terrans; he is deeply concerned with the fact that Ashtheans, a peaceful people who knew not the horrors of deadly combat, have now learned something that they cannot unlearn. In fact, in *The Left Hand* Estraven is concerned with a similar issue when Genly Ai arrives on Gethen: he fears that the Sinoth Valley strip of land conflict, over which Karhide and Orgoreyn are fighting, could lead his planet's people to war. War, organized conflict, is such a foreign concept on Gethen that there is no word for it. Unorganized forays, however, are quite common, and never involve many citizens. Genly Ai remarks that, in what concerns the Sinoth Valley land dispute, war would already be fully in place on the other worlds at the stage of civilization Gethen finds itself in (the known and allied worlds of the Ekumen is his parameter). On Gethen, Ai ponders, "nothing leads to war. Quarrels, murders, feuds, forays, vendettas, assassinations, tortures and abominations, all these were in their repertory of human accomplishments; but they did not go to war," adding that what they seemed to lack, apparently, "the capacity to *mobilize*" (48-49, emphasis in the original). This is so because, especially in Karhide, the Domains are self-governing to a certain extent: there are no inspectors to make sure whether laws are followed or not. The Domains are composed of Hearths, places where different people sharing a common genealogy and affinity live together, and these

Hearths are, in a way, self-governed, so that adherence to regal orders is dependent upon the agreement among the members of each Hearth. The Prime Minister himself, Estraven, does not necessarily endorse all of king Argaven's orders, especially when it comes to the unnecessary killings in the Sinoth Valley region. Not adhering to orders in the Domains differs, however, from not adhering to the king's commands while in the capital of the Nation and living under the king's keen eyes, so Estraven is ultimately banned from Karhide and seeks refuge in Orgoreyn.

In *The Dispossessed*, the same "refusal" of sorts can be found in what concerns the hero's story. Shevek is hardly a hero; he is a scientist who betrays, in a way, his anarchist planet in choosing to go to Urras, the capitalist planet, in search for answers. When Shevek returns to his home planet, one is not even sure whether he will be killed upon descending the ship; he does not return a hero, and he does not leave Urras as a hero, either. In fact, the whole idea of the hero is incompatible with Shevek's understanding of himself. On Anarres, nature is so ruthless from the human perspective – nothing thrives easily, much effort must be put into making food do for everyone – that there is no life without the cooperation of all its inhabitants. No one is seen as lesser, at least not in the same way as on Urras. When Shevek arrives on the capitalist planet, he is soon exposed to the logic that creates heroes and villains, worthy and unworthy people. The flight from Anarres to Urras usually takes four days, but in order to accommodate for Shevek's need for a "habituation time," the captain of the ship, which is called *Mindful*, made it in five days, swearing his way from one planet to the other. The doctor who is accompanying Shevek in the voyage explains, when asked, that the captain "is used to looking on all foreigners as inferior, as less than fully human" (p 14). More than suggesting that the reasoning in vigor on Anarres is the same as ours, one could claim that Le Guin is exploring the possibility that, in a society that truly values all individuals, there is no room for blatant oppression, for the overvaluing of some(things) over others (things). Shevek, surprised that such a retrograde way of thinking is still in place, recalls that Odo, who once conceived the utopian plan for Anarres, described in her writings that on Urras there was once "[t]he creation of pseudo-species," but he finds this hard to understand "since [Urras has] so many languages and nations, and even visitors from other solar systems" (14). In other words, for Shevek, difference should make room for more, and not less, equality. Shevek is a vehicle for exploring an anarchist system, its qualities and shortcomings, and a capitalist system,

a mirror in a certain way to our own system. What is really at stake in the novel are the ways of being in the world (those worlds, our world), in a sense. As a SF that is also categorized as a utopia, *The Dispossessed* is even more a collection of things than the other two novels. Characteristic of the latter category, it involves a travel, a guided tour of a society (in this case, one is introduced to two societies – Shevek gives us insight into Anarres and is given insight into Urras), and the traveler is "given an explanation of its social, political, economic and religious organization;" and he or she returns to his or her own country "in order to take back the message that there are alternative and better ways of organizing society" (Vieira, 2010, p. 7). The twist in *The Dispossessed* lies in the fact that the society Shevek returns to is apparently the better one between the two. And although it is human-centered, as Vieira points that that is one of the traits of utopia ("utopian societies are built by human beings and meant for them", p. 7), Shevek often remarks on the central role nonhuman beings and things play in the Anarresti ethics. Shortly after his arrival on Urras, on his ride from the spaceship to his new installations at the Urrasti University, Shevek sees a horse for the first time in his life and is startled by the estrangement it causes on him. The horse is, in fact, the first large animal he ever sees, as there are no large animals on Anarres. He remembers his partner Takver, who is back on their home planet, and her work in fish husbandry, and remarks that: "[s]he had always known that all lives are in common, rejoicing in her kinship to the fish in the tanks of her laboratories, seeking the experience of existences outside the human boundary" (22). Kinship, for Shevek, and for the Anarresti, it seems, is not a matter of belonging to the same species, so the notion of a pseudo-species among one's own species seems both far-fetched and unfortunate.

Le Guin's preferred format for the novel, thus, is not the spear, but the sack, the bag. The way in which the novels are organized, as a matter of fact, resemble more a collection of things than a spear; all three books either go back and forth in time (*The Dispossessed*), or are narrated from different points of view (*The Left Hand* and *Forest*). *The Left Hand* is even more complex in its collection of things, as it takes the shape, at times, of anthropological records: there are transcriptions of tales and myths, field notes from one of Ekumen's investigators, and so on. A book shaped as a spear would probably look more like the story of a hero who goes full circle in leaving in search of victory and returning with the mammoth as the prize.

A book, Le Guin maintains, "holds worlds. Worlds hold things. They bear meanings. The novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a

particular, powerful relation to one another and to us" (153). A novel, she contends, should not be reduced to the notion of "conflict". Conflict will be part of it, that is sure, but she criticizes the "manuals" for writers that argue for the centrality of any sort of conflict. It is an element, but like the hero, it is one among many others. And, from a "vibrant matter" perspective, taking up Jane Bennett's notion, it is truly one among many elements, since all is part of the play of bodies that, in assemblage, make meaning together: the novel itself, the reader, the noises in the room where one is reading, the smells, the texture and comfort of the chair one is sitting on. The hero, representing the spear, would not look good in the bag, Le Guin playfully notes, as he would need "a stage or a pedestal or a pinnacle. You put him in a bag and he looks like a rabbit, like a potato" (153). The author, however, claims that writing a story that is not about the hero is hard, but it is neither impossible nor something new: creation stories, myths, trickster tales, and so on, she points out, have been around for eons; and that is what she intends to do. Tell not the killing story, but the one that is "full of beginnings without ends, of initiations, of losses, of transformations and translations, far more tricks than conflicts, far fewer triumphs than snares and delusions; full of spaceships that get stuck, missions that fail, and people who don't understand" (153).

There are many writers and scholars who espouse Le Guin's ideas on the contents of novels and their shape. Thomas King (2003) often calls attention to the effects the stories we tell have on the way we (using Haraway's words) world our worlds. Frequent in his writing is the reminder that although stories are marvelous things, they are also dangerous, precisely because of what they effect. King tells a creation story that involves a witch gathering where they dare each other to tell the most horrid story possible. One of the witches tells such a horrific story that the others ask her to take it back, which she cannot do, of course, so it is set loose to cause whatever harm it may. The author focuses greatly on creation stories and explains that the orality of native accounts often diminishes the authority of the narrative while the Western (mostly Christian) mode of telling, with its highly stylized and formal language, gives the story authority and a "sense of veracity" (23). The difference, however, is not only in the form, it is in the content, too. While the former kinds of stories, the native ones, are often accounts of cooperation, the latter are stories of hierarchies. While there is balance in the former, there is competitiveness in the latter, and he wonders why it is that "we relish stories that lionize individuals who start at the bottom and fight their way to the top, rather than stories that frame these

forms of competition as varying degrees of insanity," and why we choose to "tell our children that life is hard, when we could just as easily tell them that it is sweet" (26). His most central question, the one that, as I see it, relates to Le Guin's (and Haraway's) ponderings, is this: "[d]o the stories we tell reflect the world as it truly is, or did we simply start off with the wrong story?" (26). The political aspect of storytelling in this sense is material: in stories we establish facts that pass for the "truth," or that create convenient truths that "stick" to the popular imaginary and may have disastrous effects. The examples King works with are the Indian in the American literature and the Indian of Edward Sheriff Curtis's photographs. In nineteenth century American literature, usually termed as the "American Romantic Period," the Indian, King claims, was "tailor-made for it," and "death and nobility were sympathetic ideas that complemented one another," so that the Romantics found a suitable persona for the Indians to wear ("a literary shroud in which to wrap the Indian [and] bury him," in King's words) (33) When Curtis went looking for the Indian that was portrayed in the literature, he could not find him, because he did not exist anywhere but in literature. He then filled the trunk of his car with elements that were commonly associated with native cultures, such as "wigs, blankets, painted backdrops, clothing" (34) so that he could style all the Indians that might have happened not to look as they "should," according to the construct that had been designed for them. "Native cultures," King remarks, comparable to any other cultures, are ever-changing, they are not stable pieces of artifacts, so that when Curtis searched out for a native culture and eventually found it, "it was changing from what it had been to what it would become next," but his idea of what the Indian ought to be like was, he adds, "already fixed in time and space" (37) by means of the stories that had been told about it and them. Curtis's undertaking was, King declares, to seek and find not what *was* but "what he needed" (37).

Stories, as King remarks, are indeed wondrous things, and they can be dangerous at times, as shown in the examples above (King, 2003, p. 9). Oppositional stories, however, are also a possibility, and in them lies a way to countering some of the damage done by the violent ones. Upon seeing that the past invented by the novels and by the historical "facts" of literature, a past that had been and often still is propagated on the most various kinds of media and in schools and history books, native people realized, King puts forth, that "the past was unusable," for it was all that was available to them (the past, never the present or the future, since they had been declared a dead or dying culture and people), native

writers began to "use the Native present as a way to resurrect a Native past and to imagine a Native future". They knew, of course, and as King reiterates again and again, from "empirical evidence that they were very much alive" (106). In the creation of this new and old and present and past native universe, binaries showed their limitations. What recent native writers have been proposing in their narratives is that "there are other ways of imagining the world, ways that do not depend so much on oppositions as they do on co-operations," and key to these stories is that they "raise the tantalizing question of what else one might do if confronted with the appearance of evil" (110). The story of the spear, the hero story, tends to construct evil as something to be fought against, not as part of the way the world works, where good and evil are problematic concepts that usually depend on point of view and vested interests, so, King asks, holding the controversial idea of good and evil together, "just how would we manage a universe in which to attempt to destroy evil is seen as a form of insanity" (110), and his example is fitting, as he invokes the idea of the US "bombing the world into goodness" (111). It is not, King posits,

> […] that we don't care about ethics or ethical behavior. It's not that we don't care about the environment, about society, about morality. It's just that we care more about our comfort and the things that make us comfortable – property, prestige, power, appearance, safety. And the things that insulate us from the vicissitudes of life. (163)

We could, King fancies, tell stories that praise co-operation, stories that carry the messages we urgently need (and have urgently needed for long), and argues that for us to develop a different ethics from the one that is currently in vigor we need to start telling different stories.

Le Guin's critique of the hero narrative and King's examination of the effects of stories are also an inquest into the narratives of progress, as they presuppose that there are certain modes of being in this world that "belong" to the present and future, as well as ones that "belong" to the past. Anne McClintock (2004) points out, in her assessment of the term "post-colonial," that the notion of progress in colonial discourse is that humans have or will traverse from "from slouching deprivation to erect, enlightened reason" (1186), a hubristic view of any system of being and interacting with the world that does not work under the Enlightenment values. McClintock develops this particular argument based on the spatial and discursive configuration of

an art exhibit entitled "The Hybrid State," where colonialism, post-colonialism and a supposed "hybrid" state are explored. The exhibit is particularly problematic in that it presumes that colonialism (the door that leads to this section of the exhibit is entitled "The Passage") is associated to progress, while the section entitled "Postcolonialism" proposes the "hybrid state" postcolonial countries now find themselves in, suggesting that colonialism and its effects have been surpassed, that the mixture between the "regressive state", which McClintock formulates as a "regression backwards from (white, male) adulthood to a primordial, black 'degeneracy' usually incarnated in women" (1186), and "progress" has given birth to something positive, devoid of complications. There is, the scholar postulates, a "temporal logic" implied in the notion of the door entitled "Passage", as it leads one to travel from a "primitive" (constructed as so) pre-history, unlit and language-less past to "the epic stages of colonialism, post-colonialism and enlightened hybridity" (1186).

As with the Indian[25] past that King describes in his critiques of a version of facts that "stuck", McClintock's assessment reaches a similar result: the narrative that is being construed is that of history as a line that progresses through time and has a fixed objective, that of progress as envisioned by Enlightenment values (which also has a face, a gender, a race, a class). McClintock moves on to explore the term post-colonialism and its (still) ubiquitous prefix. The positive feature of the "post," for her, is that it suggests a break in linearity, in the notion of "historical 'progress'" (1186). It also, however, reasserts the Western obsession with the binary in the use of a colonial/post-colonial, further changing the focus from what McClintock terms the axis of power "colonizer/colonized" to the axis of time, suggesting that it is, above all, less politically nuanced than the former, "since it does not distinguish

[25] In the book entitled *An Inconvenient* Indian, King (2012) explains that he uses the term "Indian" to describe the collective of native nomenclatures not because it is a good noun to describe the collective experience – there is not a collective experience or people, and he is adamant about this – but because it is one of the so many nomenclatures available for this end: Native Americans, Aboriginals, First Nations, Amerindians, and Indigenous Peoples, among others. As he puts it, "[t]erminology is always a rascal" (Kindle Edition, 2012). It is intriguing to note the similarity of King's argument to McClintock in what concerns terminology, inasmuch as both Indian and Post-colonial fail to illustrate the enormous variety of nations, of cultures, of peoples, of experiences, of economies inherent to the conditions that led to the creation of these terminologies in the first place.

between the beneficiaries of colonialism (the ex-colonizers) and the casualties of colonialism (the ex-colonized)" (1186). The implication of doing so also lies in the making of a version of history that places colonialism in the past, as if it were not still producing effects.[26] In an even more complicated twist, the "post," McClintock remarks, "reduces the cultures of peoples beyond colonialism to prepositional time" (1187), as colonialism becomes a marker in "history proper," as she puts it, and, more seriously, makes post-colonial cultures "share only a chronological, prepositional relation to an Euro-centered epoch that is over (post-), or not yet begun (pre-)" (1187). The distinction among the enormous varieties of cultures that share a colonial past are marked by their relation to "European time" and its obsessive notion of linearity, and not "positively by what distinguishes them" (1187), McClintock adds. I hope the connection I am trying to draw here does not seem far-fetched, but my goal is to find a common ground between what is characterized as the killer story, the hero story, the story as a spear, and how discourses on progress are largely responsible for stories on how the hero conquered an animal, a place, a people, just as Western binary discourses that have for long justified the conquering of peoples (based on race, gender, and class), places, things, nature, and animals are grounded on Enlightenment values that have established the notion of progress, what it should "look like," and for whom it is designed. Thus, time is marked as a spear, as in Le Guin's carrier bag ponderings, in King's accounts of the past and future that is available for Indians[27], and in narratives of progress that are available (and often imposed) on peoples and cultures.

The idea of progress is a complicated one in view of its manifold effects. It positions cultures and peoples that are not in compliance with its values in an eternal past, seeing that even its present is a sort of past and future that is only possible within the "progress" framework. McClintock (2004) estimates that the first great challenge to the notion of progress came about in the 1980s, when the US changed its policy toward Third World countries. Invigorated by the "great leap

[26] Anibal Quijano has proposed a term that reflects the ongoing system of colonialism with the term "coloniality of power," whereby he demonstrates that the rationale that oriented colonialism: enlightenment values that classified human beings in races and authorized their oppression.

[27] King uses the word "Indians" to mark the colonizers' geographical mistake when they thought they had reached the Indian Ocean and had, instead, reached the Caribbean.

forward (space, again, is time)" (1193) enjoyed by the US in the 1950s economic boom, the United States began their attempts at forcing elsewhere the notion that "other countries could 'progress' only if they followed the US road to mass-consumption prosperity" (1194). The recipe was clear, and it entailed following the same stages the US had undergone (a modernization in the form of industrialization), and the "help" overseen by both the IMF and the World Bank, toward the so-called "mass-consumer prosperity" (1193). When the attempt to "universalize" progress failed in the 1980s, it became clear that not only was the plan was not devised to pull countries out of poverty but it also made them sink in debt and ensure the US's place as the leader in world economy, which did not necessarily happen, for Germany and Japan had emerged as economic forces and the US was, as McClintock puts it, hobbled in debt. As its recipe failed as a model of progress and development, the US (and Reagan's policies more specifically) "instituted instead a bullying debt-servicing policy towards poorer countries, bolstered by aggressive competition with them on the market […]" (McClintock, p. 1193). The countries affected by this new policy, McClintock points out, "could aspire only to tighten their belts, service their debts, and maintain some credit" (1193), and they now had to rework what had been conceived as progress, seeing that it became even more further removed from what they could expect to reach.

McClintock highlights one of the most appalling effects of the progress and development myths devised by the US on global ecologies, putting forth that by the end of the 1980s

> […] the World Bank had $225 billion in commitments to poorer countries, on condition that they, in turn, endure the purgatory of 'structural adjustment', export their way to 'progress', cut government spending on education and social services (with the axe falling most cruelly on women), devalue their currencies, remove trade barriers and raze their forests to pay their debts. Under the financial spell of the US (and now Japan), and in the name of the fairy-tale of unlimited technological and capital 'growth', the World Bank engineered one ecological disaster after another […]. The Polonordeste scheme in Brazil carved a paved highway through Amazonia, luring timber, mining and cattle ranching interests into the region with such calamitous impact that in May 1987 even the President of the World Bank, Mr. Barber Conable, confessed he found the devastation 'sobering'. (1194)

The "price" of progress, which already seemed high in the late 1980s, has risen to such a proportion in the last thirty years or so that it seems irreversible, catastrophic even. The news are filled with climate change headlines that vary from the speedy death of Australia's Great Reef[28] to the administration of President Trump deleting much of the information on climate change on the White House's website on the day Donald Trump took office,[29] to despairing news on the current levels of global warming,[30]to, finally (to offer one last example), "What the Muck of Walden Pond Tells Us About Our Planet",[31] showing a relevant contrast between what Henri David Thoreau saw in 1864 and what scientists now see in it. Alongside what the phosphorus enrichment scientist Curt Stager finds in the deposits on the bottom of the pond, one of the markers of our ubiquitous writings on the strata, he mentions the presence of a layer of mud that emits radiation, "a memento of the early 1960s, when humankind flirted with Armageddon. So many thermonuclear weapons were tested in the atmosphere then that the fallout contaminated every body of water on Earth, and every person, too," and Curt adds that the "ecological changes revealed in the sediments of the last century were more extreme than anything in the previous 1,400 years, and some were unique in the history of the pond" (Curt, 2017, no page). The effect of the intensive and speedy (especially in the last 60 years or so, the period that coincides with the Great Acceleration) industrialization, progress, and development, modeled on the richest and most predatory and imperialistic nations of the world, is no longer a "what if" scenario, but a fact. As data builds up, it scares (or

[28] New York Times piece entitled *Large Sections of Australia's Great Reef Are Now Dead, Scientists Find,* published on March 15, 2017.

[29] On January 20, 2017, the New York Times published a piece entitled *With Trump in Charge, Climate Change References Purged From Website* on what happened on the day Donald Trump took office as president of the USA, when information on Climate Change suddenly disappeared from the White House's website.

[30] Scientists have found that 2016 was the hottest year on record, and a number of pieces in the NYT reported on this fact (see the piece http://nyti.ms/2nSU7F3, where it states that out of the 17 warmest years on record, 16 happened in the 2000s, and http://nyti.ms/2nGztJ4). The news company also created a webpage where any city of choice's mean temperatures could be analyzed: http://nyti.ms/2nALeUw.

[31] The piece makes constant reference to Henri David Thoreau's stay in the cabin that is right beside the pond.

should) even the skeptics, and torments the scientists who are carrying out the daunting task of gathering the data on climate change, ocean acidification, chemical pollution, biodiversity loss and the other five[32] planetary boundaries within which scientists calculate we must operate in in order to guarantee that conditions on Earth remain stable enough to sustain life as we know it. As Bruno Latour (2017) puts it, "[i]t doesn't stop; every morning it begins all over again. One day, it's rising water levels; the next, it's soil erosion; by evening, it's the glaciers melting faster and faster," adding that before the day ends, on the nightly news "we learn that thousands of species are about to disappear before they have even been properly identified" (Kindle Edition).

[32] The nine processes entail: global warming, ocean acidification, stratospheric ozone levels, nitrogen cycle, atmospheric aerosol loading, chemical pollution, biodiversity loss, land use change, and freshwater use. For a full description of each of these processes, see Rockström, J et al, 2009.

4FOURTH CHAPTER: Planets Respond to Progress

Capitalism is a body that judges its well-being by the size of its growth. Endless growth, limitless growth, as in obesity? Or growth as in a lump on the skin or in the breast, cancer? The size of our growth is a strange way to judge our wellbeing.
Ursula K. Le Guin

Progress and development are central issues in the novels, as they all either present alternatives to the focus on progress (as is the case with Gethen), demonstrate its harmful effects (as in the state of the Earth in contrast with planet Forest), or show the pitfalls of the progress and development rationales (as on Urras, when compared to Anarres). The planets themselves are also central to the novels. In *The Left Hand*, Planet Gethen is referred to by the Ekumen as Planet Winter. It is wintery, filled with mountains, and hard to navigate. From space, what stands out is the ice. There are no large meat animals on Gethen. The population adopts a mainly vegetarian diet, with the occasional meat provided by a small animal or fish. There are no dairy products available on the planet. Immersed in an intense cold, people must eat often in order to consume enough calories to survive in those conditions, "[a] lowgrade diet for a bitter climate" (10), as Genly Ai puts it. He also notes that Gethenians do not eat often and have mastered the technique of starving for indefinite periods, especially in the aforementioned Handdara religion.

The weather changes rapidly on Gethen. The heat of the sun suddenly gives way to heavy clouds that fall into snow. Gethenians are used to this suddenness, but Genly Ai, the envoy of the Ekumen, voices the strangeness of it all while standing at a parade in Karhide's capital, Erhenrang: "[t]he rain is gone, the sun shines on us, the splendid, radiant, traitorous sun of Winter" (2000, p. 4). It is hot, Genly Ai is sweating, and in half an hour's time it starts snowing. He is otherwise constantly cold. Karhiders have central heating but do not use it in their homes so as not to lose the "physiological weatherproofing" (28) of sorts that they have developed throughout the centuries. The comparison Ai makes is with birds: Earthly Artic birds, if kept in warm tents, get frostbitten feet as soon as they are released into the cold. Karhiders are kin to arctic birds in this sense. Ai, on the other hand, is an Earthly, "tropical bird" (29) and is constantly cold. In Karhide, he walks up and down to warm himself up. Walking, in fact, is the main "mode of

transportation" on Gethen. They do have automobiles, such as landboats and cars, but there are places where automobiles cannot enter or access, such as the city of Rer, in the country of Karhide. The city, Ai clarifies, "was built before Karhiders used powered vehicles, and they have been using them for over twenty centuries" (53). One finds "covered walks, tunnel-like, which in summer one may walk through or on top of as one pleases" (53); Rer is made for walking. Gethenians' notion of progress is clearly not marked by sudden changes or by the continuous accommodation to technological advances, and the fact that cities that are centuries old do not adapt their urban configurations to embrace automobiles illustrate that.

For a month, Genly Ai lives in a city (a Clan-Hearth) called Gorinhering, describing it as a "house-town-fort-farm built up on a hill above the eternal fogs of the Hodomin Ocean" (97). There are more or less five hundred people living there, and he makes the following considerations, which can be read as a commentary on the possibility of another world (the imagined Gethen) against our current world, Terra:

> Four thousand years ago I should have found their ancestors living in the same place, in the same kind of house. Along in those four millennia the electric engine was developed, radios and power looms and power vehicles and farm machinery and all the rest began to be used, and a Machine Age got going, gradually, without any industrial revolution, without any revolution at all. Winter hasn't achieved in thirty centuries what Terra once achieved in thirty decades. Neither has Winter ever paid the price that Terra paid. (97-98)

Le Guin tackles the moment that marks when, on Earth, a deep change in the way we relate to the production of goods took place. The Industrial Revolution, in fact, is one of the possible moments for the beginning of the Anthropocene. Scientists belonging to the *Anthropocene Working Group of the Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy* analyze data from three especially impactful moments in the history of the world when humans started having more expressive impacts on the Earth and leaving their marks on the strata. The first one, as mentioned before, is termed "early Anthropocene" and coincides with the beginning of agriculture, a few thousand years ago. The second coincides with the Industrial Revolution, at around the year 1800. The third one is located in what has been termed the "Great Acceleration" period of the twentieth century, which coincides with the end of the

Second Great War and with the nuclear bomb tests that began in 1945 and remained a mainstay of the Cold War era through to 1988, with the average rate of explosion of one bomb every 9.6 days (Zalasiewicz, J., et al., 2014).

The moment of the Industrial Revolution was the first to be proposed as the beginning of the Anthropocene by Crutzen and Stoermer (according to Zalasiewicz et. al.), and is marked by the invention of the steam engine. This period is symbolic of the transition from

> a long period of slow, if uneven, human population growth, expanding agricultural modification of the landscape and energy use primarily from a combination of wood-burning and muscle-power, to an interval of rapid population growth, urban growth and industrialization powered by increasing use of fossil fuels. (Zalasiewicz, J., et al, 3)

The power humans had access to changed from manual labor to the steam engine, and the result was not only responsible for an increase in the production of goods, but also for the effects of this new mode of production. In other words, as Zalasiewicz et al put forward, based on the work of Fischer-Kowalski et. al, humans then crossed a "key historical threshold in the energy metabolism of humans (from biomass to fossil fuels)" (3), and thus began a period when fossil fuels became a symbol (and a marker) of human intervention at a larger scale than ever before. It is meaningful to highlight that the marker for a possible beginning of the Anthropocene is not the first evidence of human presence on Earth, but, as Zalasiewicz et. al. explain, the signs of "scale, significance and longevity of change (that happens to be currently human-driven) to the Earth system" (4). The Industrial Revolution has been considered a boundary moment precisely because it fits that criteria (alongside its traces on the Strata), even though Zalasiewicz's working group favors the moment of the Great Acceleration, as it is even more representative of our effects on the Earth system. One of the main differences between these two boundary moments, they point out, is that the Industrial Revolution did indeed leave its mark on the strata, but over a period of more of less one hundred years, and especially over Europe, and later China and India. The Great Acceleration period, on the other hand, left its mark (is leaving its mark) on the Strata in a much more ubiquitous and speedy way, so even though the Industrial Revolution, in terms of stratigraphy, is less representative of a boundary

moment, it represents a moment of transition in which the force of humans and its effects, as mentioned above, multiply in previously unthinkable ways. In this sense, there is an inauguration of a way of being in the world that epitomizes the way we live to this date.

Speed is one of the concepts that invoke the aura of progress. With steam, in the Industrial Revolution, the speed of modes of transportation – trains, steam boats – increased, as did the speed in the production of consumer goods. On Gethen, in not adjusting the social spaces of the city to the growing speed of vehicles, one could, perhaps, infer two points from this resistance. Firstly, one could claim, based on Ai's perceptions, that in resisting (not refusing, for powered vehicles are used, they simply do not dictate the speed or geography of people or places) the speed of powered machines, one is also resisting the beehive mentality of the Industrial revolution, where in several buildings from the Victorian Era bees are used in their decoration as "symbols both of hard work and the acceptance of the social order." (Paul Atterbury) As Genly Ai explains, "Gethenians could make their vehicles go faster, but they do not. If asked why not, they answer 'Why'? Like asking Terrans why all our vehicles go so fast; we answer 'Why not?'" (50). In a slightly more moralistic tone, but nonetheless resonating with the conundrum we find ourselves in, in the Anthropocene, Ai adds that "Terrans tend to feel they've got to get ahead, make progress. The people of Winter, who always live in the Year One, feel that progress is less important than presence" (50). In other words, in resisting the thirst for speed, a society allows for changes to sink in before they become irreversible. Secondly, expanding on the conclusion of the first point, in not following through, implementing changes at full speed once a new technology is developed, there is the realization that nature might not be able to handle speedy changes in a way that is favorable to humans who are willing to live as part of it. "Winter is an inimical world," Ai explains, concluding that

> its punishment for doing things wrong is sure and prompt: death from cold or death from hunger. No margin, no reprieve. A man can trust his luck, but a society can't; and cultural change, like random mutation, may make things chancier. So they have gone very slowly. At any one point in their history a hasty observer would say that all technological progress and diffusion had ceased. Yet it never has. Compare the torrent and the glacier. Both get where they are going. (98)

Val Plumwood, in pondering on the usual traits of feminist utopias, which from the 60s on are populated with women-ridden societies where hierarchy among humans and nonhumans is not the norm, there is care for nature, and military and economic forces do not dictate the ways and so on, emphasizes that this sort of vision has its power, for it both brings hope and makes us confront the sadness of our current situation: we create these alternate worlds because the one we live in closely resembles feminist dystopias, "where technological mastery extinguishes both nature and less technologically 'rational' cultures, where we face the imminent prospect of loss of the world's forests along with the bulk of its species diversity and human cultural diversity" (7), adding that many cultures have already been obliterated by our Western modes of existence in the name of "progress," which brings forth pollution, inequality, and mass extinction, among other misfortunes. None of Le Guin's three novels give account of feminist ecotopias, but they all either suggest an alternative to what we currently live or blatantly call out our current mistakes, and most of them are linked to our thirst for progress, which can also be understood as a thirst for speed. Indeed, not only are the novels not feminist ecotopias, but are also not essentialist, which is one of the main criticisms that fall over novels of the genre, especially in cases where there is a strong connection between the notions of nature and nurture in women, a link that has often been used to oppress both nature and women, assigning them places or roles within which they could act. Plumwood is part of the group of theorists that have attempted (and are still attempting) to identify where the connection is problematic and where it can be redeemed in a different light, considering not only women's but also men's connection with nature, or at least troubling the view that there is such a thing as nature as separate from either men or women.[33] This, Stacy Alaimo claims, is at the root for the formation of dualisms; in her words, "a foundational term for a set of dualisms that are fundamental to how Westerners make sense of things" (531). Le Guin's novels do not paint a world where only women rule, creating yet another dichotomy,

[33] Plumwood, in fact, makes an amusing reference to Virginia Woolf's famous essay entitled "Angel in the House," suggesting that there is a vein in ecofeminism, which she both criticizes and calls out disservice to current trends of ecofeminism, which sees women's relation with nature as an "angel in the ecosystem," a sort power to infuse one with attributes such as empathy, nurture, connectedness and cooperative with nature, as if being a woman would guarantee these "virtues."

thus women/men; or where women have a symbiotic relation to nature, and the stories do not represent a refusal of technology or progress. The speed of progress and the ways in which the societies represented progress, though, are very much present and central to the novels.

In *Forest*, conceptions of progress entail much more a blatant critique and a warning than a counterexample, as they are in *The Left Hand* or in *The Dispossessed* (although they are most certainly also critiques and warnings, *what if* scenarios). Athshe, "Forest" in the native language, is a planet marked by trees and water; there are no open spaces. A third person narration with captain Davidson's bias tells the reader that, when Terrans arrived on the planet, there was "nothing but trees," rivers were "chocked by trees," and there was nothing else other than the native humans, the "Creechies," "some red deer, hairy monkeys, birds. And trees. Roots, boles, branches, twigs, leaves, leaves overhead and underfoot and in your face and in your eyes, endless leaves on endless trees" (15). Nature's abundance bothers Davidson and his conquistador mentality. In fact, Davidson calls himself just that, and in three months he and his crew of two hundred men managed to smother into barrenness one of the planet's five islands. The feat is meant to be Davidson's "scientific approach" to the land. He is supposed to chop wood and ship it to Terra; he is thus carrying out orders without taking any possible damage to a planet that is "not his own" into consideration, an interstellar Eichmann. When confronted by his colleague Kees about his blind-eye policy toward his team's recreational hunting of deer, an illegal practice according to the martial laws they are under, Davidson replies that he is willing to blink in order to make his men get through. Kees reminds Cap. Davidson of the arsenal of recreational options that the men have at their disposal, which includes drugs and hallucinogens, sex (with men, women, and Athsheans), and sports, and calls attention to the fact that they must obey the Ecological Protocols that were established prior to their exploration of the planet. Davison's reply resonates with recent claims made by the leader of the "Free World," Mr. Donald Trump, that complying with eco-friendly protocols harms the economy[34]:

[34] Some of the headlines that have appeared on the news in the year of 2017 and 2018 so far: "Trump Team to Promote Fossil Fuels and Nuclear Power at Bonn Climate Talks"; "Donald Trump with Withdraw the U.S. From the Paris Accord"; "It's not okay how clueless Donald Trump is about climate change We've come to accept Trump's ignorance, but it's often dangerous,"

> […] you want to keep this place just like it is, actually, Kees. Like one big National Forest. To look at, to study. Great, you're a spesh. But see, we're just ordinary joes getting the work done. Earth needs wood, needs it bad. We find wood on New Tahiti. So—we're loggers. See, where we differ is that with you Earth doesn't come first, actually. With me it does. (13-14)

Davidson might not represent only those aligned with what I will only now call the "Trump mentality"; he possibly represents all of us who choose to get the job done at the expense of others, including humans, nonhumans, and things. I say that to mark one step toward non-duality: there is no good human and bad human, as all have the capacity to be both, and Le Guin surely explores that in the novella. Selver, who learns from Davidson and his men how to kill, chooses not to kill Davidson, when given the chance. It matters what stories one chooses to tell, or, as Eduardo Kohn, an anthropologist, puts it, "how we represent the world around us is in some way or another constitutive of our being" (6).

Planet Athshe tells a story about itself in the way it is made, as do the other planets, namely Gethen, Anarres, and Urras (and even Earth/Terra, of which one is constantly reminded in the novels). James Lovelock (2010), in considering the threats we are currently under, reminds us of how much we owe to the natural world. He posits that the wild that is not in the vicinities of cities and farms "is not there as decoration but serves to regulate the chemistry and climate of the Earth, and the ecosystems are the organs of Gaia that enable her to maintain our habitable planet" (10). It is hubris, he argues, to think that we must save the Earth, as the Earth knows plain well how to look after itself. What we must do is "try to save ourselves" (9), and it is what Athsheans do once they decide that they can deal with the deforestation of their planet no more. It is themselves that they are looking after, as they depend on trees to live, as humans do. They are often described as "merging" with the trees, inhabiting them, and are confused with them, and even the twittering of the birds that inhabit the trees are often mistaken for Athsheans laughing (p. 31). When the Athsheans employ their first strike against the humans, precisely on Davidson's headquarters (he had been away, by helicopter, testing the recreational women at Central, who had just arrived), the Captain arrives by air and witnesses the destruction of Smith Camp, and next to it stood the forest, green, reminding him of what he feared, the wild. Lovelock argues that such an instinctive fear is sound, for "wholly natural places are as

inimical to innocent city folk as is the landscape of an alien planet infested by monsters" (9). Interestingly enough, Davidson fears both, as he sees solution only in the annihilation of both the forest and the native humans.

Eduardo Kohn, in his anthropological survey in the upper Amazon, in Ecuador, aims at exploring human and other-than-human encounters, and to thus expand, open the category of the human to new meanings. He uses the riddle of the Sphinx in Oedipus, the one the former poses to the latter, namely: "What goes on four legs in the morning, on two legs at noon, and on three legs in the evening?" (5), to explore what the answer might be beyond and with the answer, "man." He works with encounters, as does Haraway, and with the entangled representations that spring from them; and he criticizes our all-too-human approach to both understanding the world (one needs more than human history, language, culture and so on in anthropology to understand the human, one needs what the human makes 'itself' with, one needs the animals and the forests and the environments too) and representing it. Just like Karen Barad, Kohn, not using quantum physics but anthropology, calls attention to the limits of our capacity to represent that which is not human, and to come to terms with the affect and collaboration of the things represented on the one who attempts partial representations. What Cap. Davidson does, though, is to deny the participation of anything that is nonhuman in the process of "worlding," that is, he does not see the use for things to exist if not for human purposes. For him, hierarchy is set in stone, "from the top down, and the top, so far, is human […] so this world is going to go [his] way" (14). He is a "world-tamer" (12) and, depending on him, Athshe would soon look like "a desert of cement," as Kees puts it (14). Most compelling, though, is how Davidson sees Athshe prior to Terrans' exploration, as we learn from the narrator that "when they came here there had been *nothing*. Trees. A dark huddle and jumble and tangle of trees, endless, *meaningless*" (15, my emphasis). "Nothing," for Davidson, is precisely what they are there for, the wood that Earth needs so bad. Wood is merely instrumental for Davidson, as he and his men would now "end the darkness, and turn the tree-jumble into clean sawn planks, more prized on Earth than gold" (16). Davidson's hubris takes yet another tone when he compares Terrans with Athsheans, which shows how much he removes the human from nature. In pondering on the Hainish colonization of planets many millions of years before, Davidson sees the resemblances with Earth in what concerns vegetation and the animals that populate the planet, but considers the Athsheans an example of

where evolution failed. “As ETs they were about standard,” he claims, “but as men they were a bust, they just hadn’t made it” (17). His difficulty to see the human native as his other comes to show that he is utterly incapable of seeing himself through or with other species and things that surround him, be it on Earth or Forest, and it also sounds much like narratives on progress and how there is a missing element in societies that are deemed “retrograde,” which during colonization meant the presence of Europeans and the values associated with it, and in Davidson’s mouth comes out as a resolution to “save” Forest from its savagery: “Evolution moved now not at the pace of a random mutation once a millennium, but with the speed of the starships of the Terran Fleet” (17).

The chapters in *Forest* change perspective in that in each one the narrator takes on the bias, or tone, of the character it follows. A clear change in perspective is witnessed when Selver, the Athshean who defies Davidson and ultimately drives the Terrans away, takes on the role of storyteller (not in first, but in third person narration). Right in the first paragraph is what I believe to be a perfect metaphor for the way Athsheans behave toward their planet and the things and animals they share it with. The narrator is describing Selver’s walk to the Athshean town of Cadast, and calls attention to the fact that nature interrupts, at all times, any desire for a clear-cut view of things: “No way was clear, no light unbroken, in the forest. Into wind, water, sunlight, starlight, there always entered leaf and branch, bole and root, the shadowy, the complex” (35). The idea that no light goes unbroken is provocative because it conveys the impression that every attempt at a clear, uninterrupted, untangled view of any one thing is impossible. Earth, as portrayed in the novella, is an experiment where everything that does not resemble or mirror the feats of “human-ness” is removed. There are no forests, only man-made cement. There are no longer any animals other than rats (“which were the only wild animals left on Mother Earth,” p. 100) and here one might even think of Haraway’s OncoMouse (2013, first published in 2008), a lab worker who stays afterhours, after all other animals have left, to make men company, sharing their pain. In *Forest*, the Terran human has completely “removed” himself from nature, effecting an unbroken view into the world that makes it difficult for him to exist among trees anymore, for some more than others. For Davidson, nature is a nuisance, or anything that challenges his way of seeing the world. For the anthropologist Raj Lyubov, who befriends the Athshean Selver and studies him and his culture, nature is odd at first, but gains meaning as he grows accustomed to it. He had never, the

narrator informs the reader, "walked among wild trees […], never seen a wood larger than a city block" (105). Like Davidson, he felt oppressed and disoriented in the forest at first, for its incoherence, lack of unbroken light, and indifference to human presence, to "mind" (105), but soon started feeling more at home in the forest than in man-made spaces.

The reference to "mind" in this context is striking, as it can be tethered to the Cartesian split between body and mind; one can only *be* because one *thinks* in human terms, as if there were only one way, only the human way, of thinking and being. The forests in Athshe *are* very much alive, despite their lack of an obvious, apparent "mind." Life, in fact, defines the way Lyubov experiences and perceives the forests: "[t]he mass and jumble of various competitive lives all pushing and swelling outward and upward toward light, the silence made up of many little meaningless noises," as well as the "total vegetable indifference to the presence of *mind*" (105, my emphasis). Lyubov allowed, it seems, fear to become awe.

Karen Barad brings forth the Cartesian split and its "by-product," representationalism, to propose, in a critical fashion, her agential realist ontology theory. One of the main issues with representationalism, Barad expounds, is the idea that beings and things exist as individual entities, thus the understanding is that there is a gap between the "Knower" and the "thing that is known," a line of reasoning that presupposes no interference from either the knower and the thing, or if there is interference, it would come from the entity that holds a "mind." Representationalism, Barad expounds, is often organized as a system of three parts: the representation, the thing represented, and the knower, who is sometimes, not always, made evident. But when this is the case, the aforementioned gap, the "taken-for-granted ontological gap," as Barad puts it, "generates questions of the accuracy of representations." Many questions may arise from this system of representation, and Barad lists a few, such as "does scientific knowledge accurately represent an independently existing reality? Does language accurately represent its referent?" (804) among others. But the point is that the Cartesian split assigns the one who represents as the one with agency, stripping subjugated humans, things and nonhuman beings, in short all of what is represented, of their share in the act of resisting, informing and contradicting how they are represented. Barad brings forth the arguments of philosopher Joseph Rouse, who in his turn questions our uneven credulity "in word over world." He wants to "encourage doubt about [the] presumption that representations (that is,

their meaning or content) are more accessible to us than the things they supposedly represent" (Rouse, as quoted in Barad, p. 806), that is, the idea that our mental formations about things represented are more reliable than the things themselves. In Barad's words, "the asymmetrical faith in our access to representations over things is a contingent fact of history and not a logical necessity" (806), that is, it is possible to break free from this system of representation. The tendency to take representationalism for granted, however, has often taken a hold over how we see the nonhuman world, and it is clear that, in *Forest,* Cap. Davidson represents this logic, taking things and nonhuman beings that do not take on a "Terran human" shape and thus do not contain a human "mind" as matter for instrumental uses. The Athsheans and one human in particular, Lyubov, resist it.

Barad, of course, also resists this logic, and propounds a performative approach to understanding the world, or assigning temporary, situated definitions for the world around us. But before moving on, I would like to propose that by resisting the representational logic, Barad is, in a way, resisting the narrative of progress, which largely needs matter to be instrumental and "dead" other than agential (not accounting for different kinds of agency), having its own pace, story, and way of being (as in the case of landscapes and the "aliveness:" the glaciers on Gethen, the trees on Forest, the barrenness of Anarres). And it is precisely when the nonhuman partakes in the process of making meaning that the logic of progress gains another dimension: matter becomes alive. This, of course, applies mainly to things, and not to nonhuman beings, but this logic has been largely used to make instrumental use of both nonhuman beings and humans that are deemed as "less than human." The ecofeminist approach, as discussed in other moments of this dissertation, declares that this same logic, the one that authorizes the oppression of nature, is the one that authorizes the oppression of women and minority groups. What Barad does is ponder on the material-discursive relationship, on how things come to matter (mean and matter) both in their making of themselves (matter and humans) and in discursive practices.

Barad poses a question that both troubles the critique she is making (and that others have made before her) of representationalism and functions as an entry point to her proposal on agential realism. The question is: "[i]f words are untethered from the material world, how do representations gain a foothold?" (811). In other words, if one is claiming that the correspondence between the representation and the thing represented is not a given, that it can be put into question, then

how is any sort of representation possible? That is her entry point. Instead of stable meanings and positivism, there are what she terms "relata," something in the sense of meaning-in-relation. In order to do that, she refuses the "optics of transparency," which she also calls "the geometries of absolute exteriority or interiority" (812) and makes all the entities participating in the event responsible for the outcome. In other words, no participant is seen as atomistic (a concept she attributes for Democritus, meaning the smallest units of a given thing – what is indivisible), but is instead deeply affected by what surrounds it/her/him. Barad then resorts to quantum physics to develop the notion of intra-action, and invokes Niels Bohr's work in the field, which when proposed deeply challenged the Cartesian model of representation ("words, knowers, and things"). Bohr, Barad puts forth, develops a work where "things do not have inherently determinate boundaries or properties, and words do not have inherently determinate meanings," and where the idea that there is an "inherent distinction between subject and object, and knower and known" (813) makes no sense; and so he changes the way in which we understand the world, upon which understanding we act. The human, in the Cartesian optics, holds too much power, and robs the nonhuman world of its agency.

In this section, what I mean to foreground about Barad's agential realist ontology is the way in which it challenges the Cartesian split between body and mind, thus challenging the way in which humans (the mind) deny matter and nonhumans their due agency in the process of making meaning. The split, of course, is not new, and dates to Biblical times, but it was Descartes who, in *Discours de la Méthode* (1637), encouraged a "total reliance on reason – rationalism" (Marion Wynne-Davies, 1992, p. 119) that ruled the world of ideas in the 17th and 18th centuries, and still has a footing in this world today, informing our instrumental uses of most of what is not "rational" from an imperialistic human perspective. For Descartes, the combination of mind and matter is only possible in God, therefore impossible for us (Wynne-Davies). What Barad does, however, is to use Bohr's idea of relational ontology, which, summed up, implies that meaning is made in relation and not in the tripartite, Cartesian model, to propose the notion of intra-action. For Bohr, the smallest epistemological unit is "observer" and "observed," together, which he calls "phenomena." For Barad "phenomena" marks that and also "*the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting 'components*'" (815, her emphasis). I will attempt to explain that in my words. What Barad is proposing is that there is no unaffected being or thing in the world: everything is

happening in phenomena, and it may or may not involve humans in the process of meaning-making. When the human is part of the phenomena and one is attempting to reach a "definition" of something, or a situation, or another human, meaning is the result of the intra-action of all the components involved, and an "objectivity" can only be *enacted* with an "agential cut," as Barad puts it, in the sense that one is accountable for all of the exclusions and omissions that have been made in order to temporarily stabilize a concept. Another important point is that the "knower" is no longer deemed as holder of the capacity to see "the truth," but only as a unit of the phenomena, with whom all the other units intra-*act* and thus make aspects of themselves intelligible to "him." Things, in other words, speak not our "language," but hold meaning, for "[m]eaning is not a property of individual words or groups of words but an ongoing performance of the world in its differential intelligibility," that is, "[i]n its causal intraactivity, 'part' of the world becomes determinately bounded and propertied in its emergent intelligibility to another 'part' of the world" (821). Barad's theory, in not being anthropocentric, is perhaps perfect for the development of an ethics that places the human not as atomistic, as the one whose "objectivity" gives "him" power, but whose objectivity allows "him" to be accountable to the "marks on bodies" (824), to wit, accountable for everything that is left out of the equation in order for a temporary meaning to be propounded over some thing/some body/some one.

To close off this section, I will bring light to one example from each novel from where one can infer an ethics that permeates a given character's actions toward the world and/or nonhuman things, an ethics that is not informed by the logic of progress, but by a sense of awe that, as Terry Gifford suggests, might bring about a sense of humility in our species. In *The Left Hand*, perhaps the most meaningful moment is not one where Genly Ai and Estraven are confronted with nature's immensity, but when, at the final moments of their hiking adventure through the glaciers, they get to part from the sledge that accompanied them across the ice. It is a sign that they have used most of the resources that protected and nourished them through the hike, and that the item that carried these valuable resources is no longer necessary. Genly Ai's voice describes their parting:

> It was good to be released from forever pulling and pushing and hauling that sledge, and I said so to Estraven as we went on. He glanced back at the sledge, a bit of refuse in the vast torment of ice and reddish rock. 'It did well,' he said. His

> loyalty extended without disproportion to things, the patient, obstinate, reliable things that we use and get used to, the things we live by. He missed the sledge. (269)

Neither nature nor manmade things are simply instruments to advance or serve humans' needs and wants. Estraven does not ignore the role the sledge plays in their endeavors to reach Karhide. He seems to acknowledge that any agency he and Ai might have is intimately interfolded with innumerous others, be they human or nonhuman, and in this case it is a sledge. The sledge, for Estraven, holds a "thing-power," as Jane Bennett puts it, in the sense that it transcends its "object" side, revealing "independence or aliveness" (20). And although the term may reinforce the "object" side of a given thing, as well as its apparently atomistic state, Bennett's intention is to surpass the limitation of the term and suggest that it is precisely the opposite, in that "agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces"(21). In understanding that an atomistic perspective does not suffice to describe the world and the forces that act on it, that is, in understanding that agency is always a collaboration, Bennett suggests that we might be able to rethink our relationship with human and nonhuman bodies that collaborate with us in a more horizontal fashion, and that, she posits, is a "step toward a more ecological sensibility" (10), something we desperately need to act more and not less toward.

In *Forest*, the sense of awe comes not from Davidson, and right until his "end"[35] the planet is nothing but a mess: a mess of trees, a mess of houses and villages that mesh with trees, a mess of "humanoids" that are too at ease in this forest-covered world. Davidson sees only "progress" before him and is thus unable to encounter what Lyubov does, and is unable to empathize with the Athsheans's environment. When Selver is narrating to the headwoman of the city of Cadast the events at Smith Camp, where a number of Athsheans killed all the humans that were living and working there, he puts it that "the yumens came and began to *cut down the world*" (40, my emphasis). Interesting is the fact that humans do not, in his view, cut down trees; they cut down the world, suggesting that the world as they know it, as they want it to keep on being, is no longer one of forests (a group of trees, animals, noises, leaves, moss, and so on), which is the meaning of the word

[35] When given the chance, Selver does not kill Davidson. The Captain is exiled, taken to Dump Island, where there are no more trees and where erosion reigns.

"Athshe", forest, but one of barrenness. For Athsheans, nature is not a "thing" to be tamed, to be used as if devoid of life and purpose, but a living companion, a home to be lived in, a source of physical and emotional nourishment (Athsheans are experienced day-dreamers, and often experience the dream-time in the forests). The forests are deeply alive. As Selver walks toward Cadast, a description of the forest gives a strong sense of life and agency:

> The ground was not dry and solid but damp and rather springy, product of the collaboration of living things with the long, elaborate death of leaves and trees; and from that rich graveyard grew ninety-foot trees, and tiny mushrooms that sprouted in circles half an inch across. The smell of the air was subtle, various, and sweet. The view was never long, unless looking up through the branches you caught sight of the stars. Nothing was pure, dry, arid, plain. Revelation was lacking. There was no seeing everything at once: no certainty. The colors of rust and sunset kept changing in the hanging leaves of the copper willows, and you could not say even whether the leaves of the willows were brownish-red, or reddish-green, or green. (36)

It is challenging to read this passage and not think of Haraway's ideas on the collaboration of things (2016), both living, dying, dead, and inert matter. In her ponderings on our current necessity to "make kin," she posits that establishing alliances with people and things that are not related to us by blood, and even with things that do not even have blood, or veins for blood to run through, is the only way to survive. "We become-with each other or not at all," she often says (4), and her sense of urgency is to place us in a position where we do not declare that it is game over; to the contrary, and I argue that she would invite us to do like the Athsheans, who understand her aforecited injunction and truly act to impede the ongoing disaster that they are witnessing on their world. Their actions cannot be summarized as "the killing of the enemy," as there is so much more to what they do. First, even though Athsheans are enslaved upon humans' arrival on Athshe, still Selver accepts to collaborate with Lyubov, the Terran anthropologist, who in his turn produces volumes of work on Athshean culture and language. Second, upon establishing terms to peace after the second attack on Terrans, attacks devised to put a halt to the cutting of the world, Athsheans resonate what Le Guin proposes in *The Carrier Bag*, more precisely the idea that although she does not endorse the killer story, one

must now and again fight off the oppressors in order to be able to keep on telling non-killer stories. They propose a truce, which is only broken when a team commanded by Davidson, at a rebel camp, start surreptitiously attacking Athshean villages. Once they are stopped, all the killing is done. There is both a sense of purpose in the "gift" Athsheans "accept" from Davidson, the ability to kill which Athsheans did not have, and it is a "gift" in that it allows them to put a stop to the cutting of trees. Davidson and Selver are considered "gods" since Davidson brings something from the "world-time," and Selver, having witnessed his wife's death (from the wounds of Davidson's rape) and been almost killed by Davison himself, is a god in the sense that he is a "translator" of the gift into terms that can be used by Athsheans to promote the necessary changes to take a hold of their planet once again. Third, Athsheans seem to understand that some damages cannot be undone: the effect of the cutting of the world will one day fade, and future generations will perhaps be oblivious to the once dark past of their planet, but for now all would know the price that was paid for forests and for themselves to keep on being. What I am suggesting is that Athsheans do not succumb to the idea that their planet is doomed: it is not, and sometimes the price is a complete reversal of what is in effect. What is the "gift" of progress and how can we use it to deflect the course we are currently on? Could it be creativity? Could we not creatively find ways of becoming-with, as the description of the forest above, "[n]othing was pure, dry, arid, plain. Revelation was lacking. There was no seeing everything at once: no certainty." It seems that humans have long insisted on a revelation that might spring from cutting themselves from nature, on a certainty of objectivity, on a path with a certain outcome, and the idea of progress seems to represent that path. It is a sanitized version of what in fact *is*. Davidson insists on this "scientific management" of the planets and of things on them. He insists on a version of the world where neither humans which he deems inferior nor nature and all it encompasses (he does not see himself as part of it, naturally) have any sort of agency or will; where nothing interrupts the mental formation he might have on them, even when these beings and things consistently inform parts of themselves to him (or to those who represent this mentality). Selver and Lyubov, however, oftentimes bring forth a feeling of awe for their environments, and this shows in the way they relate to the world (Selver and Lyubov want to save it at any cost from its cutting) and their fellow beings. They show deep respect for elders, especially elder women, who according to Lyubov are crucial because they say what they want; and all their cities are run by women.

Their ethics, Lyubov ponders, is the result of the interaction of the Athsheans' arrangement between men and women: "[i]ntellect to the men, politics to the [older] women" (115). Said like that, it might sound like a troublesome statement, but it is relevant to note that the realm of politics, a realm not only relegated until very recently (until the suffragist movement, perhaps, with few exceptions in known history) exclusively to men, is dominated by women in Athshe, and elder women, and they act on behalf of both humans and nature. Their aim, in allowing for attacks to Terran human cities to take place, is to recover and preserve the world.

Aside from that, it might be relevant to bring forth the thought-exercise Le Guin explores in a piece entitled "The Space Crone" (1989, first published in 1976). In this piece, Le Guin discusses the phases in the life of a woman, starting with ponderings on menopause and the taboo revolving around the issue. Relevant to the argument I am trying to make, though, is that she invites women to "die old, white-crowned, with human hearts" (5). In saying that, Le Guin is proposing, in my reading, an idea that works in opposition to the injunction of progress, to always look young and pristine, brand new, newly produced. It is revealing that, in Athshe, all Terran women are young and fertile (in the essay, Le Guin puts it that "the only meaningful condition left to women is that of fruitfulness," p. 4). The Terran women in Athshe are machines of progress; they are "assembly line turning up life" (285), as Adrienne Rich puts it in *Of Woman Born* (1995), and Le Guin is both recognizing that (all the Terran women are killed for their potential to breed) and empowering women who have lived through all the phases of life and are "crones" now: they are able to say what they wish and contribute, from the top of the ladder (in the progress mentality, old age is a "where you go after life's over and wait for cancer or a stroke," p. 4), a different reading of women on a planet that revolves around trees: themselves all the more empowered with the passing of time. Le Guin finishes the essay with a compelling suggestion: that, if visitors from a neighboring planet came to visit and offered space for one human on their way back to their planet (Altair is its made-up name), Terrans would probably consider sending a Russian astronaut (American astronauts are too old, she plays), or a highly educated young man or woman.[36] Her pick, however, would be a granny, a woman who, for the mentality of

[36] Her argument is that some young women would volunteer "out of magnanimity and intellectual courage, others out of a profound conviction that Altair couldn't possibly be any worse for a woman than Earth is." (p. 5)

progress, has little to no value, and for her is a person who can represent humanity for having "experienced, accepted, and acted the entire human condition" (6). Instead of seeing through the lens of progress, which would probably foreground physical weakness, barrenness, and cognitive decline, Le Guin empowers old women and old trees: both tell stories about the times we live in.

Finally, in *The Dispossessed*, Shevek displays a profound ethics in his relationship with other humans and things. Since resources are so scarce on Anarres and the planet is so barren, the rarity of things and the effort it takes for producing the food and the structures to feed and house a human being are not taken for granted by Shevek, nor by most of his fellow Anarresti. In contrast with Urras, the "propertarian" and nature-abundant planet, Anarres is "meager; barren, arid, and inchoate" (65), a planet in formation whose material resources do not allow for any excess. Urras, on the other hand, "is what a world is supposed to look like" (65). Not by chance, it looks like Earth. One day, on Urras, Shevek's colleague, Saio Pae, takes him shopping. For him, this is a completely foreign experience, as there is no such thing on Anarres: one takes what one needs and usually never more than that. Pae leads him to a tailor to have a suit made for Shevek, as he is taller than most Urrasti. The way Shevek responds to the situation is as follows:

> The whole experience had been so bewildering to him that he put it out of mind as soon as possible, but he had dreams about it for months afterwards, nightmares. Saemtenevia Prospect was two miles long, and it was a solid mass of people, traffic, and things: things to buy, things for sale. Coats, dresses, gowns, robes, trousers, breeches, shuts, blouses, hats, shoes, stockings, scarves, shawls, vests, capes, umbrellas, clothes to wear while sleeping, while swimming, while playing games, while at an afternoon party, while at an evening party, while at a party in the country, while traveling, while at the theater, while riding horses, gardening, receiving guests, boating, dining, hunting — all different, all in hundreds of different cuts, styles, colors, textures, materials. Perfumes, clocks, lamps, statues, […] everything either useless to begin with or ornamented so as to disguise its use; acres of luxuries, acres of excrement. In the first block Shevek had stopped to look at a shaggy, spotted coat, the central display in a glittering window of clothes and jewelry. 'The coat costs 8,400 units?' he asked in disbelief, for he had recently read in a newspaper that a 'living wage' was about 2,000 units a year. 'Oh, yes, that's real fur, quite

> rare now that the animals are protected,' Pae had said. 'Pretty thing, isn't it? Women love furs.' And they went on. After one more block Shevek had felt utterly exhausted. He could not look any more. He wanted to hide his eyes. (131)

Shevek's gaze as an alien to the "propertarian" system is welcoming, especially its element of shock. To grow accustomed to the accumulation of things as if there were no great efforts to make them and impacts both on the world and on the people who make them is perhaps a mark of the Anthropocene. In keeping with this idea, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2014), in an interview, compares our experience of dissociation with how things are produced and their effects with the use of drones. He has one specific example in mind, and it is perhaps a more contemporary way of going about explaining the concept of alienation, as humans are often not even in contact with the machines they are operating anymore. The example he gives is of an American, in a control room somewhere in the US, flying an unmanned drone over a school in Pakistan, then pushing a button and bombing it. The drone is, according to him, the contemporary symbol of our relationship towards the world. When Shevek sees the objects he encounters at the high street in Nio Esseia, he sees consequences, and it makes him dizzy. The consequences of our actions, Viveiros de Castro posits, seem farther removed from our actions. As he points out, we buy our meat packaged in the supermarkets; one is not invited to go into a slaughterhouse to witness the death of one's dinner. That, and actions of the sort (which nowadays represent most of what we consume), he argues, is the "dronification" of experience. We are no different, he claims, from the soldier in the room, pushing buttons, or from the pilots who dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. The difference is that the world is responding in a way that disrupts our drone-like way of being in it: the ice is melting, the seas are rising, the planet is getting warmer. In other words, "*las catástrofes [están] llamando a la puerta*" (no page).

Shevek comes from a planet where resources are already scarce, and nature is uncooperative. Oddly enough, on Earth nature has been mostly cooperative for its abundant resources, and philosophical treaties abound on how man must tame it in order for progress to follow its course, as if nature were the enemy. When Shevek is beginning his career as a physicist on Anarres, and arrives in the city of Abbenay, a capital of sorts (even though the Odonian, Anarchist, society is very suspicious of centers and marks the artificiality of its status), he resists the abundance of trees on a square at the center of the city. The main

species of trees found on Anarres are Holum trees: they have few leaves and serve many purposes, but mainly it is a type of tree that manages to thrive on such a barren planet. In Abbenay, on this particular square Shevek walks through, there are alien trees, the same trees that exist on Urras, the propertarian planet where the plan for his own planet was devised by a revolutionary woman called Laia Asieo Odo, who never set foot on Anarres. At first, he is taken aback at the sheer amount of leaves each tree on the square carries. It seems excessive to him: how much water do they need? he wonders. In explaining the energy efficiency of Anarres, the third person biased narration informs the reader that although there is plenty of energy (especially wind and solar energy) to allow for excesses in lighting (for instance, power plants only use artificial light to light their interiors "an hour before sunrise and an hour after sunset, p. 98), excess is seen as "excrement," comparing any excess to bodily fluids that must be expelled from the body for it to function properly. This principle is so ingrained in Odonian society, the narrator explains, that it produces profound effects on the ethics and aesthetics of the Anarresti: things are simple, efficient, and the use of resources is kept to a minimum. But there is something that Shevek cannot quite explain, which is the effect of the lavishness of the trees on him. He is as uncomfortable as on the high street shops of Nio Esseia, on Urras, but the feeling, instead of causing him to want to leave, makes him want to stay: "[h]e entered under the trees, alert, wary. Were they not wasteful, there crowding leaves?" and ponders whether they are taking their toll on much needed Anarresti resources (100). What starts as suspicion, though, grows to become something else, as he feels the softness of the grass under his feet, as he is embraced by the trees' long, "dark limbs," and finally "[a]we came into him. He knew himself blessed though he had not asked for blessing" (100). Throughout the novel one witnesses such moments when Shevek deploys a profound awe, and even gratitude, toward nature and manmade things, expounding a deep "vibrant matter" mindset that is not rational, simply "mindful," as he is mindful of the necessary collaboration of things (human and not) for anything to be possible. And it is fetching, and perhaps not by chance, that the ship that carries him from Anarres to Urras is named "Mindful." Greta Gaard (2014) also uses this word in a piece entitled "Mindful New Materialisms," where she borrows ideas from Buddhism, such as "dependent origination," and connects it with the new materialist notions of "entanglement" and "intra-action." To be mindful, in this context, is to account for the interplay of all that is at stake at a given situation. In the square, the trees are not excess, they are

what one needs to both produce oxygen and please the senses, as nature often does.

5 FIFTH CHAPTER: Challenging the Border of the Nature/Culture Dichotomy

I have been here for a long time, the room said to Shevek, and I am still here. What are you doing here?
Le Guin, The Dispossessed

Perhaps the most meaningful split in the history of Western culture is that when the human removed "himself" from the world that surrounded him, thus effecting a wall. The wall, however frail as it may be, has for centuries produced a sense of separation that has justified a vicious posture on the part of the human toward not only nonhuman beings and things, but also toward other humans. The first words of *The Dispossessed* allude to this reasoning to such an extent that, in having one's mind focused on this issue, the following passage looks like a description of the effect of the separation that was once articulated (and persists to this day):

> There was a wall. It did not look important. It was built of uncut rocks roughly mortared. An adult could look right over it, and even a child could climb it. Where it crossed the roadway, instead of having a gate it degenerated into mere geometry, a line, an idea of boundary. But the idea was real. It was important. For seven generations there had been nothing in the world more important than that wall. (1)

As with the slash that separates the human from nature, the wall is feeble, but the idea behind it is so commanding that it produces vigorous effects. No matter how self-evident the frailty of the wall may be, as both adults and children can see over and climb it, humans have for generations relied on it for making their superiority a point over anything or anyone who is considered dead, inert matter, or not seen as a full human being. Le Guin adds that "[l]ike all walls it was ambiguous, two-faced. What was inside it and what was outside it depended upon which side of it you were on" (1). Even though the wall could be seen as enclosing the Port of Anarres and the universe beyond it, thus making Anarres free, the narrator ponders that it could also mean that the planet exists in a state of quarantine, a great prison camp on a planet that has no prisons. No side truly benefits from this arrangement.

In the novel, Shevek embraces the life-long challenge of "unbuilding" walls, and the same could be said about what happens in

The Left Hand and *Forest*. The three works allude to the nature/culture dichotomy, either to show its power or to dismantle it. In *Forest*, Davidson is mulling over fresh information: the newly arrived shipload of women from Earth and the crop failures report on Dump Island, a piece of land that Terrans have lumbered into complete erosion. Both women and nature are deemed as categories to be tamed, their implied wildness (and conflation) to be contained and controlled. The women are described as "212 buxom beddable little figures" (10) and nature as tamable, implying that both exist to serve men's instrumental uses for them. The Athsheans are equated with nature, and their women considered human only for "beddable" purposes, regaining the status of nonhumans, animals even, as soon as the intercourse (which often ends in death, since Athsheans are much smaller than humans) is over. For Davidson, women, planets, nature, and Athsheans ought to be tamed to function properly. About Earth, which at this point of the imagined future explored by Le Guin has no trees left, Davidson puts forth that it works as it should: if one wanted corn, one grew corn instead of allowing nature to do its own business of having trees or stubborn vegetation growing where it might. "If Dump Island was just rocks and gullies now," he ponders, "then scratch it; start over on a new island and do better" (10), which is what they do, now on Smith Camp. Davidson and what he represents want objectivity, and the trees, the forest, are construed by them as walls, as impediments to their goals of conquering, taming the planet, but they are doing the exact opposite, building walls, attempting to effect a cut between humans and Athsheans and nonhuman species and things, all in the name of unending progress. If Terra needs wood to keep on "growing," Davidson and his team will keep at it until yet another planet is lumbered down.

The first lines of *The Left Hand*, conveniently, also serve the purpose of showing the frailty of the wall, of the dichotomy. Genly Ai discloses at once that "[t]ruth is a matter of the imagination," adding that "[t]he soundest fact may fail or prevail in the style of its telling" (1). He resorts to an analogy, claiming that a pearl may look bright or dull depending on who wears it, and facts, he posits, "are no more solid, coherent, round, and real than pearls are. But both are sensitive" (1). It is all, one might conclude, a matter of storytelling, and the problem seems to reside on how fiercely one holds on to which side of the stories that have been told, or even believing that there are "real" sides, separation, to begin with. In this chapter I will explore the idea of the border, calling it "wall" to make due reference of Shevek's lifelong task of unbuilding them in *The Dispossessed*. I will attempt to show how, in the

novels, characters resist the border mindset and propose, again and again, alternative ways of relating with the world around them.

Inspired in Barad, Anzaldúa, and Haraway, I claim, first, the meaning of "matter" as a verb, as in how things take import and *mean*, produce effects. Second, I mean "matter" as a noun, as in how, after "mattering" as a verb, something gains ground and seems material, stable, and is taken to have always meant something. A border between countries, for instance. The border begins as an idea. In *The Left Hand*, the border between Karhide and Orgoreyn around the Sinoth Valley region is an idea. Each side claims to know where it starts and where it ends and each side claims to know "since when" it has been so. The border is a vague idea at first, as the wall that separates the Port of Anarres, and thus Anarres, from the rest of the universe; but it becomes tethered to material things and the resulting effect is the perception that the border is "true." One could entertain the idea that, in Western thought, prior to the dissociation between body and mind, between human (culture) and nature, it was not strange to be suspicious of boundaries. Boundaries, however, go far back in Western history and culture. As developed in the second chapter to a certain extent, the idea of nature is a complex one in Western culture. Timothy Clark expounds that one way in which nature is understood is as "the other of culture, that which arises without human agency" (75). Not only is this apprehension of the world inaccurate, but it is also damaging, and it is on this understanding of the term that most scholars focus on when troubling the "nature issue," that is, on the dichotomy of nature/culture. Perhaps the most damaging outcome of such an understanding of the world is, as Clark puts it, the notion that nature exists in a "condition prior to politics" (76), which means that everything that is nonhuman (and often even human, as our history is well-known and innumerous humans, based on race, class, and gender have been constantly subjected to oppressions under the argument that it is a will or "a force of nature") is stripped of agency. So nature is something that needs to be tamed, to be dominated; it is chaos that needs order. As Clark points out, in the Seventeenth century Thomas Hobbes insisted that nature had to be overridden, neutralized, and its chaotic state must be controlled, and in the Eighteenth century it was Jean-Jacques Rousseau who proposed something quite opposite, but all the same problematic: that there is a certain state the world must go back to, to a "lost ideal of natural humanity" (76). What environmental studies insist on right now, according to Clark, is that much of the damage that has been done to the natural world is "a result of political or social systems built upon

questionable constructions of nature," adding that, for a great number of scholars, "the ultimate source of humanity's destructive relation to the natural world is *dualism* – the assumption that human and nature are quite separate, that the human is radically divided in kind from the rest of creation" (77). I believe that Le Guin, in the three works analyzed here, constantly challenges this understanding, and although it may seem almost obvious to academics doing research in environmental studies and ecofeminism, as well as other areas that challenge dichotomies, the way the world goes about and the way countries pass most of their environmental laws and manage their businesses only shows how far we are from an understanding that the human is part and parcel of nature, and not a special entity, holding agency alone in a tower, with powers over beings and things.

Manuel Arias-Maldonado (2015), in attempting to answer the question "What is Nature?", poses that, in surveying the Western understanding of the concept, Darwinism represents a major shift in the way we conceive of nature. He also claims that nature is perhaps the most ambitious word in the whole of language, "one that intends to name all living things and processes" (17). Arias-Maldonado states one thing in advance, a disclaimer of sorts, that the understanding that we now have of nature is radically different from the understanding that there once was in Ancient Greece, for instance, that nature is that which is "not artificial" (18), and that nature is self-governing, thus having a will and that, in having so, its will is to "maintain its integrity," thus being independent from humans. "Natural history," Arias-Maldonado puts it, "is also social history—one that has spread human influence in so many ways, in such a scale, that it is now difficult to tell whether humanity is absent or not from a given natural process or a certain natural entity." Having this in mind, it makes sense when he argues that "[w]e have kept the word, but the world that it refers to has vanished" (p 18). If one thinks in terms of nuclear fallout, for example, it seems impossible to think of a space in nature untouched by human actions, and in such thinking exercise it is helpful to think of the categories of nature that Arias-Maldonado brings, based on the work of Kate Soper, those of *deep* and *shallow* nature. The latter entails the everyday contact we have with what we consider to be nature, such as the environment and pets, natural resources, bodies, and so on; the former entails "the causal powers and structures that operate constantly in the physical world and are the condition for any human intervention in the environment or the biological realm" (19). That is, the former refers to nature *before* and *with* humans, in that after humans there have been so

many changes that one is not independent from the other. Maldonado shows that there is a clear turning point in Western understanding of nature, namely Darwinism. Whereas nature is seen as having a design and purpose, even *for the sake* of humans and having religious or moral purpose,[37] since at least ancient Greece (circa 800BCE), in 1859, when Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* is published, it changes the name of the game completely. As Maldonado puts it, after pointing out that Darwin's theory is not produced without a context, being ultimately the culmination of the work of his predecessors:

> [I]t is his groundbreaking work that paves the way for a completely new understanding of the natural world and, crucially, human beings themselves. Darwin provided an explanatory device—evolution—that relocates humanity within the natural world in a revolutionary fashion, showing our common genealogy with other creatures and providing new tools for the study of life. In showing that nature is apparently deprived of any religious or moral foundation, let alone any inherent goal other than self-reproduction, Darwinism also had a major impact on culture and politics—one that may yet to be fully felt. Hence it makes sense to take it as the turning point in the history of the concept. (21)

Darwininsm is the completion of a cycle that starts in the Renaissance (when humans tackle Reason but are still attached to Christian mentality), gains momentum in the Enlightenment period (Reason and the idea that it can be used to attain perfection), and finally finds a "reasonable" explanation with Darwin's theory.

In the period of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, conceptions around nature tended to view it as a realm to be perfected, as agriculture expanded and there was both an increase in population and deforestation. Paracelsus, Maldonado posits, thought of nature as "unfinished," and saw in alchemy a tool provided by God for perfecting it. In this process, the interference in nature is made legitimate, if not indispensable, and the scholar points out that some environmental approaches still embrace this idea to a certain extent: nature as an inert

[37] Maldonado mentions the work of scholar Clarence J. Glacken on the notion of nature in ancient Greece to say that: "[...] the notion of nature as the result of a conscious design that actually fits human needs will become a key element in Western constructions of nature (Glacken 1967). Nothing would then be vain in the latter, everything would make sense." (p 220)

entity that could use a hand. This mentality, Maldonado expounds, is made possible by the advances in mechanics and science, and an example he provides illustrates this well, that of an engineering standing for an "architect of social progress" (23), which closely resembles the current idea of engineers as the warriors who will save the world from disaster with the use of geoengineering (a resource that exempts us, to a great extent, from the damage done so far to the climate, and from acting *now*). But in the Middle Ages this mentality gives way to the mechanization of nature, "far from the vitalist tradition" (24), and a Cartesian view of nature, which "refused to see nature as a living entity" (24) gains force. Nature becomes inert matter. This, Maldonado claims, citing the work of Carolyn Merchant, is central to the "death of nature." Nature no longer has a functioning body, it is a machine. Dualism as we now know it, Maldonado claims, starts there. "It is not merely a descriptive dichotomy," he puts it, "but a hierarchical one: human beings stand above nature, which in turn is composed of objects metaphysically separated from us," adding a somber remark: "[t]he world was being emptied out" (24). The mechanistic view of nature finds resistance, though, even within the Enlightenment movement, and Kant himself addresses the fact that mechanism fails to account for the signs that nature lives, a reasoning that opens the path for a vitalism of sorts, and prepares the terrain for Darwin's theory of evolution, as there is a growing "acceptance that nature has a history, that it unfolds and develops" (24).

Darwin's theory of evolution showed that there is no hierarchy among beings and that although there are laws governing nature, it had its own history, one filled with chance, adaptations and maladaptation over long periods of time. Evolution, Maldonado explains succinctly, "is a process by which species adapt to their environment—sometimes by changing it, as is the case with human beings" (25), and not a process where what matters is inferiority or superiority among beings, but erroneous notions of hierarchy and natural selection stuck as the way Darwinism is perceived, and these notions are often used to explain ideas of progress. Maldonado invokes the work of Peter J. Bowler to explain that Darwin's theory of evolution "triumphed at least in part because it was adapted to the increasingly popular idea of progress" (26), but Darwin reinforced at the time that

> [T]here is no force behind evolution, and thus no direction for the latter, […] evolution is a naked force that abolishes any teleological explanation for nature's history, let alone the

> notion that nature has the function of being useful to human beings. (26)

In *The Dispossessed*, Atro, a physicist from the "propertarian" planet of Urras, embraces such distorted visions of Darwinism in his conversations with Shevek.

Shevek goes to Urras so that he can finish his theory of Simultaneity, for on his planet people see no need of such a theory, they deem it unnecessary: a theory that would allow for instantaneous communication among worlds, no matter the distance. As the narrator informs us, "[n]obody there attached importance to the issue of free communication with the ideological enemy," thus another wall is built. Shevek, as an anarchist, wants to make this available for all the worlds, at no cost, and succeeds in doing so, as we learn in the end. But in the development of the story, one learns that the propertarians of Urras want him there because they see the possibility of profiting from this theory. Atro is an elder scholar, whom Shevek finally meets after years of interplanetary academic snail mail. Back on Anarres, the latter would send his papers to Urras and have them back with comments from Atro. At Atro's home, the scholar is preaching on how it will be wonderful when they, the Cetians (the Anarresti and the Urrasti, together, on the eyes of the Hainish people), have the Simultaneity theory in hands, as it will prove their "intellectual superiority," even though the Hainish (who create the League of Worlds, the Ekumen) have already proved that they all have common ancestors. Shevek takes this to be an unquestionable fact, but Atro thinks that "'mankind' is a bit over inclusive," so he builds walls and invokes religion to explain his resistance:

> The religion of my fathers informs me […] that I'm a descendant of Pinra Od, whom God exiled from the Garden because he had the audacity to count his fingers and toes, add them up to twenty, and thus let Time loose upon the universe. I prefer that story to the aliens', if I must choose! (142)

Interestingly enough, this story of Origin could have been told both in Genesis and by the mouth of Coyote, as it invokes the image of Adam and the image of a playful and daring coyote, who turns everything inside out.[38] But Atro's faithfulness to this myth of origin is useful to

[38] For Coyote stories, see Thomas King's *A Good Story, That One* (2013), *Green Grass, Running Water* (1994), and other titles by the author, who deeply

him, for it serves the purpose of allowing for the building of walls, for justifying his denial of common ancestry with the Hainish, for a hierarchical storytelling that divides the world. Shevek tries to laugh his way out of the conversation, but Atro elaborates on his theory some more. He argues that what is useful about his society's beliefs is that it teaches one to discriminate. Atro wants to convince Shevek to give his theory, once finished, to the Urrasti, or at least to keep it between them and the Anarresti, and he finds Shevek's ideas on mutualism, collaboration and brotherhood, backwards, insisting that "[t]he law of existence is struggle—competition—elimination of the weak—a ruthless war for survival. And I want to see the best survive" (143). Revisiting Thomas King's remarks[39] on the stories we tell, and on how it makes a difference whether one tells stories of cooperation or hierarchy, it might be useful to think of Atro's comments as insanity. It is intriguing that Atro's comments prompt Shevek to revisit his mission, which is precisely the opposite of what the former preaches: brotherhood (144), what he in other moments refers to as the wish to "unbuild walls" (8).

Elizabeth Grosz (2008), in her attempt to make peace with Darwinism within feminist scholarship, reckons that, in feminist research and politics, "nature has been regarded primarily as a kind of obstacle against which we need to struggle," adding that, how could it not, since it has been often seen as "that which remains inert, given, unchanging, and resistant to historical social, and cultural transformations" (23). Nature, however, is not that, and Darwin did not make these claims about it. As aforementioned, erroneous interpretations of Darwinism, as well as purposeful misleading uses of it, are partially responsible for the distance feminist scholarship has taken from the category of nature and Darwinism. As Grosz puts it, both the argument of "nature" and the theory of evolution have been actively employed "by those with various paternalistic, patriarchal, racist, and class commitments to rationalize their various positions" (23, 24).

Stacy Alaimo, on a similar note, provides two main (and broad) reasons as to why feminist scholarship has struggled with the word and

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explores the ways of the coyote in Native American and Canadian First Nations cosmologies.

[39] As mentioned before, King ponders why is it that "we relish stories that lionize individuals who start at the bottom and fight their way to the top, rather than stories that frame these forms of competition as varying degrees of insanity" (p. 26).

concept of nature. First, because "nature" is often associated with a certain essentialism, the creed that there is an essence, or "core identity," as she puts it, that characterizes determined groups or beings; and this idea often "explains" these groups' or beings' inferiority. Racism and sexism, she shows, have been conveniently "explained" and justified by the reasoning that minority groups and individuals "are inferior due to their unchanging, core 'natures,' which exist in a realm apart from histories of colonialism, economic systems, ideologies, or other social and discursive formations" (530). Alaimo highlights that although this idea may seem outdated, "a quick trip to a local playground," she adds, shows how it still holds true and how ingrained the notion of gender essentialism is, as well as how "contemporary feminist movements seem to have had little impact on everyday discussions of children's behavior" (530). Second, Alaimo explains, nature is deemed as that which is not cultural, not human, and that, as delineated by many other scholars, is at the basis of a dualist mindset that informs Westerners' ways of seeing the world. Women and other minority groups, Alaimo adds, are never at the winning end of this dualism. Alaimo also brings Social Darwinism to the fore as an intellectual effort that based itself on the idea of the survival of the fittest, twisting it to its intents, and thus "naturalized political oppression and even the attempted genocide of particular groups by way of arguing that some peoples inhabit a 'primitive' nature and others a lofty, civilized culture" (531). But returning to Grosz, she, like Shevek, wants to unbuild the walls that a misleading interpretation of Darwin's theory of evolution brought about, and for doing so she argues for a feminist reading of Darwin's theory as the complete opposite of the reductionist view in which it is deemed as one of winners and losers. I will not focus on her proposal here, though, as my intention was to demonstrate how Darwin's theory, a key event in the way nature is understood in the West (according to Maldonado's research), has been misused to promote complicated ideas on progress, ideas that involve the building of walls, of a paramount dichotomy in the West (nature/culture), that has for centuries been used to justify notions of hierarchy both among individuals and things. Suffice it to say, in regards to Grosz's invitation, that she insists feminist thinkers revisit Darwin's theory to find in it a number of ways in which chance and transformation show how open-ended a system nature is; in other words, how non-essentialist it is, and how useful a tool it can be in feminist scholarship.

Similar, in a way, to Alaimo's example of the playground, is Maldonado's argument that although Darwin changed ideas at the time

of the Industrial Revolution (his seminal work was published in 1859), the ideas did not immediately translate into human practices in what concerns the natural world. In fact, a quick trip to any major government meeting in the world will show that, although we hold the facts on climate change, this knowledge does not necessarily translate into action.[40] Industrialization and everything that it involved, planted the seeds of our current relationship with nature, Maldonado suggests, citing, among other things, the massive use of soil, overpopulation in urban areas, intensive changes in small communities, not to mention the overwhelming use of natural resources, adding that many ecocritical scholars see in these changes the reason why humans became alienated from nature. In not taking part in the processes that effect given products, being that bread, for instance, is no longer produced at home but in a factory; humans lose touch with the organic, natural world. Maldonado also addresses non-Western views of nature, arguing that a less dualistic perception of nature does not necessarily spell out less aggressive practices against what is placed on the other side of the dichotomy.

Based on a study carried out by Donald Hughes on the three main systems that informed humans' understanding of the natural world in Antiquity, Maldonado expounds them as the "traditional" ones, the reformers, and the monotheistic. The first one includes Hindu and Shinto beliefs that group together ancient hunter-gatherer, pastoral and agrarian societies' beliefs. The third entails religions such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam, that "tend to preach a doctrine of stewardship" (30). The second category of world systems hold perceptions of the world that prioritize the oneness of life and the focus on "an ethic of respect that seemed to have encouraged the preservation of nature: Jainism, Buddhism, Taoism, as well as the Pythagorean doctrine" (30). Maldonado also highlights that, in Buddhism, the first principle in the set of ethics that it proposes is: "do no harm" (30). Paramount to Maldonado's very brief discussion on nature and the ways in which it is understood across time in non-Western traditions is the argument that despite the wide range of understandings on what nature is, variations are not so great. At one point or another, views on nature converge. Also, neither are there "endless different ethics derived from [these views on nature]" (30). There are differences, of course, such as

[40] For an extensive discussion on this theme, of facts and action in what concerns climate change, see Bruno Latour's Gifford Lectures, organized into a book: *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*. Polity, 2017.

"animism/materialism, immanentism/transcendentalism, dualism/holism, male-oriented/female-oriented, appropriationism/conservationism, separateness/relatedness" (30) and so on, but most of the ethics stemming from these different approaches "command the protection of nature and natural resources" (30). The point is that none of these ways of understanding nature make it central that it should be dominated, either. There is a catch, though, as "[t]he societies in which those world systems reigned did not show any remarkable record of environmental protection," but only showed a slower pace in what concerns the uses of nature when compared with the capitalist model that reigns in the West.

Le Guin is known to have a great admiration for the Taoist tradition. She translated Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*: *A Book About the Way and the Power of the Way* (1998), but her involvement with the book came much earlier, as it was one of her father's favorite books and she considered herself lucky to have discovered it at a very young age, as she puts it in the introduction to her translation. Not unexpectedly, Le Guin takes a feminist stand in the introduction, claiming that her intention in producing such a translation was to offer an alternative to scholarly ones that emphasize "the uniqueness of the Taoist 'sage,' his masculinity, his authority" (e-book, no page). The perpetuation of such a language, she argues with an ironic tone, is not interesting for the "unwise, unpowerful, and perhaps unmale reader, not seeking esoteric secrets, but listening for a voice that speaks to the soul. I would like that reader to see why people have loved the book for twenty-five hundred years."

Karyn L. Lai (2008) explains that there are many interpretations of what the Tao is. Meaning the "way," or "path," it is commonly seen both as a philosophy of life and as ethical concepts. As a philosophy, very briefly, it holds similarities with Plato's allegory of the cave, where reality is seen as something which transcends ordinary life. It is very much concerned, Lai clarifies, with oppositions[41] (long/short, shiny/opaque, empty/full, masculine/feminine, heavy/light, giving/taking, perfect/incomplete, action/no action, difficult/easy), much like Western dichotomies, but the sense of flow between the two sides of the dichotomy is constantly foregrounded. Le Guin's translation of the 36th poem in the Tao Te Ching offers an example of this interpretation on dichotomies: "What seeks to shrink / must first have grown; / what seeks weakness / surely was strong. What seeks its ruin /

[41] For a full list of the dichotomies found in the Tao Te Ching, see Lai, 2008.

must first have risen; / what seeks to take / has surely given" (e-book, no page). As Lin points out, holding together that which seems opposite is paramount for the understanding of a given term, adding that a remarkable trait of the Daoist opposition is the dissolution of the dichotomy between the contrasting terms. Citing the work of Benjamin Schwartz, Lin remarks that if there is an asymmetry in the oppositions, it tends to favor the weaker half: ugliness, darkness, submission, femininity, tranquility and weakness are among the elements of the dichotomies that the Tao favors, showing its tendency to queer conventional values.

As a set of ethical concepts, the Tao favors a monistic understanding of the world, similar to the Spinozist philosophy, meaning that the whole of reality is one single entity, although it is apparently constituted of an enormous variety of things. Tao Te Ching, in this understanding, is a metaethical[42] tool, one that might be used to evaluate the methods (Tao, the way) and goals of conventional morality. My intention here, however, is not to delve into the Tao, only to show that Le Guin's work is informed both by the Western and the Daoist understanding of dichotomies, and scholars have argued (Sandra J. Lindow, for instance) that her work is very much influenced by her early admiration for the *Tao Te Ching*, which Lindow deems as "one of the oldest guides for moral development" (2). So the Tao foregrounds, in a way, the "unbuilding" of walls, or at least it makes evident the frailty of walls (borders), and the theme is recurrent in the three novels. The characters, especially Estraven (*The Left Hand*), Selver (*Forest*), and Shevek (*The Dispossessed*), devise a personal, a "minimal ethics," to use Zylinska's term, to push forward and work for a world with less, and by no means more, borders.

Gloria Anzaldúa, in the seminal work *Borderlands: La Frontera* (2007, first published in 1987), puts forward that borders are "physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy" (preface to the first edition). The word "physically" is not there by chance, as borders can be material but, even when they are not, effect borders that at least feel very much made

[42] Metaethics is defined by the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy as "the attempt to understand the metaphysical, epistemological, semantic, and psychological, presuppositions and commitments of moral thought, talk, and practice."

of matter, blocking the way, be it in a physical, intellectual, or emotional way. The borders Anzaldúa describes operate, one could argue, mainly in these two ways: they are geopolitical and emotional. The first are where cultures physically edge each other, and in her work they refer to the territories between Mexico and the USA. The second is the one where individuals "edge" each other, the emotional border. Borders are not disposable; they hold important functions, including bodily functions (cellular membranes regulate the flow of material, after all), but their uses for the exercise of power under the guise of "progress" may create borders that oppress at worst and limit the creative free play at best. The most laughable border, the one Shevek finds at the Port of Anarres, which does not even succeed in looking like a border, has such an import that, ultimately, it cannot be denied. Anzaldúa speaks of borders as a place where one inhabits, as well as transits through, remarking that it is hardly a comfortable position to be in. In the borderland, Anzaldúa devises the consciousness of the *mestiza*, a tool for survival that guarantees her a potent subjectivity to inhabit this space and make use of the contradictions that push for space on the geography of her body and her emotions. Anzaldúa's consciousness stems from the experience of being a Mexican-American and a lesbian woman who has access to at least two worlds at all times, refusing to deny any part of herself that may conflict with the standing values of the societies she inhabits. Borders, Anzaldúa theorizes, are devised to mark what is safe from what is unsafe, "to distinguish *us* from *them*," and though the border is a "diving line," the borderland is where the effect of the line runs deep, it is a "vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (25). Those who dare to inhabit the borderland are not seen with good eyes by those in power: they are the queer ones, the "*atravesados*", the troublesome, and this space is closely monitored by those who are "locked into the fiction of white superiority" (29), which can be expanded to include all those who inhabit the "stronger" end of any dichotomy.

When Anzaldúa makes the bold movement of claiming her *mestiza* consciousness, daring to defy the cultural norms that were both expected from and imposed on her, she speaks of the "Strength of [Her] Rebellion" (37). She left behind her home, her people, the values that were "meant" to support, but in fact crippled her, and searched for the values as well as created new ones to account for the need she felt for, in a sense, unbuilding the walls that she felt were impeding her. She responds to what she feels is unfair, tightening, unsafe, and violent, and claims that "[t]he ability to respond is what is meant by responsibility"

(42). Estraven, Selver, and Shevek embrace the same movement of rebellion, and although they all do it under circumstances that differ greatly from Anzaldúa's struggle, they share in common the desire to seek a personal ethics that does not necessarily conform with existing values in the societies they inhabit.

In *The Left Hand*, Estraven risks his own life, and ends up losing it, for the sake of troubling borders, for refusing to accept "unnatural borders," as Anzaldúa calls them, those that produce the effect of separation between countries, people and things that edge each other. Estraven sees in the Ekumen two opportunities, namely the expansion of borders to include more, and the mitigation of the struggle over the border of Sinoth Valley. King Argaven XV, who rules Karhide, and the Commensals who rule Orgoreyn, are deeply threatened by the idea of the Ekumen and reckon that, in joining them, their power will diminish and they will be oppressed. Estraven voices out the king's concerns, saying that, to the king, "his kingship is a joke to men who rule a hundred worlds" (17), and it only shows how it takes courage to envision another way of ruling that does not centralize power; one's reaction is to judge it a lie. Estraven is removed from the role of Prime Minister for supporting the alliance with the Ekumen, yes, but mostly because he fails to support Karhide's side on the Sinoth Valley dispute. In conversation with Genly Ai, Estraven explains why he might not be able to help him any longer in what concerns the Ekumen, and asks Ai if he knows what "patriotism" means, and he answers that if Estraven means something other than "love of one's homeland" (18), he does not know. Patriotism does not mean love to Estraven, but fear, "[f]ear of the other. And its expressions are political, not poetical: hate, rivalry, aggression" (18). Estraven fears, indeed, the outbreak of a war between the two nations, something unheard of on the planet. He believes in Ai's cause, in the Ekumen, especially because they offer something new, a system that "outgrew nations centuries ago," a system where borders are, when existent, permeable, constantly changing, and not a result of fear. Estraven fears the humiliation Karhide is suffering over the dispute and what may arise from that feeling, and pushes the topic in what is read as an unpatriotic tone with the king, for which he is exiled. Already in Orgoreyn, speaking with Obsle, an Orgota commensal, the latter claims to know why Estraven is exiled from his home country: "for liking Karhide better than its king" (82), for not wanting a war to kill people on either side and thus teach Gethenians how to make war. Estraven attempts to explain to the Commensals of Orgoreyn why Ai's

cause is a worthy one, especially before the current situation in Sinoth Valley:

> [I]n his presence, lines drawn on Earth make no boundaries, and no defense. There is a greater challenger than Karhide at the doors of Orgoreyn. The men who meet that challenge, who first open the doors of Earth, will be the leaders of us all. All the Three Continents: all the Earth. Our border now is no line between two hills, but the line our planet makes in circling the Sun. To take shifgrethor on any lesser chance is a fool's doing, now. (86)

Borders, for Estraven, are relative, and make no sense when they result in fear and when fear, in its turn, produces even more troublesome emotional and physical consequences. The word "shifgrethor" plays a role here, and it means "prestige, face, place, the pride-relationship, the untranslatable and all-important principal of social authority" of Gethen (13). In other words, it is the feeling that establishes and maintains hierarchical forces in place, the social decorum, the cultural element that justifies borders among people, things, and places.

Estraven's rebellious spirit does not develop out of shifgrethor, quite the contrary. When Estraven manages to organize Genly Ai's break from a prison called "Pufelen Commensality Third Voluntary Farm and Resettlement Agency," the name itself suggesting a much prettier place than what it really is, they embark on their trekking course over the Gobrin Ice. Throughout the course, Estraven and Ai have only each other to count on for their lives, so a great sense of companionship and complicity grows out of their forced relationship, and they resume the conversation on patriotism that they had begun at Estraven's Prime Minister home in Karhide, a few months ago. Ai tries to understand Estraven's motivations for helping him, but soon learns that Estraven is not interested in helping one person alone; he wants to embrace a project, the Ekumen, that involves collaboration instead of competition, that expands other than enforces boundaries. Ai asks him whether he hates Orgoreyn, to which Estraven replies:

> Hate Orgoreyn? No, how should I? How does one hate a country, or love one? Tibe [the current Prime Minister] talks about it; I lack the trick of it. I know people, I know towns, farms, hills and rivers and rocks, I know how the sun at sunset in autumn falls on the side of a certain plowland in the hills; but what is the sense of giving a boundary to all that, of

> giving it a name and ceasing to love where the name ceases to apply? What is love of one's country; is it hate of one's uncountry? Then it's not a good thing. Is it simply self-love? That's a good thing, but one mustn't make a virtue of it, or a profession… Insofar as I love life, I love the hills of the Domain of Estre, but that sort of love does not have a boundary-line of hate. And beyond that, I am ignorant, I hope (212)

Estraven, Ai points out, was ready for the Ekumen when he arrived there, while no one else was. But Estraven is not devoid of anger, and adds that "[a] man who doesn't detest a bad government is a fool" (213), making it clear that his problem is with the ruling values, not with the people of the places themselves. One could argue that Estraven is ready not only for an alliance with the Ekumen, but for a whole perspective of alliance altogether, for a "vibrant matter" approach to alliance. As mentioned before, Jane Bennett embraces a Spinozist view of matter, which challenges the Cartesian notion that the world is divided into living and inert matter. For Estraven, as for Bennett's field of theory, demarcations, or boundaries, between mineral, animal, human, or vegetable matter are not obvious, and the focus on human agency alone does not account for what is out there; an association among these entities is the only way to move toward an understanding of the world. This is strongly evidenced in Ai's and Estraven's trekking course. It is astounding how much they depend on everything that surrounds them in order to be able to succeed, and the external world often impedes, as well as aids, their efforts. This is clearly true of most fiction, but in Le Guin's works here contemplated this is particularly true, and it is voiced out by the characters.

Some examples of when this awe and recognition take place can be brought to the fore in order to illustrate this argument. Perhaps one of the most beautiful moments is when they finally leave behind the places where humans dare to inhabit in the inhospitable planet of Gethen, "out of the regions of mankind" (219). There is a reckoning that humans mean little to nothing here, as all that envelops them in the landscape is so massive that it leaves no room for human hubris, and all the matter around them is vibrant, vigorously alive. They reach a plateau "full of evidences of recent mountain-building and volcanism" (219). Before them is a breathtaking landscape, "a great wall stood, a wall of ice, and raising [their] eyes up and still up to the rim of the wall [they] saw the Ice itself, the Gobrin Glacier, blinding and *horizonless* to the utmost

north, a white, *a white the eyes could not look on*" (220, my emphasis). Here I think of Haraway (2008) and her injunction that humans must find another way of relating to nature that does not entail "reification, possession, appropriation, and nostalgia" (158), and perhaps, when facing a landscape such as the one Estraven and Ai do, and in the way they do (being actually there, and not seeing images of the glacier as we often do in the news), it may seem impossible to envision the idea of possession or appropriation, and even nostalgia, since one's experience of nature is hardly ever with this sort of imagery. "Smoke panted from every mouth that opened out of the ice," Ai describes, and Estraven says "I am glad I have lived to see this," to which Ai responds that he feels the same among that "magnificent and unspeakable desolation" (220).

There is another moment when the planet shows its liveliness in a contradicting way for current human terms. Estraven and Ai are hiking through a valley that is made mainly of stones, where nothing grows, where the planet shows its "bones raw to the air" (222), yet the smell of sulphur holds sway. Precisely where it seems barren, the planet exhales the smells of its making, showing that nothing around them is inert, though it may seem so. Their lives, in fact, are under constant threat: they are right in the middle of two active volcanoes. There is only one reason Estraven can think of for any human being on Gethen to want to go where they are: grandeur (224). At night, when they make tent, they feel the glacier shake under their feet; Drummer, one of the volcanoes, is in eruption, and maybe its name is not a coincidence, but a reflection of what the Earth under their feet is: alive, and interrupting their plans, since they must change their intended course because of it. The other volcano, Dremegole, is also growling, "farting foul smoke," and Estraven concludes that "[m]ountains should be seen, not heard" (226). Ai and Estraven are constantly under risk on this part of the path to Karhide. Strikes of lava erupt from Drummer and miss them by little as they "creep infinitesimally northward through the dirty chaos of a world in the process of making itself," adding a remark of awe: "Praise the Creation unfinished!" (227). It is encouraging to think that borders are expanded in this process too, for one is reminded that the planet (ours, in this case), no matter how affected it is by the actions of humans, is always in the process of making itself, as creation is always unfinished. What is at stake in the Anthropocene, however, is not how the world keeps on making itself in spite of us but the "the multitude of creatures that will not be reconstituted, will not be safely ensconced, but will, instead, dissolve" (Alaimo, 2017, Kindle edition, no page). Alaimo highlights how thinking of "the planet" translates oftentimes as too big

an issue and is less effective than using the microscope and focusing on what is, in fact, affected. She argues that it is fascinating that, so many years after the publication of Haraway's "Situated Knowledges," in 1985, where, among other things, she criticizes the "God's Eye" position[43] in science and technology, this is the perspective that is often used to represent the Anthropocene in theory, science, and art. But, as mentioned before, one of the questions that Terry Gifford proposes for analyzing whether a work of art attempts at collapsing the human/nature divide (border, wall, to use the terminology that has been used here so far) is, "[c]an awe in the face of natural phenomena, such as landscapes, lead to humility in our species?" (27). And one could answer, having the examples above in mind, that yes, awe produces on Ai and Estraven a sense that shakes the borders that are often devised among humans and nonhumans (including beings and things here), especially in a sense that all that is nonhuman does not care about our imagined borders. Microbes will keep on inhabiting us no matter how hubristic our views of our own bodies are, and volcanoes will keep on interrupting our wills and cancelling our flights: "[…] the skin of the Earth is seamless. / The sea cannot be fenced, *el mar* does not stop at borders" is Anzaldúa's powerful response to nature's rebellion. Nature refuses to accept the rules and lines we try to impose on it.

In *Forest*, Selver's rebellion entailed accepting the gift he received from Cap. Davidson, as sinister as that may be, and learning the ability to kill. A constant theme in the novel is the notion of hierarchy and borders; taming, diving: taming the Athsheans, the women, nature; dividing people into humans and nonhumans, and world-time and dream-time. Athsheans' daydreaming practices are harshly criticized by the Terrans. "Creechies never slept, they just sat and stared" (11) is Cap. Davidson's misconception of what is really at stake when Athsheans are daydreaming. In fact, instructions in Mahayana and Zen Buddhism are to meditate with one's eyes half open or fully open in order not to believe too much in one's internal world and not to forget the outside world, not to buy too much into the idea of

[43] The notion was first exposed in "Situated Knowledges" published in 1985, but I used the 1988 article "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial
Perspective," published in 1988, to retrieve the notion of the God's eye. Haraway argues that it is "the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere" (581).

a border between the two[44] (Norman Fischer, 2016). Athsheans oscillate between wakefulness and sleep throughout the day, dreaming while awake as we do in our sleep. Athshean children, before receiving the training on how to daydream, also dream while asleep, like Terran humans, but as adults and experienced daydreamers, Athsheans need very little sleep. Lyubov suffers from severe migraines, and he gets them when he is particularly stressed. Pondering on what Athsheans would do for a migraine, he concludes that "[t]hey wouldn't have one, they would have daydreamed the tensions away a week before they got them" (64). The planet Forest itself, in its absence of clear spaces and abundance of trees, where one cannot see clearly a few feet away from where one stands, makes one daydream, as Cap. Davidson remarks, with anger. He wants division, he wants to see things objectively. Davidson wants to enact cuts, to use Barad's terminology, at any cost. At times, he catches himself daydreaming like the Athsheans and violently pulls himself out of that state (17).

From the Terrans' perspective, except for the anthropologist Lyubov, Athsheans are lazy, but in Athshean culture, daydreaming is at the root of their lives. They enter these states to avoid madness, to find answers: it is the bridge instead of a border between wakefulness and sleep, a positive borderland that filters information from both worlds, that does not fully buy into the fiction of either. Athsheans have a "polycyclic sleep pattern" of 120 minutes (116) and many could not adapt to the Terran pattern of having to sleep at night and work during the day, so many of the Athsheans who were forced to do so became groggy, catatonic, and confused. "Once you have learned to do your dreaming wide awake," Lyubov ponders, "to balance your sanity not on the razor's edge of reason but on the double support, the fine balance, of reason and dream; once you have learned that, you cannot unlearn it any more than you can unlearn to think" (116). So Athsheans do not draw a border between reason and un-reason, and that translates into how they live: to kill one is to kill oneself, as there is no clear-cut distinction between one and the other or their surroundings. The places where they live are what they are, and that is why when Terrans are logging the forests they are not, for Athsheans, cutting trees, but cutting the world.

[44] Norman Fischer (2016), a Zen Buddhist teacher, comments the following as to why the instruction is to sit with one's eyes open: "When you sit in zazen, you sit in the middle of the profound fact that outside and inside are conventions, not fundamental realities" (p. 18), so that the idea is that one does not accept either as the "truth", but remains mindful of both.

When Selver reaches the town of Cadast after the killings at the city of Sornol, which Terrans call Smith Camp (coordinated by Cap. Davidson), he encounters the town's head Dreamer, Coro Mena. Selver explains what had happened at Sornol and Coro Mena reacts accordingly: "[his] bones seemed to shrink within him, trying to hide from this terrible story, this new thing" (40). It is like King's creation story above,[45] where a witch releases a story that cannot be taken back. Athsheans learn a new way of telling a story and thus learn how to kill. Selver and Davidson are considered Gods in Athshean culture; the latter because he offers a gift, and the former for translating the gift into something that can be used. A translator inhabits the borderland, and effects cuts, and in Athsheans' mother tongue the word is "sha'ab." Words in Athshe are mostly made of two syllables and two meanings, and are, Lyubov puts it, like "coins, obverse and reverse" (123). *Sha'ab* means god and translator, and Lyubov ponders on how these two meanings are connected. "If a god was a translator, what did he translate?" he asks, adding that Selver, no doubt, was a "gifted interpreter, but that gift had found expression only through the fortuity of a truly foreign language being brought into his world" (123). But a *sha'ab* is not merely one who can translate a language, not even dream time language into world language, as many dreamers on the planet could do that, but he is probably, Lyubov concludes, "a link between two realities, considered by the Athsheans as equal, the dream-time and the world-time, whose connections, though vital, are obscure" (123), and that is why Selver *acts*: that is how he *speaks* this new "thing," and it entails being so rebellious that it goes against a whole culture on a planet that did not know how to kill. It is, in a way, an "agential cut," as the Athsheans only engage in killing while threatened, as a way of protecting themselves, as a means, as Le Guin puts it in the Carrier Bag theory, to keep on telling non-killer stories. Selver is this link and his dilemma is this: "[t]o change or to be changed, radically, from the root. For the root is the dream" (123-124). But the dream is changed, as Athsheans learn how to kill, but choose not to engage in any more killings once they get what they want back: the non-killing of their world.

[45] Where, in a witch gathering, they dare each other to tell the most horrid story possible. One of the witches tells such a horrific story that the others ask her to take it back, which she cannot do, of course, so it is set loose to cause whatever harm it may.

The concept of the *sha'ab* holds some resemblances with Anzaldúa's *mestiza*. The most remarkable difference would be that, for Athsheans, a god is embraced by the members of its society, while Anzaldúa had to rebel against both cultures she roamed between; there were elements in both that made her rebel against them. But Anzaldúa is most definitely a translator, a messenger who engages creatively with the forces that try to inscribe meanings onto her, thus translating them, and turning the borderland into a richer place, one that allows for a more potent subjectivity. It is in that same place (the borderland of the translator) that Selver gains a more potent subjectivity and translates a message to his people, and it could be argued that it is a mestiza consciousness, as it is made out of an encounter of two cultures that come to edge each other on another planet. And he and his people change, countering the patronizing and hierarchic tones of Davidson and his Terran fellows, who assign essential behaviors to the Athsheans, doubting their capacity to kill and defend themselves. Selver and his people blatantly, as well as violently, resist the labels, and especially the type of "progress" that Terrans offer them; they want no part in it, and if Selver learns anything in the borderland is that once the killing is over, it is over, but "[t]here is no use pretending, now, that [they] do not know how to kill one another" (189), Selver tells Lepennon. As Haraway, a great admirer of Le Guin's works (she often cites them in her research), puts it, for the Athsheans there is a consequence in their struggle for freedom, "the lasting knowledge of how to murder *each other*, not just the invader, as well as how to recollect and perhaps relearn to flourish in the tentacular grip of this history" (44). In this sense, the Anthropocene is a story that is unleashed by the witch, a story that is told in such a sequence of events that one cannot simply say "take it back," we must now learn to live with and through it the best we can. People have done that to a large extent, to be fair, and that is why scholars such as Haraway, Jason W. Moore, Alaimo and others have insisted on the problems with the nomenclature. As Moore (2016) puts it, the word Capitalocene is not meant to represent capitalism as an economic system, but "capitalism as a way of organizing nature—as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology" (6), and he prefaces that with a disclaimer: it "is an ugly word for an ugly system" (5), echoing an argument that has been brought to the fore many times here, that the dichotomy human/nature is largely responsible for the problems we are now facing.

In *The Dispossessed*, much of Shevek's adult life revolves around the unbuilding of walls. The novel, in fact, as Lewis Call (2007)

notes about Le Guin's *ouvre*, makes "sustained assault[s] on binary thinking" (90). Most things that divide, that are organized in a hierarchic manner, that separate an individual from his or her environment are challenged in her work. Le Guin has been reminding us since the 1960s of what Haraway (2016) has been insisting on since at least the 1980s (and is still often ignored in the sciences, she shows): that we need to do without "human exceptionalism and methodological individualism" (34). In this scenario, of understanding the impossibility of exceptionalism of any kind, and accepting that the damage (that has led us into the Anthropocene) has been done, one can, Haraway argues, resort to a number of *thinking-with* and *becoming-with* tools, and the letters SF stand for a number of these strategies, among which are science fiction, speculative feminism, science fabulation, and string figures, the latter being responsible for the tangling of all the others and for the creative powers of Terra and all its creatures and critters to find ways of living here, now. We need to find creative stories of being here that propose collaboration between humans, multispecies assemblages, and the SF is what Le Guin does. And that effort to tell of alliances across species and things in the past (finding the stories), present (finding and telling stories), and to come is what she calls the Chthulucene. The latter is not related, she insists, to H.P. Lovecraft's monster, the Cthulhu (her spelling is different), but "entangles myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages—including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as humus" (160). Interestingly, Shevek's theory, the one he starts on Anarres and finishes on Urras, is a theory of time, of simultaneity, which is a concept ("a unified theory of time," p. 112), or at least a term, that could be used to explain Haraway's Chthulucene. The "unified" of the theory, in Shevek's efforts throughout the novel, has more to do with unbuilding walls than it has to do with time, though.

Shevek travels to Urras with two intentions in mind. The first, and public one, is to finish his General Temporal Theory, which was deemed unnecessary on his world, the argument being that on it no one *wanted* instantaneous communication with other worlds, so why bother. In other words, his attempts at developing a complex physics theory on Anarres are met with contempt: the only other world they have access to is "propertarian," so a wall is built against them: there is an "us" and a "they." The second idea, which he stated mainly to himself, his family and friends, is to unbuild walls, to "urge the idea of brotherhood" (144). The walls, he reasons, are limitations that arise from the need to move forward in developing an idea and not being able to. Shevek finds walls

everywhere: in the Port of Anarres, discussed previously; on the ship that takes him to Urras, and even in his room on Urras, in the University's dormitories, which is precisely where he reaches the epiphany that leads him to complete his theory.

The notion of unbuilding walls is useful for what the ontological turn that Barad, Grusin, Haraway, Gaard and so many others discuss, because it aims at dismantling the illusion of the frontier between human and nonhuman matter. Shevek sees with clarity the physical and ideological walls that were erected on both planets to serve political agendas that have different goals but produce similar results: separation and the forging of hierarchies. Anarres separates itself from the rest of the universe and there Shevek cannot develop the work he needs to because it has no evident use to its people, so it is not a matter of hierarchical power, but of utilitarian power in that if there is no use, it is useless, and that impedes the exploration of new ideas for Shevek. On Urras, separation is a matter of hierarchy, and there the human reigns. Better yet, *some* humans reign, as there is a class and gender system that is well in place on the planet. Jane Bennett's political and philosophical project in *Vibrant Matter* is at times very similar to Shevek's rebellious project of unbuilding walls, of dismantling the illusion of separation, of non-intra-action between observer and observed, between human and nonhuman bodies, things and ideas. She claims that the wall that separates things into inert matter and vibrant bodies is responsible for our lack of commitment with the assemblages we take part in. Her goal is to encourage us to engage more mindfully and in a more sustainable way with matter, and it is, in a way, also similar to Haraway's (2015) definition of "response-ability," the ability to respond creatively to "unexpected others," those who not only do not belong to our family but who are not even human in the first place. When Shevek manages to perceive that the walls, the borders that stun and impede him are sand castles, projected to limit the movement of people, ideas, and things, he enters a sort of "insight transe," and what grounds him after that are the objects that surround him:

> After a while he got up shakily and lighted the lamp. He wandered around the room a little, touching things, the binding of a book, the shade of a lamp, glad to be back among these familiar objects, back in his own world — for at this instant the difference between this planet and that one, between Urras and Anarres, was no more significant to him than the difference between two grains of sand on the shore

> of the sea. There were no more abysses, no more walls. There was no more exile. He had seen the foundations of the universe, and they were solid. (280)

It is the book, the lamp, and the room that ground and stabilize Shevek. It is the *things* that do the job. Shevek is so accustomed to being utterly dependent on the collaboration of his environment to survive, being that on his own planet, Anarres, entanglements are so evident and necessary for life to thrive, that he accounts for everything that surrounds him. Shevek's rebellion lies in refusing to believe in the borders that were erected around him, and not even the lamp, the binding of the book, the room itself goes by without his notice: they are all part of his epiphany, and the ethics that arises from this moment is that nothing is utterly disposable or dispensable, and everything plays a part. Everything in the room is imbued with Bennett's "thing-power", as this temporary alliance informs and enhances Shevek's insight trance, and he accounts for them. Everything, for Shevek, in the room as well as outside it and on both planets, is oddkin, as Haraway proposes and I explain in the first chapter (in the ethics subsection). In fact, for Shevek, Estraven and Selver, people or things do not need to be related to them by blood, or even be a human at all for an ethics of collaboration to exist. Revisiting a question that Bennett asks in her work and that I had raised in the second chapter, "[h]ow would political responses to public problems change were we to take seriously the vitality of (nonhuman) bodies?," (210), one could entertain the idea that Estraven, Selver, and Shevek are giving us their tentative answers.

6 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS: Le Guin's Otherworldly Literature: a Bag Full of Books

In the Dark Ages, to be a Christian priest usually meant you could read at least a little, but to be a layman meant you probably didn't, and to be almost any kind of woman meant you couldn't. Not only didn't, but couldn't—weren't allowed to.
Ursula K. Le Guin, The Wild Girls

Literature has an impact that cannot be easily measured. Can books change us? Change the world? History shows that some can and that their messages endure, even if the messages change with time. But that is an ambitious project and not necessarily what books are written for. They release a story, though, as the witches do in the story of the contest Thomas King tells of, and might produce effects as they travel from libraries and bookshops into peoples' homes, schools, and universities. Through literature one can have not only vicarious experiences, and thus empathize with others, but also experiment with different scenarios, worlds, ways of being – here and elsewhere, and thus propose new or maintain certain ethical parameters. Literature, one could argue, is a borderland, a contact with something we need or want to know or think about, and literature is often a person, a place, a situation we learn to enjoy visiting, even when it illuminates issues we do not want to delve in, issues that are hard. But not all love visiting these places – so how does literature change anything? In Buddhism, it is often said that you change the world only by changing yourself, and it does sound like the story of the hummingbird that tries to put out a forest fire by carrying water in its beak and flapping its wings furiously. Isabelle Stengers (2014), in pondering on the Anthropocene, wonders how scholars can help, and whether they can. The question, she goes on, involves being able to both think and feel affectively, and not merely theoretically, and to hold on to what we still have, even "against sad probabilities" (7). One of Stengers's solutions is storytelling, and she endorses Haraway's articulations on SF narratives, which are not messianic or apocalyptic, but stories that "cast our lot for some ways of living and dying and not others." (7) She entertains the following idea:

> What if SF novels were the missing thought experiments, the missing art of consequences which socio-anthropological

> sciences have renounced, rather obeying a model of objectivity which has nothing to do with the kind of objectivity achieved by experimental sciences? What if such novels were exploring, and experimenting with, the settled, authoritative distribution between the possible and the impossible, the acceptable and the inacceptable? What if they enacted what scientific imagination demands: that our world does not need to be what it is, does not need to be thought and felt as it seems to authoritatively demand? What if they were crafting tales that disclose their epoch's capacity to feel that there are other possible ways for a world to consist? (9)

I believe Le Guin's novels do just that, and perhaps SF novels *are* the missing link, where the free play of ideas result in formulations and ways of being that we need now; a minimal ethics, as Zylinska puts it, one that fits in the bags we carry every day. Scientists perhaps need that, and so do non-scientists, as a way to explore other ways of being in the world and relating to things on it. Books, and here I am thinking of Le Guin's novels, affect those who come into contact with them so that they become hummingbirds too, trying to put out a fire, one mouthful and wing flap at a time, so definitely not messianic nor apocalyptic. The SF that Le Guin produced may not have been intentionally aimed at putting out fires, especially not ones called Anthropocene and what it implies (climate change, ocean acidification, the sixth great extinction, and so on), but they can be used as tools to help us think of ways out of this rut. Or maybe not out of the rut, but into something more in tune with what probably most of us want: to keep on living here on Earth, and with the beings that are now on it, the natural world as preserved as it can be given our circumstances.

And who would have said that almost fifty years after the publication of *The Left Hand*, *Forest*, and *The Dispossessed*, sexism, racism, classicism, ableism, and the violent instrumental uses of nature would still be well in place, if not worse in the case of the latter, even though we seem at least mindful of the harm we are causing to the natural world and to countless species. If Le Guin is criticized for having used male protagonists in these novels (and the male pronoun in the ambisexual world of Gethen), credit should be given to the fact that in all three works feminism, environmental issues, class and race issues are addressed and foregrounded. Additionally, the novels display a great concern for nonhuman elements, both in regards to nature and to what we deem as "things."

Attempting to answer the questions proposed in the first chapter, do the novels raise issues on environmental awareness? As aforementioned, I mean awareness in two senses, in that of awe and humility before landscapes, as Gifford puts it, and as the ecofeminist awareness that any attempt to liberate nature must be accompanied by an attempt to liberate women as well as any being oppressed on the basis of color, race, ability, and class, as Gaard argues. I hope to have demonstrated in the analytical chapters that yes, the novels have as central to their stories an environmental awareness. They have so in different measures, of course, but concerns for the natural world (beings, landscapes, and things – the sledge, for instance) are paramount to the arguments Le Guin develops in the novels; and gender, class, and race issues are prominent, too. In *The Left Hand*, Ai ponders on the issue of gender throughout the narrative and both he and Estraven go through a great ordeal in the natural world, so reflections on its impact on them as well as comparisons with Earth abound. The conclusion one could draw from *The Left Hand* could be summarized in Stengers's words, that "our world does not need to be what it is," (p. 7) meaning that we can change the way we have been both approaching the invitation to "progress" (as a verb and a noun) and recognizing that the borders we effect between us and all that surrounds us are feeble. Gethen does not find progress irresistible, and change is almost imperceptible. We have grown accustomed to adapting to new technologies as if not to change were the route to perishing. Perhaps the opposite is true? Ai's perceptions on Gethen are those of a person who has witnessed what full adherence to the notion of progress can do to a planet, and comments on the high price Earth has paid for it. Estraven, on his part, shows the reader what it looks like to extend one's "loyalty […] without disproportion to things, the patient, obstinate, reliable thing that we use and get used to, the things we live by" (269) when he parts from the sledge. With regard to gender, Le Guin's thought-experiment is grounded on the notion that on an ambisexual world, as in Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness, there is no space for sexism once every being has access to the potent subjectivity of being both male and female at all times. If she does not succeed to make her point perfectly, credit should be given to the fact that she does this in the late 1960s and in a genre that was not, at the time, particularly welcoming for women.

In *Forest*, the same holds true but in a different way. Environmental awareness comes especially from the contrast between Terrans and Athsheans, the former striving to understand (and often misunderstanding) the latter's relationship toward the natural world. In

Forest, we are shown what we have done to Earth and what we might continue on doing on other planets lest our mentality toward progress and everything that is not understood as being human change. On Athshe, Terrans are still abusive of women, nonhumans, and the natural world, whereas Athsheans offer us, readers, a way of being that differs radically from what has led us into the Anthropocene. So there is awe, in the sense of awareness, but my guess is that the only character that Athsheans manage to affect dies, Lyubov, and that it might be left to us, readers, to carry the message of the Athsheans into our world. We can resist the package progress has offered us in as Athsheans do. We can accept that the confusion of boundaries might strip us of our need for certainties, but it might also encourage us to accept Bennett's invitation to see all matter as vibrant; in doing so, our relationship with them changes.

In *The Dispossessed*, awe appears as the capacity of a people to mobilize and make it work on a planet that seems improper for life to thrive. Shevek constantly contrasts the abundance of Urras with the scarcity of Anarres, but things do not seem apocalyptic on the arid planet, although they certainly are difficult. On Urras, Shevek soon learns that the propertarian system on which the planet runs makes ill uses of nature, strips "things" of life and thus promotes alienation, and hierarchizes individuals – women are mostly for show, a characteristic Shevek resists at all times; and the hardships of social mobility create resentment and dissent among individuals. Urras mirrors Earth and the similarities are not pretty to look upon. Shevek, on Urras, is a dangerous idea, but for us who are thinking about what to do with the implications of the Anthropocene, he might be considered an inviting one. What would it look like to unbuild the walls we have strengthened in the process of seeking ideas of progress? If we do reach the point of no return, if predictions on climate change take effect and mass migrations become the norm because whole areas of the Earth will be affected and populations will be displaced; and if the acidification of the oceans finishes off the ongoing bleaching of the coral reefs, where fish live and reproduce, then what? Will our planet look somewhat like Anarres? Among the revolutionaries of Urras (the libertarians who want to decentralize power on the planet), when a person wishes the other well, they say "May you get reborn on Anarres!" But perhaps we do not need to inhabit a planet with such few resources and so improper for life in order for the sentiment of brotherhood (among human and nonhuman elements) to sprout. After all, the Anarresti arrived on Anarres with a plan, an anarchist plan. What if we reach such a scenario without such

brotherhood stories in our bags? So *The Dispossessed* proposes a different way of progressing, a way that entails making oddkin, as Haraway would put it, and thus unbuilding walls.

I hope I have managed to answer throughout this dissertation the question of whether Le Guin's otherworldly literature resonates with and reflects our times. I believe it does, and I have attempted to intertwine theory with the analysis of some moments from each story in order to illustrate this argument. A whole study could be developed on each book alone, but here my aim was to explore the ways in which Le Guin's narratives propose, on different worlds, something for our nonhuman times, something that we already know but that we might feel ever more compelled to add to our bags in order to navigate the Anthropocene *knowingly*: knowing how to make oddkin, how to defy notions of progress that do not serve the story we want to keep on telling, how to unbuild walls that are devised to create the ontological impossibility on which our world runs: an us and a them, as if anything existed out of a context. In this sense, Le Guin's literature defies human exceptionalism, making explicit the inevitability of oddkin, which is a concept that in itself challenges both notions of progress and of borders. It challenges these notions in the sense that, with an oddkin ethics in our bags, the more we harm the environment in our thirst for progress, the more we harm "our own", accounting for "our" human and nonhuman dear ones.

As stated in the hypothesis, the idea was never to find in the novels a blueprint to follow, but to find ways of being that defy the notions that have contributed to leading us to this Epoch we are now living, the Anthropocene. The books here analyzed are tools (nonhuman tools made by human hands) to think with in order to explore stories that make us want to use the bag and not spear. The ethics that spring from these thinking tools are not patriarchal, and they are not made by men for women. They were made by a woman who has greatly contributed to SF literature and who engages in storytelling apparatuses that show great concern for the environment, for women's issues, race, and class. Her texts are, as Bennett calls texts, "special bodies," narratives that promote the temporary stabilization of ethical values that may be useful for us now. In our bags, when equipped with Le Guin's literature, one is automatically equipped with an ethics that embraces feminist and environmental values, a very good fit for our nonhuman times.

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