*Il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel*: Challenges and Reinforcements of Binary Genderedness in Science Fiction

According to Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. in his critical work *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction,* “fictive neologies” are one of the seven things that mark science fiction as science fiction. The term “fictive neologies” refers to “new words,” or the words that a science fiction author invents. These neologies have a dual purpose: convince the reader of the newness of the world in which these unfamiliar words exist, and convince the reader—in a rather metaphysical fashion—of the fantastical, fictional element of the narrative itself. Csicsery-Ronay cites another scholar, Gary Westfahl, who observed that the vast majority of fictive neologies are nouns. They are names for things, surrounded by familiar verbs, adjectives, and pronouns. The unfamiliarity of the nouns may be jarring, but they exist within a sentence structure that readers know how to decode. In contrast, verbs complicate how the readers view the actions, and by extension, the motivations, of characters. In English, pronouns serve as a gender pointer. When science fiction writers create new pronouns or use regular pronouns in unfamiliar way, they complicate the reader’s perception of a character’s gender. Science fiction typically portrays gender as stable and immutable—something that just *is*, and something hardly worth discussing in detail. My focus in this study will be to examine science fiction that imagines something beyond binary genderedness. These imaginations take place at the level of pronouns, rather than the level of nouns that is so common to science fiction. Pronouns serve a convenient framework for this issue: pronouns are a linguistic structure that point to the underlying social structure. Because pronouns point to gender, they are a convenient barometer for the state of genderedness of a particular society. Pronouns point to the presence or absence of gender binaries.

In this study, I will focus on three science fiction works: Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Mary Gentle’s *The Golden Witchbreed*, and Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy. These works use pronouns in jarring, disorienting ways as a means of imagining different genders and sexes, and different relationships between genders and sexes. These works imagine better worlds. In making their thought experiments both tangible and viable, these books critique the arbitrariness and close-mindedness of not only traditional science fiction but also the real world. In critiquing the real world in this way, these books reveal the arguments underlying gender bias and inequality to be arbitrary and ultimately false.There are two main ways in which these books challenge traditional conceptions of gender. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* challenges gender through gender fluidity. It imagines a world in which gender is not (and, importantly, should not be) a stable marker of identity. Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy and Gentle’s *Golden Witchbreed* challenge gender through gender multiplicity. They imagine worlds in which heteronormativity is destabilized. Despite the ways in which these books challenge gender binaries, I found that they all ending up reinforcing, to some degree, those same binaries.

*The Left Hand of Darkness* presents a sexually androgynous society through the perspective of a man from a heterosexual world. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, everyone is sexually neuter until they mate, at which point they become—temporarily—male or female. However, the rest (majority) of the time, the Gethenians are completely androgynous. Genly Ai, the envoy to the planet Gethen, refers to Gethen’s androgynous inhabitants as “men” and “he,” though not without a remark that suggests the inadequacy of these male descriptors: “*man* I must say, having said *he* and *his*” (Le Guin 5). Here, the word “must” suggests a need for consistency: male pronouns must follow male nouns. However, there is no reason for the envoy to use “he” and “his” in the first place—the inhabitants are androgynous, and are no more male than female. Later, Genly explains why he uses male descriptors to describe an androgynous people:

“Lacking the Karhidish “human pronoun” used for persons in somer, I must say ‘he’ for the same reasons as we used the masculine pronoun in referring to a transcendent god: it is less defined, less specific, than the neuter or the feminine. But the very use of the pronoun in my thoughts leads me continually to forget that the Karhider I am with is not a man but a manwoman (101).

“He” is not a neutral pronoun, any more than the Christian god is a female figure. Genly admits himself that his use of “he” makes him unconsciously assume the underlying maleness of the person whom he is with. “She” would be equally as inaccurate; “it” would disallow the humanity of the Gethenians. The Karhidish “human pronoun,” which one can imagine being something similar to the universal “per” of *Woman of the Edge of Time*, is really the only viable solution. The envoy doesn’t always, or even usually, see these androgynous Gethenians as stereotypically male or powerful; rather, he switches back and forth between the two extremes of the male-female binary of his home planet. He describes one Gethenian as “light and quick, graceful as a girl” (60). Later, he describes Estraven’s meticulous documentation of their journey as “either house-wifely or scientific” (259). This last construction in particular reveals Genly’s true perception of the Gethenians: he perceives them as either male or female, switching back and forth depending on appearance and actions. The envoy admits himself that the world from which he comes (a version of the world from which Le Guin’s readers come) is obsessed with dualism, and, by extension, a male-female gender binary. The Gethenians are either male-ish or female-ish—they are always gendered in one way or another; they are never genderless to the envoy, and therefore to the reader. There is a notable exception to this rule that comes in the last few pages of the book. Estraven is dead and Genly’s “fellow-Envoys” have landed on Gethen. Genly is overwhelmed by the men and women from his home planet, and eventually retreats to his room where he is attended to by a doctor with a “young, serious face, not a man’s face and not a woman’s, a human face, that was a relief to me, familiar, right” (319). As Genly looks at the physician, he realizes—seemingly for the first time—that there is a place outside of the male-female binary. Even the construction of the sentence evokes a conscious exit from that binary. The two phrases “not a man’s face” and “not a woman’s” are two parallel constructions connected by an “and”: this construction reflects a defined binary. However, the phrase “a human face” exists outside of this parallelism, this dualism. It refuses to make gender a marker of identity. But, this is one moment, one sentence within an entire book that is otherwise dedicated to a dualist, binaric perspective of sexuality and gender.

Genly uses the word “ambisexuality” to describe Gethenian society (95). The prefix “ambi” means “both,” which is true in one respect: the Gethenians have the potential to be either sex in kemmer, and the potential to be male, and then female. But in reality, for the vast majority of the time, it’s “neither” for the Gethenians. For the vast majority of the time, they have no sex and have no desire for sex. Categorizing a society that is primarily sexless as “ambisexual” is another example of Genly’s need for dualism. If the Gethenians won’t be one or the other, then they must be both; categorizing them as “both” supports a dualist framework. If they are both, then they are both male and female: two sides to one body.

As keenly as Genly Ai insists on believing that somehow, the Gethenians really must be gendered during somer, the previous envoy to Gethen (Ong Tot Oppong) insists—to Genly and to the readers—on their genderlessness. Yet in insisting on this lack of gender, Ong Tot Oppong reinforces the same kind of dualism by which Genly’s perception is defined:

“Yet you cannot think of a Gethenian as “it.” They are not neuters. They are potentials, or integrals… But of course they are not eunuchs, in somer, but rather more comparable to pre-adolescents: not castrate, but latent” (101-102).”

The very word “potential” is oriented toward the future; in this context, the word “potential” orients the latent Gethenian in relation to his (to use the envoy’s pronoun of choice) future sexed state. The word “latent” suggests something that is not developed, orientating the Gethenian toward the thing (a sexed being) that he is to develop into: the Gethenians are not post-penis, but pre-penis (even the word “castrate” has a fundamentally male implication). And, the penis state is really the only state that matters. “Pre-adolescent” situates the Gethenian in a childlike state; the state of sexlessness is a fleeting state of childhood that eventually leads toward sexed adulthood. Sexlessness is synonymous with childhood, and the sexed state with adulthood. This, of course, plays into Genly’s dualist point of reference, and undermines the true state of androgyny in which the Gethenians exist. So much for gender fluidity: Genly writes off the sexless, androgynous state as a “pre-kemmer” childhood, when in reality kemmer—and sex and gender—is the temporary stage that results in androgyny. Genly insists on defining the Gethenians by this fleeting state: his dualist perspective inflicts a male-female gender binary onto the androgynous Gethenians.

While *The Left Hand of Darkness* uses androgyny and gender fluidity to challenge the heterosexual binary, *The Golden Witchbreed* uses a “third sex” toward the same end. In Mary Gentle’s *The Golden Witchbreed*, children are sexually androgynous until puberty. The “third sex” is not really a third sex—it is an intermediary state on the way to becoming gendered as male or female. In some cases, however, this intermediary stage does not end in sexuality, but continues until death: these individuals are called “ashirenin.” Despite the fact that this sexless state is largely an intermediary stage, the ashiren (sexless, pre-pubertal children) and ashirenin (sexless, pre-pubertal adults) are referred to by the pronoun “kir,” rather than a “he” or “she” pronoun. “Kir” normalizes the ashiren and ashirenin, placing the unsexed state on a linguistically equal level with males and females. They have a pronoun; they have a place. While their positions as children or neuter adults may place them on the outskirts of their society, their position within their language remains level with their male and female brethren.

These pronouns have societal importance in addition to linguistic importance. Christie, the envoy from Earth to the planet Orthe, assumes for a long time that her companion, Rodion, is (or rather, will be) male. However, when Rodion eventually becomes female, Christie remarks that she could never imagine her as anything else:

“As Rodion left, I realized something. I’d always seen ashiren as either male or female. Even Maric, who a year from now might become a man or a woman, I saw as a boy. But Rodion was neither, in appearance or behavior… I was forced into use of the neutral pronouns, and it was becoming natural to see all ashiren that way” (304).

Pronouns, and other similar linguistic tools, effect societal change (even on the level of a single person). Christie used to unconsciously gender the ashiren, much like Genly Ai unconsciously (and consciously) genders the Gethenians. A small switch in pronouns seems to be the difference between Genly’s consistent, lasting inability to break from his dualistic chains and Christie’s relative ease (“forced” suggests some degree of struggle) transitioning from a dualistic perspective to a perspective that accepts gender multiplicity. The argument is, or rather, shouldn’t be, that pronouns in themselves beget greater understanding and tolerance for gender and sexual diversity. The argument is that shifts—be they linguistic or otherwise—on the *level* of pronouns begets such understanding and tolerance. A linguistic shift in the terminology for a different gender or sexual state begets a societal shift, for better or for worse.

Though these pronouns initially seem to reveal and create an equal society, they actually end up reinforcing the heterosexual binary that exists in Orthean society. The ashirenin are not necessarily the lesser sex, but the fact that they remain in a state that is considered to be both childlike and temporary seems to imply a lesser state. Sexless adults share a pronoun with sexless children. One of Christie’s hosts explains the definition of the pronoun: “Ke is ashiren, a child under fourteen” (20). And later “literally one who has not attained adult gender” (460). The pronouns “kir” and “ke” are simultaneously defined by an age (under fourteen) and a state (ungendered). The adults that pass the age mark but still remain ungendered remain in a gray area. They are adults, but are still referred to as the child pronoun; they are no longer children, but still retain the sexless state associated with childhood. The ashirenin are still, linguistically, children. Rodion, Christie’s ashiren companions in the book, is often teased and ostracized for her looks, which are reminiscent of the evil ruling class of the past. Rodion is also “fifteen…and still ashiren” (244). According to her mother, “that doesn’t help” (244). This exchange suggests that an ashiren that does not change—on time—to a gendered state is an oddity, and therefore at risk of being ostracized. The word “still” points to a discrepancy between the state and the age, reaffirming that the ungendered state is a childhood condition. Adults that remain in this ungendered condition are a source of unease: they have never undergone the transformation that marks the passage of childhood, but they are, by a time standpoint, past the age of childhood. When the ashirenin do eventually go through puberty (typically around the age of thirty), they “invariably die” (460). This trait is distinctly intriguing: a sexless adult can share the same pronouns as children; their sexless state is linguistically equal with that of male and female, yet the association with sexlessness and childhood places them on a linguistically subordinate level. Equal, but lower. When these equal but lower beings sexually mature, they die—their death solidifies their subordinate, childlike state. Once they are in the gray area of being a sexless adult, the ashirenin are not able to become full, sexed “equals.” They are not able to fit into the heterosexual binary of adulthood; gender multiplicity shakes out to only two in the end, culling the asirenin and keeping the men and the women.

Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy explores gender multiplicity through the presence of a third sex. Unlike *The Golden Witchbreed*, the ooloi sex is not a transitory stage but a stable adult sex.Every member of the Oankali species starts as a sexless child. The Oankali change to male, female, or ooloi during puberty. The ooloi are responsible for genetic manipulation during sexual intercourse, a key role in a population concerned with survival. However, despite the ooloi’s crucial position in Oankali society, there still exists a heterosexual binary.

This binary starts at birth. In *Adulthood Rights*, the second book of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, the narrator observes that the child “would probably become female to balance Akin,” who appears to be becoming male (333). A few pages later, the narrator observes another sibling pair and comments that one “would probably become male in response to its sibling’s apparent femaleness” (371). This “balance” is, essentially, heteronormativity. However, gender uncertainty does complicate this to some extent. “Probably” and “apparent” suggest a gender that is fluid and gradual instead of innate. Still, despite the lack of innateness, in the end gender does shift into a strict heterosexual binary: a male balances a female; a female balances a male. When Oankali babies come into an uncertain world—one in which the ooloi is not present—they tend to become ooloi as well:

“Without that small contact [of an ooloi], its body would have prepared it to live in a harsher place—an environment less safe because it contained no ooloi parent. In truly dangerous environments, ooloi were likely to be killed trying to handle hostile new forms of life. That was why children who had no ooloi parents to welcome them at birth tended to become ooloi themselves when they matured. Their bodies assumed the worst” (333).

This excerpt says and implies a few interesting things about the relationship between male, female, and ooloi. First, it appears that the ooloi, out of the three genders, are most likely to “be killed” in an uncertain environment. This fact doesn’t necessarily imply that the ooloi are the most disposable of the three, but it does suggest that they are the first to go, leaving a heterosexual pair. Second, there is a causal relationship between the harshness of the environment and the eventual sex of the child: the harsher the environment, the more likely the child is to become ooloi. In a harsh environment, the ooloi is a critical piece—the genetic manipulation and healing abilities of the ooloi can ensure the survival of the race, but also assume the survival of heterosexuality. In *Herland* (Charlotte Perkins Gillman), a natural disaster (a volcanic eruption) seals off a population of women and male slaves. Unrest leads the women to essentially kill of the male slaves, leaving a completely female society that eventually begins to asexually reproduce. There are, as *Herland* exhibits, ways around heterosexual reproduction in science and speculative fiction. In *Xenogensis* and in this except in particular, the pregnant Oankali body even in the harsher of environments finds some way to preserve heterosexual reproduction. Even the very meaning of the word “ooloi” suggests a reinforcement of heteronormativity:

“The word ‘ooloi’ could not be translated into English because its meaning was as complex as Nikanj’s scent. ‘Treasured stranger.’ ‘Bridge.’ ‘Life trader.’ ‘Weaver.’ ‘Magnet.’ Magnet, my birth mother says. People are drawn to ooloi and can’t escape… the Oankali said the chemical bonds of mating were as difficult to break as the habit of breathing” (526).

The descriptor “bridge” in particular suggests that the ooloi is merely a means to an end—the end being heterosexual reproduction. A bridge makes travel easier and more efficient, and that is essentially the role the ooloi provides: it physically connects the male and female through itself while making genetically efficient and viable the created fetus. At many places in the Xenogenesis series, the narrator and characters insist that the ooloi is not “some kind of male-female combination,” but a distinct gender in its own right (524). This may be technically true: the ooloi may be a different sex altogether; however, they only serve to reinforce and make more powerful a heterosexual encounter. The ooloi seem to have a distinct pronoun in the Oankali language, but it is never certain as to what that is. The English translation of the Oankali pronoun is “it,” which suggests a being that is certainly not on the same (linguistic or otherwise) level as a male or female. At one point, Lilith implies that the English “it,” in its “truly neuter” form, is an accurate translation of the ooloi pronoun:

“She inserted the English “it” because in English the word was truly neuter. Spanish did not have a word that translated exactly. Spanish-speaking people usually handled the ooloi gender by ignoring it. They used masculine or feminine, whichever felt right to them—when they had to use anything” (656).

The Spanish language forces the ooloi into a gender binary in which it apparently does not belong, but in reality, this refusal to venture outside a linguistic binary may be overall a more accurate picture of how the ooloi are situated within the Oankali social structure. Ooloi have a crucial and powerful role, but they essentially facilitate, and make more powerful, heterosexual sex. They play directly into the binary. Yet, the ooloi are still “it”—a thing, a neuter. In the world of an Oankali, a sexual, gendered being cannot exist outside of the male-female binary. The word itself, “ooloi,” is both singular and plural: it is both “it,” a separate stranger, and “they,” some combination of male and female. Or if not exactly a combination, then one who facilitates a combination—one who facilitates heterosexual sex.

*The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Golden Witchbreed*, and the *Xenogenesis* trilogy all challenge gender and sexuality in productive, imaginative ways. However, all three of these works end up, to some degree or another, reinforcing the heterosexual norms to which they originally appear to present an alternative.Genly Ai takes over 300 pages to venture outside his dualistic perspective. The ashirenin die when they hit puberty, preserving the male-female binary in the adult population. The ooloi facilitate and reinforce heterosexual reproduction. The use of pronouns in all of these cases may be unique and jarring, but the pronouns still end up reinforcing the inherent heterosexuality of Genly’s perspective, the planet Orthe, and the Oankali species. These books fail, it seems, because they use a fundamentally binaric structure to challenge a binaric system. Anne Garréta’s *Sphinx* (translated into English by Emma Ramadan) presents an alternative to pronouns themselves: her two characters do not have pronouns. As Ramadan says in the appendix to her translation:

“Garréta believed that equality could not exist within a language that puts the two genders in opposition to each other, and so created a language and a world in which amorous relationships are not determined by a binary of distinction” (Garréta 123).

Garréta sees pronouns themselves as inherently binaric—and in the English language (and in Garréta’s native French), they are. In an extraordinary act of science fiction, Garréta creates “fictive neologies” by eliminating, instead of adding, words. Her “new words” are the absence of pronouns; she breaks the binary by eliminating all references to it. *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Golden Witchbreed*, and the *Xenogenesis* trilogy all attempt to imagine a world where pronouns and genderedness do not automatically construct (or, more accurately, reflect) a binary. They all fail, to different extents, to do this. Their worlds do not successfully break the binary. Using Garréta’s book as an ideal, it seems that *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Golden Witchbreed*, and the *Xenogenesis* trilogy fail to bust the binary because they use structures—pronouns, but also societies structured in a pronoun-like way—that are themselves fundamentally binaric. *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Golden Witchbreed*, and the *Xenogenesis* trilogy can point out flaws in the gender binary, but cannot transcend it without shaking off all binaric structures.

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