

Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Matter of Seggri”

Victoria Hegner

When the latest season of “Star Trek Discovery” came out on Netflix, reviews rolled over, praising the gender diversity it represented: “The queerest Star Trek in history,” it was emphatically called. Sure enough, it was the queerest you could get on board the USS Discovery in the futurist time of 3188. However, for fans of science fiction literature—and particularly of feminist science fiction literature—the gender constellations on “Discovery” evoked only a weary smile. In feminist science fiction, one has—as early as the 1960s—embarked on journeys to worlds that challenge common ideas of gender and, thus, sexuality in far more radical ways. One has encountered worlds with not only three genders (as is demarcated in “Star Trek Discovery”) but also countless ones, has met living beings with flexible, temporary, or no genders at all and, again, has explored communities where “gender” is a perverted, very saddening condition that inescapably leads to societal exclusion and, sometimes, even to death. Furthermore, whereas “Star Trek” represents the diversity of genders as a utopia for which we all should strive, feminist sci-fi authors have often taken a much more ambivalent stand. For them, utopia and dystopia are never far apart: “Everyone’s shining city on a hill is someone else’s hell on earth,” as the sci-fi author Naomi Alderman pointedly wrote (2017).

One author who made the simultaneity of utopia and dystopia a dominant element of her novels, books, and essays and of all the future worlds, galaxies, and universes created within them was Ursula K. Le Guin (1929–2018). Probably one of the best-known feminist sci-fi authors of our times, she makes sex and gender a central topic, particularly in her Hainish Cycle—a series of novels and short stories set in a pangalactic association of more than 80 planets called the *Ekumen*. Placed

far away from Earth in a distant future, the Hainish world turns into a huge laboratory of sociocultural and biological alternatives: a thought experiment on things and ways we take for granted in our own world and time. Utopic and dystopic at the same time, it constitutes a lustful and yet often quite horrific estrangement of humanity and its fundamental gendered constitution. It is exactly this *mélange* of joy and horror of all the different constellations of “men” and “women” and other genders, and of the intimate relationships and societal settings that come with them, that attracted me most to these stories. They had a profound impact on my anthropological feminist thinking because they are not only engagingly written literature. Instead, they are fictitious ethnographies: thick descriptions of everyday life, inspired by actual experiences, places, and events, that are, although invented, grounded in poetic theoretical thinking on the ways people live together, creating meaning in and of their existence (Narayan 1999). In their fantastic—i.e. their speculative—character, those tales rearranged my perspectives on my “own” reality, time and again. They showed me my “blind spots” and the unreflected ideologies that guide my life and studies, and invited new, almost adventurous approaches to the limitless ways of life and world views on Earth.

It has certainly been widely acknowledged that Ursula K. Le Guin’s writing reveals anthropological sensitivity, which again, reflects not least the influence of her upbringing and family background, since both of her parents—Theodora and Alfred Kroeber—were well-known anthropologists, Alfred Kroeber being the first professor of Anthropology appointed at the University of California, Berkeley. Le Guin grew up surrounded by ethnologists, whom she perceived as a “mixture of exciting minds and backgrounds ... that did something to my head, something good” (Curry 2018, 18:34–18:40 min). Many tales and novels of the Hainish Cycle are considered masterpieces of anthropologically inclined science fiction and, simultaneously, groundbreaking in feminist literature, challenging any gender arrangements taken for granted. The one that reverberates strongest in my anthropological and feminist mind is a rather little known “side tale” of the Hainish world, i.e. the short story “The Matter of Seggri,” first published in 1994 in the science fiction and fantasy magazine *Crank!*. Not only does it provide an artfully written ethnography about a future world, but it also courageously opens up our understanding of queerness and, thereby, goes far beyond the idea of gender and sexual diversity so joyfully portrayed in the “Star Trek Discovery” appraisal. The tale turns the idea of queerness radically around and spells out that even the “straightest,” most essentialist binary gender regime is ultimately queer in the sense that it appears as non-normative from a terrestrial heterosexual perspective. “The Matter of Seggri” has a strong feminist impetus and creates a world of empowered women, yet, it immanently ponders the question: What price would we be willing to pay for a queer and feminist utopian world? What should this world look like? And, how fair could it be—or would it ever be fair? Thereby, the tale works as a strong reminder to keep challenging your own perspectives, no matter how right, appropriate, and open-minded they feel. It is this form of self-reflectiveness and, in

that, vulnerability that takes us, in my perspective, to the heart of anthropology—it is this that makes the discipline such a challenging, yet ever so often fulfilling utopian endeavor.

In "The Matter of Seggri" we encounter a society in which the division between "men" and "women" is an unquestionable truth: power relations between genders are (from a terrestrial perspective) reversed: "[T]he men have all the privilege and the women have all the power. It's ... a stable arrangement," (p. 9) as one central protagonist, called Merriment, observes. She arrives on the planet as a *Mobile*: a person who is sent out by the planetary association to maintain or initiate contact with the *Ekumen* and—similar to a cultural anthropologist—explore the culture in every possible aspect, including food, gender, sports, technology, religion, mythology, and many more.

As the story unfolds, the reader dives deeply into Seggrian culture and society and its transformation over more than a thousand years. Le Guin develops different narratives: reports, ego-documents, tales-within-tales, and ethnographic fieldnotes. Through them, one gets to know the complex and yet, from a terrestrial perspective, rather disturbing *rite de passage*—the ceremony of *Severance*—whereby Seggrians celebrate young boys' separation from their families at the age of 11. A new stage in life begins, as the boys start their life-long stay in so-called castles and get prepared for their main purpose in life, that is, procreation. They will never see their families again. One also gains an insight into the role of sports and games, as they differ between men and women. Le Guin, furthermore, offers an elaborate description of the matrilinear kinship system and gives an account of Seggri's romantic fiction literature. Finally, she describes in detail the historical events of the *Mutiny*—an insurrection of men against the ruling gender division that gradually led to a less segregated society.

At first sight, men seem to lead a comfortable life, residing in castles surrounded by beautifully maintained walled gardens and parks. Their garments are of gold and crimson, embellished with fine embroidery. They spent their days with a diversity of sports and games and acquire great skills in martial arts. In addition to these "manly" activities, they are also very knowledgeable in seemingly rather feminine occupations, such as sewing up their own clothes and competing in the splendor of their attire. Women, on the other hand, live in towns separated from the walled parks. Most of them are occupied with heavy physical work on farms they reclaimed from a parched land of stones and, thus, ensure the planet's economic wealth. They never wear fine clothes, instead walking around in uniform greyish dresses. The parks are forbidden territories for them. The women supply the men with food and other necessary goods that they leave at the parks' gates. Their way of life appears much harsher and less desirable than those of men. However, they are the ones who rule and exercise the legislative and executive power in society and, thereby, other than men, have the chance to lead a self-determined life. The distribution of power on Seggri clearly alludes to the patriarchal system on Earth, mirroring its oppressive

character towards women. But it is also much more than that: it is a (queer) feminist utopia in all its desirable potentials and cruel shortcomings.

On Seggri, as the reader gets to know, people suffer from a gene defect that causes a great imbalance of gender: only every sixth child is born a boy, and only few of the boys reach puberty. Considering the unequal numbers of males and females, Seggrian society relies heavily on the reproductive strength of men and its efficient use. Hence, at the age of 15, men have to start to work in so-called *fuckeries*. Women go there in order to get pregnant or/and to satisfy their sexual desires. Men are paid per bout of intercourse. Those among them who have a high rate of impregnations and sire large numbers of male children, rank the highest among Seggrian men and acquire the status of *Great Champions*: sex with them is the most expensive.

Until *Severance*, boys grow up in a family of mothers and sisters in so-called motherhouses: multigenerational households of (grand-)mothers and (grand-)children. They get spoiled and receive outstandingly kind care. Seggrians boys are, however, only provided rudimentary education: they can neither read nor write, nor do they receive any instruction in the sciences and humanities. As a Seggrian woman explains: “It weakens a man’s sense of honor, makes his muscles flabby, and leaves him impotent: ‘What goes to the brain takes from the testicles.’ Men have to be sheltered from education for their own good (p. 10).”

This poignant and—at the same time—often appalling reversion of terrestrial patriarchy is finely interwoven with elements of queerness—forms of sexual norms beyond heterosexuality. Here, the tale offers a double reverse, as it turns a gender dystopia, again, into a utopian space. Thus, as the reader learns, the central element of the Seggrian kinship system is female homosexuality and same-sex marriage. Biological “mothers” are married to “lovemothers,” and women can be both mother and lovemother at the same time. The kinship ties described are never only harmonious, however, they are grounded in deep affection—love and compassion—for one another, as well as being characterized by the idea of social fairness towards all members of society, women and men alike. Within this framework, Seggri portrays a futurist world that offers, especially for lesbian and bisexual women, a society without discrimination. At the same time, lesbianism, as a central social element of society, is not, as is laid open, free from (capitalist) exploitation and sexism, and—as is shown once men demand an active role in society—not devoid of intolerance against other genders, despite the claimed idea of equality.

In this context, Le Guin traces the painful renegotiation of the societal system after the time of the *Mutiny*: both—women and men alike—are open for changes. But to create something new and, thus, to feel, think, act, and perceive outside or beyond the cultural structure and context in which one is socialized is an endeavor hard to fulfill. No matter how unfair and oppressive a system might have been, it has shaped one’s identity and self-conception that one cannot escape. Accordingly, Le Guin offers an evocative portrayal of how people start to create alternatives out

of the lives and the symbolic systems they had known, and, thereby, start to gradually "rewrite" or redefine them. In this manner, the tale provides a poetic analysis of how fundamental societal changes are executed. For Seggrians, for example, who grew up in a homosexual kinship system, a marriage or romantic relationship between people of different sexes is hardly conceivable and difficult to think of and express; this is mirrored in language, since no distinct terms exist for such an arrangement. In one scene of the tale, the reader overhears a conversation between a man and his mother. The strict gender division has slowly dissolved: *fuckeries* and castles are gradually closed down, boys are no longer separated from their families, men are allowed into schools and colleges. Ardar Dez, one of the leaders of the *Mutiny*, returns to his motherhouse. In a conversation with his mother, he shares with her his greatest wish:

"I want to get married." Her eyes widened. She brooded a bit, and finally ventured, "To a man." "No. To a woman. I want a normal, ordinary marriage. I want to have a wife and be a wife." Shocking as the idea was, she tried to absorb it. She pondered, frowning. "All it means," I said, "is that we'd live together just like any married pair. We'd set up our own daughterhouse, and be faithful to each other, and if she had a child I'd be its lovemother along with her" (32)

Ardar Dez formulates a Seggrian utopia through a symbolic system—the language—he is used to and, thereby, extends the limits of imagination and societal conventions. Still, as the tale goes, he will never get married and never "be a wife." Instead, he becomes a *Mobile*—a cultural anthropologist of futurist worlds: a professional stranger derived from his experience of being a stranger in his own world.

Through all these stories, characters and different constellations, "The Matter of Seggri"—as a comment on patriarchy and a thought experiment of feminist utopia—does not indeed escape the binarism of gender. However, it is an emphatic story of queerness. It trains our anthropological and feminist awareness that there are always other ways to do things. Reading (and watching) sci-fi—as explorers of lifeworlds that, although not far away, might often be as strange as the most distant planet—therefore, matters a lot. Let us take the adventure and, henceforth, make science fiction part of our disciplinary "canon."

Works Cited

- Alderman, Naomi. 2017. "Dystopian Dreams: How Feminist Science Fiction Predicted the Future." *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/25/dystopian-dreams-how-feminist-science-fiction-predicted-the-future#comment-95490116>
(accessed September 7, 2021)

Curry, Arwen. 2018. *Worlds of Ursula K. Le Guin* [documentary film]. USA.

Le Guin, Ursula K. 1994. "The Matter of Seggri." *Crank! Science Fiction. Fantasy* 4, pp. 3–36.

Narayan, Kirin. 1999. "Ethnography and Fiction. Where is the Border?" *Anthropology and Humanism* 24.2, pp. 134–147.