Grokking Gender: Understanding Sexual Pleasure & Empathy in 1960s Science Fiction

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Tutorial College with a degree of English

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Grokking Gender: An Introduction

Though some critics have often approached science fiction derisively, dismissing the genre as escapist, idealistic, or too depressing, many others have instead embraced its capacity to enable “thought experiments” about the future, about science and technology, and even about what it means to be human (Le Guin xiv). Ursula K. Le Guin, who is both an author and critic of science fiction, famously suggested that though these thought experiments are indeed extrapolative, “science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive” (xiv). Despite its strange tropes of aliens, spaceships, distant planets, robots, and apocalypses, the worlds constructed in science fiction reflect the world around us, and reveal some things about our existing sociocultural structures that we might not have noticed otherwise. Consequently, works of science fiction have the unsettling effect of “defamiliariz[ing] certain taken-for granted aspects of ordinary human reality” (Hollinger 129). In other words, science fiction has a habit of making the strange familiar, and the familiar strange.

In this way, the themes of science fiction often overlap with the endeavors of feminist, gender, and queer theory: questioning identity categories, challenging the conventions of gender and sexuality, and calling attention to inequality. As Brian Attebery argues in Gender and Science Fiction, “both gender codes and the specialized vocabulary and narrative techniques of science fiction frequently fulfill the social function of marking boundaries” (3). Both feminism and sf1 “mark” normative

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1 In pointing out the ability of science fiction to demarcate “those who know the code and those who don’t,” Attebery also makes the distinction between the insiders of science fiction and outsiders who “abbreviat[e] science fiction as sci-fi rather than SF” (3). As a student of science fiction, I choose to align myself with the insiders, and use the proper abbreviation, sf.
boundaries, making them visible in order to upend them. Veronica Hollinger, a renowned feminist sf critic, takes the position that “analogous to feminist reading, feminist sf is not simply about 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” (Hollinger 128). The convergence of gender theory and science fiction can be deeply thought provoking at times, as when Ursula Le Guin creates an androgynous society in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Or, at other times, this convergence can reveal the humorous extension of a heterosexist imagination, as when Robert A. Heinlein ponders the implications of telepathy for a man watching a female burlesque dancer in Las Vegas in *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Lest we give too much credit to the genre for its feminist potential, we should bear in mind Hollinger’s warning that “although sf has often been called ‘the literature of change’, for the most part is has been slow to recognize the historical contingency and cultural conventionality of many of our ideas about sexual identity and desire, about gendered behavior and about the ‘natural’ roles of women and men” (Hollinger 126). Though some works of science fiction are truly feminist projects, others maintain normative heteropatriarchal expectations, and many do both at once.

It’s difficult to discuss the contemporary implications of feminist readings of science fiction without turning to Margaret Atwood. Her fiction, nonfiction, and critical essays have contributed greatly to the production and recent critical reception of science fiction. She praises the genre because its “narratives can [. . .] interrogate social organization by showing what things might be like if we rearranged them. Sometimes they are used primarily as a way of reconsidering gender structures” (Atwood 62). By
defamiliarizing humanity’s tacit understanding of gender, sexuality, and the world around them, both feminism and sf share contestatory agendas. Thus, a scholarly field has emerged around the touchstones of gender and science fiction. Sometimes scholars criticize the heteronormativity and androcentrism of sf narratives, or the marginal depiction of women and minorities. At other times, critics have celebrated its imaginative feminist utopias and gender experiments; the genre’s capacity to imagine better, happier, more equal worlds is nearly unparalleled. With this in mind, science fiction—much like feminist criticism—can subvert the expectations of readers, challenge essentialized ideas about gender and sexuality, and create positive alternatives for the future (Hollinger 129).

Utilizing a feminist approach, this project aims to reach a comprehensive understanding of the depiction of gender, sexuality, and empathy in three works of American science fiction from the 1960s: Robert A. Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), and Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). These texts are all landmark, award-winning cult classics in the genre. My goal is to “grok” the representation of gender in these works by examining sexual pleasure and empathy as sites of gender performance. “Grok” is Heinlein’s Martian word that “means to understand so thoroughly that the observer becomes a part of the process being observed” (Heinlein 266). Grokking is an inherently empathetic form of understanding, and consequently is a subject well suited for feminist analysis, which often relies on the visceral experiences of discrimination, marginalization, and abuse felt by women, people of color, and queer individuals. Grokking is also feminist in its reflexivity: in its emphasis on critical self-reflection. To grok is a dynamic within these texts, but it’s also a method of critical analysis. My aim is
to analyze modes of grokking—of empathetic understanding—within these novels, and also to theorize grokking as a feminist method of reading and analysis. This method remembers that the reader is not a neutral, disinterested agent, but rather a subject position constructed through the act of reading, who moves between real and imaginative realms. Thus, I will also grok beyond the page—move from the world in the text to the text in the world—to explore how science fiction can shape our understandings of gender, sexuality, and empathy.

My central research question asks: what renders these works of science fiction not only extrapolative, but also descriptive of the normative gender roles of the world around us? Through this questioning and the application of feminist theory, I will arrive at the conclusion that traditional, binary, patriarchal, and heteronormative assumptions of gender are both problematized and reinforced through the grand-scale thought experiments and metaphors of these works. Aside from the gender binary, other binary categories, which are also gendered, emerge as central thematic tensions, such as nature/artifice, reason/emotion, and mind/body. Ultimately, these texts’ presentations of gender highlight human beings’—and science fiction’s—complicated relationship with sexual pleasure and empathy. These novels hone in on these aspects of the human—and gendered—experience as arenas that can bolster the heteropatriarchal status quo, but can also undermine its supposedly rigid identity categories. In other words: gender impacts and organizes the experience of sexual pleasure and empathy.

Before laying out my preliminary analyses or outlining the format this project will take, I will provide short synopses of each text. Science fiction is a genre famous for its complicated world building, and as such, it can be difficult to accurately summarize the
full complexities of these novels. That being said, my goal in this project is to explicate the themes that emerge, which requires an understanding of some of the details of these stories. After these summaries, I will contextualize these novels within the larger timeline of the genre. In laying out a chronology, I will explain why these texts are both extraordinary works of literature and characteristic of 1960s science fiction. I will next discuss the importance of the emergence of science fiction in the 1960s and connect it to developments in Second Wave Feminism and the rise of counter-culture politics. I will draw some parallels between the cultural moments of the 60s and present day to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of my chosen texts. After this foray into historical criticism, I will shift gears and root my reading of these texts in Third Wave feminist theory and philosophy. Following this comparison, I will outline my chapters, which are organized thematically around the texts’ portrayal of sexual pleasure and empathy. I will set up my main argument, which will be expounded upon at length in my chapters.

**Plot Summaries**

Originally published in 1961, Robert A. Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* tells the tale of Valentine Michael Smith, the Man from Mars, and his messianic rise to power on Earth. The novel takes the form of an sf bildungsroman, divided into five parts, beginning with Mike’s “maculate” origin as a human man born on Mars. Jubal Harshaw, a cynical lawyer and father figure to Mike, serves as a foil to Mike’s innocence throughout the story, while Nurse Gillian Boardman takes on the role of his nurturing caregiver, and later his lover. With Jubal and Jill’s guidance, Mike encounters Earth’s politics, legal system, organized religion, sexual dimorphism, and various vices. As Mike
matures, he and Jill decide to travel the country so he can learn as much as he can about humans. Some of their adventures include stints as carnival performers and as Las Vegas gamblers. He becomes rapidly disillusioned with humanity’s weaknesses and consequently decides to introduce Martian language and wisdom to Earth. The most notable of Mike’s foreign concepts is “grokking,” which is often at odds with the novel’s satiric tone, as grokking emphasizes purity and sincerity in understanding one another. Mike’s emphasis on the intentional, empathetic understanding of all living things may seem naïve at first, but grokking enables powers of telekinesis, teleportation, clairvoyance, and telepathy.

He shares these powers with Earth-born humans by developing The Church of All Worlds, a hierarchical religious cult. As his church gathers more attention and his “nest”—his core group of followers—grows, so does the readers’ awareness of the benefits of grokking. Mike’s unorthodox views of sexuality are also controversially expressed throughout the story. Mike is a clear proponent of free love, open sexuality, and polyamory, though other characters struggle to understand these practices. One such character is Ben, introduced at the beginning of the story as one of Jill’s lovers. Through Ben’s slow acceptance of the sexual practices of The Church of All Worlds, readers come to understand the potential benefits of unashamed open sexuality. Though Mike is crucified as a messiah figure in the end of the novel, hope remains that his cult of followers will carry on his work and Martian message.

Philip K. Dick’s iconic neo-noir detective novel Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? was published in 1968, and follows a day in the life of the bounty hunter Rick Deckard, who is on a mission to “retire” six Nexus-6 androids. Dick richly depicts a post-
apocalyptic backdrop for Rick’s adventures. The novel is commonly recognized as the basis of Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*, though the plots of each work differ greatly. The novel is set after “World War Terminus,” when most humans have migrated to extraterrestrial colonies; a ubiquitous miasma of radioactive dust causes irreversible brain damage to those who stay behind; and the sparsely populated apartment buildings collapse into a state of total “kippleization” (58). The battle between kipple—“useless objects,” debris, and abandoned junk, which reproduce themselves in the absence of people—and rational human order is at the heart of the story (57). In the face of entropy on Earth, dwindling populations, and androids that are nearly indistinguishable from genuine humans, Dick calls into question what it means to be human, extrapolating empathy as the definitive human quality. The tensions between empathy and apathy are complicated by the role of Rachel, an android who functions as a *femme fatale* by attempting to lure Rick off the course of his mission through her sexuality. Though Rick survives in the end of the novel, he suffers from permanent emotional damage after dealing with androids and humans alike. At the end of the story, Iran, Rick’s wife, is the only character who emerges unscathed.

Ursula Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* was a groundbreaking work of science fiction when it was published in 1969. It won both the Hugo and Nebula awards and enabled Le Guin to break into the male-dominated genre as one of the first renowned female and feminist writers of science fiction. The story is told primarily from the perspective of Genly Ai, an Envoy from the intergalactic league of planets called the Ekumen, who is visiting the planet Gethen, on a mission to convince its inhabitants to join the Ekumenial alliance. While the mission to persuade the planet to join the alliance
and the complex politics involved take center stage in the story, the androgyny of Gethenians is also of primary importance to Le Guin’s thought experiment. Gethenians were a biological experiment by the Hainish people, who were the early colonizers of the universe. They developed into beings who are androgynous and sexually inactive for the first 21 to 22 days of a cycle—a period called somer—and sexually active for the last five or six days of the cycle, which is called kemmer. During kemmer, a person has an equal chance of becoming the male or female partner and each has an equal chance of bearing or siring a child. Consequently, Gethen is a matrilineal society and “burden and privilege are shared out pretty equally; everybody has the same risk to run or choice to make” (100). As Genly comes to understand the gender, politics, religion, and social customs of Gethen, so do Le Guin’s readers.

**Historical Development of Science Fiction**

Contemporary science fiction finds its roots in works such as Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), which championed the narrative themes of utopia, fantastical voyage, and scientific romance, respectively (Stableford 19). These precursors to the genre illuminated the possibilities of literature to push the envelope of human imagination. However, suspicious and superstitious ideas about science and technology abounded in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and limited the scope of this type of fiction. It was not until the era of science fiction magazines and pulps that the genre truly began to take shape. Hugo Gernsback’s magazine, *Amazing Stories*, launched in 1926 and is frequently cited as the birth of popular science fiction (Attebery 32). During the magazine era, a rift developed between the pulpy, fantastical works and those
that were eventually included in the canon of literary fiction (Attebery 44). Highbrow works such as Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell’s *1984* (1949) were recognized as science fiction only by fans of the genre, for science fiction “was still seen by outsiders in terms of pulp formulas and movie monsters” (Attebery 45). Even early on in the development of the genre, critics, writers, and fans were concerned with defining its boundaries.

The 1960s saw the maturation of the genre through the new wave of science fiction, which focused on stylistic improvements and “transcendent” depictions of future and alien worlds (Broderick 51). The changes to the genre were in part a result of the fact that “by the 1960s so much sf had been published [...] that thinking of something new, bringing novelty to the sf novel, was becoming harder. What the new wave did was to take a genre that had been, in its popular mode more concerned with content and ideas than form, style or aesthetics, and reconsider it under the logic of the latter three terms” (Freedman 335). It was at this time that Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) shattered the insulated bubble of the genre and brought science fiction into popular culture, making definitions of genre even more tenuous. The novel’s Martian religious practices of free love, humanism, and empathic connection resonated well with the counterculture, hippie movement of the 60s in the United States. Many sf historians and critics highlight the new wave’s obsession with messiah figures, which is an especially prominent element of *Stranger in a Strange Land*. This obsession in science fiction was perhaps mirrored by popular culture in moments such as when John Lennon remarked that The Beatles were ‘bigger than Jesus’ or when the ‘rock opera’ Jesus Christ Superstar (1970) dominated Broadway (Roberts 336). Adam Roberts also points to the era’s
anxiety about technological advances, exemplified by space travel, and argues that “in place of transcendence, sf reverted to one of its core, [original] anxieties. All we have learnt, all of our new science and technology, all that we know now about the cosmos, does this not fatally degrade the uniqueness and effectiveness of the very idea of the messiah?” (Roberts 336). The “triumphalism” of Heinlein’s work may be a thinly veiled existential crisis (Broderick 55).

Other science fiction novels were overtly preoccupied with the entropy of the universe and the futility of religious faith. Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) exemplifies this phenomenon as the collapse of the world into a state of total “kippleization,” or entropic decay, and the outing of the Earth’s primary religion as fake are the novel’s primary anxieties (Dick 58). Dick’s writing is imbued with paranoia and “is most celebrated for the complexity and thoroughness with which he interrogates the notion that reality might not be what it appears [...] Reality and selfhood depend upon perception, says Dick; and perception is radically unreliable” (Roberts 346). Dick’s approach to interrogating reality has been termed “anti-Descartes” because “he approaches ‘I think therefore I am’ with the rather brilliant counter-argument: why do you assume that the thoughts in your head are yours?” (Roberts 349). While many theorists have picked apart the gendered, racial, and classist assumptions of the Cartesian subject, Dick is rather unique in his questioning of Cartesian subjectivity on the grounds of paranoid self-distrust.

The mysticism and famous experimentation with gender in Le Guin’s science fiction novels may also “be an allegory of the shift from golden age to new wave science fictional logics [...] the former a linearly vertical rocket flight up and away; the latter a
more self-aware, self-reflexive process of recirculation” (Roberts 357). Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) is a touchstone of new wave sf, due to her particularly elegant prose and to the novel’s enormous popularity. However, Le Guin’s self-awareness and deliberate challenging of the anxieties surrounding gender set her writing apart as a distinctly feminist work. The Second Wave of feminism had a definitive influence on the genre during the 1960s and 70s, which Freedman calls “the golden age of women’s science fiction—a period of intense creativity certainly unmatched before and probably since as well” (22). Freedman specifically cites “*The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), arguably the book with which sf most decisively lost its innocence on matters of sex and gender” as indicative of this era of women’s sf (22).

**Science Fiction & Second Wave Feminism**

As *The Left Hand of Darkness* exemplifies, feminism and science fiction became increasingly intertwined during the 1960s during the emergence of the new wave of sf and the Second Wave of feminism. One historian goes so far as to ask “has there [...] ever been, in the entire range of science fiction, a specific body of work as rich and impressive as the feminist and pro-feminist novels and stories produced between the first inauguration of Richard Nixon and the first inauguration of Ronald Reagan” (Freedman 2)? However, the bond between feminism and science fiction was not without some challenges. Feminist scholars had qualms about the potential of science fiction to overcome its “masculinist norms” and “by 1981 [...] almost none of the champions of women’s writing had bothered to notice that much (arguably most) of the best writing being done by women in their own time and place happened in science fiction” (Freedman 3). Or, as Hollinger frames this dilemma:
In spite of sf’s proven capacity for articulating and exploring feminist theoretical models in original and challenging ways, many feminist theorists and critics have tended to overlook it, discounting it as a form of escapist popular fiction with little aesthetic appeal and even less political relevance. This situation has improved steadily over the past two decades, however, and a number of important full-length studies of feminist sf—as well as innumerable essays and articles—have appeared since 1980 (131).

Though many monumental works of feminist science fiction were written during the new wave, it was not until the 1980s and even into the 21st century that a field of feminist critical scholarship has tackled this body of works. The contemporaneous critical vacuum was likely due to Second Wave feminists’ suspicions of science fiction’s masculine connection to science and technology and its exclusion of women writers and characters for many years (Merrick 241). Robin Roberts concurs with this claim, stating that “science itself, which is innately tied to science fiction, was, and remains a bastion of male supremacy” (185).

The *Left Hand of Darkness* is one of the first works to be deemed feminist science fiction, but it has some noteworthy predecessors. Arguably, feminist science fiction originated in the works of two First Wave feminist writers: Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915) and Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928). While the former imagines an all-female utopia, the latter serves as a gender-bending challenge to traditional understandings of genre. C. L. Moore is another early feminist sf writer, one of the “most successful female authors published in sf magazines” (Merrick 244). Moore is best known for her 1944 story “No Woman Born,” which “offers remarkable insights into
issues of embodiment, female beauty, power, and what it means to be human” through her characterization of Deirdre, a metallic cyborg (Merrick 244). The 1950s, perhaps surprisingly, “marked an important period in sf’s engagement with sociocultural concerns, including a more engaged awareness of contemporary issues around sex, gender roles, race and ecology” (Merrick 244). ‘Battle of the sexes’ stories—which “reveal a latent anxiety about changes and threats to the gendered order”—were also popularized in the 1950s (Merrick 243).

The new wave of sf brought with it “more liberating examples of female characters” as “seen in the work of Robert Heinlein, who was one of the earliest authors to introduce considerations of sex and sexuality into sf” (Merrick 245). Helen Merrick, a leading feminist sf scholar, stresses that though Heinlein was one of the first sf authors to include intelligent and empowered female characters, the progressive qualities of his works are limited: “Heinlein’s women are re-contained within a normative gendered order most often through their desire for male appreciation, remaining ‘sexually dependent’ whilst ‘morally superior’” (247). Though Stranger in a Strange Land promises an idealistic view of gender equity, it is unsophisticated in its portrayal of sexuality and vision of ethical nonmonogamy; “Heinlein’s understanding of sacred sexuality falls squarely into a heterosexist paradigm” (Kramer 63). Philip K. Dick’s Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep falls into similar heterosexist traps, but the novel also exaggerates gender binaries and hierarchies that distinguish human from android in order to interrogate them. Essentially, in the 1960s, the ‘Battle of the Sexes’ narrative mode became outdated as sf writers began to explore themes of gender equality in their stories, just as gender roles were being interrogated through the feminist movement. The 1970s
brought about the rise of radical feminist sf utopias, exemplified by Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man* (1975) and Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). Both works embrace the possibilities of queerness and Piercy’s narrative focus on a poor, Chicana female on Welfare broadened the scope of the science fictional and feminist subject simultaneously. The new wave ended with the rise of 1980s cyberpunk and its renewed attempts at transcendence for the humanist, neoliberal subject “refigured as meat vs. mind” (Merrick 250).

In some ways the limitations of new wave sf and Second Wave feminism are the same: they failed to address issues intersectionally, turning a blind eye to how gender equality can be complicated by things like sexuality, race, class, and so on. The early, liberal feminist movement emerged in the U.S. as a movement expressing a purportedly universal focus on women’s experiences with inequality in order to call for national action and change. Using language of equal opportunity, freedom of choice, and human rights, liberal feminists and organizations—exemplified by Betty Friedan and the National Organization for Women—sought to actively confront the conditions limiting women by utilizing the legal system to initiate change, by rekindling the flames of the First Wave of feminism, and by eventually taking the feminist agenda global. Friedan illuminated the patriarchal suppression of women’s freedom and potential through the circulation of *The Feminine Mystique* and excerpts from it in magazines. Friedan’s elucidation of these problems resonated with her middle-class readership. She criticized the silencing of those who realized that feminine fulfillment in wifehood and motherhood, promised and idealized by male-dominated society, was actually a myth (Friedan). The National Organization for Women, founded in 1966, championed these
issues vocalized by Friedan, and became a fundamental voice of liberal feminism, striving to pass legislation to secure women’s equality. Betty Friedan and Pauli Murray composed its statement of purpose and synopsized liberal strategies by concentrating on amending and crafting laws to protect women’s reproductive rights, ensure safety against sexual assault and harassment, necessitate equal pay and recognition in the workplace, and promote equal opportunity for education. Thus, liberal feminists believed that operating within society’s existing sociolegal frameworks was the most efficient strategy to affect positive changes for the position of women.

In the decade following, radical feminism arose in response to this liberal precedent, focused on demolishing existing power structures of patriarchy and male supremacy that enable female subordination, with a concentration on restrictive gender roles and relations as a primary source of oppression. Demanding a revolutionary reordering of society and rewriting of gender roles, radical feminists carved a space for women outside of the white, middle-class, heterosexual paradigm of Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique* and NOW’s homogeneous universalism. Lesbian feminists worked contiguously and adjacently to this radical movement by pinpointing heteronormativity as an offshoot of male supremacy and consequently as a major source of oppression for all women. Feminist radicals refused to tolerate a society that not only allowed the oppression of women, but actually facilitated it. Utilizing abrasive strategies to hasten change, radicals engaged in caustic discourses to push the boundaries constraining liberal universalism and complacency with society’s patriarchal power structures. Radicals strove for a nuanced, particularized solidarity with women, drawing on difference both to unite their struggles against oppression and to assert a need for all people to check their
privilege. Audre Lorde clarifies this seemingly paradoxical concept by explaining that unity is not synonymous with “homogeneity” (116). She argues that ignoring differences of sex, class, race, age, religion, and sexuality is what prevents unity, not the differences themselves. As a Black lesbian feminist, Lorde discussed how tangled identities like hers cannot be extracted from one another. Lorde invited language of difference into conversations of feminism, where liberal feminist groups like NOW often avoided it.

**Relevance in the 21st Century**

The tensions between the liberal and radical sides of feminism, which extend into the 21st century, illuminate the relevance of my chosen sf texts and their sustained contemporary readership. These novels undoubtedly have limitations in their feminist imaginations, but warrant contemporary critical readership for their early work in depicting the radical possibilities of sexual pleasure, empathy, and gender equality. The new wave of science fiction is what many readers today would term classic sf, and this characterization merits a contemporary exploration. These landmark, ‘classic’ sf novels are read again and again, often in tandem with more modern and overtly feminist sf, like the works of Margaret Atwood or Octavia Butler, or with popular sf written by women, such as Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight Saga* or Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* trilogy. It seems that our current cultural moment is obsessed with science fiction: an obsession that has a lot in common with the new wave of sf. It’s even truer now than it was in the 1960s that it’s nearly impossible to invent new and unique sf content. The contemporary response to this lack of new material is seemingly the same as the response was in the 60s: a resurgence of attention to aesthetics. The contemporary highbrow works of sf include David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996), David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas*
(2004), Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005), and Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which have all received critical acclaim and a large readership outside of the sf community.

It is not merely the form, but also the content of my chosen texts that is reflected and revisited in our current era of science fiction. Returning to these early sf depictions of polyamory, cyborgs, gender bending, and empathy are a reminder of how far feminism has brought us and how far we have yet to go. The focus on ethical nonmonogamy in *Stranger in a Strange Land* connects easily to modern vocabularies of polyamory and kink: alternative sexualities much theorized in the queer community. Kate Bornstein’s novelistic memoir, *A Queer and Pleasant Danger* (2012), crosses into the genre of feminist sf as she recounts her past involvement with Scientology’s Sea Org, her coming out as a trans woman, and her experimentation with kink and polyamory. The fascination with humanoid robots in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* fits in well with more contemporary conceptualizations of cyborgs, particularly after the 1984 publication of Donna Haraway’s “A Manifesto for Cyborgs.” Cyborgs are highly visible in recent films, such as *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) and *Ex Machina* (2015). *The Left Hand of Darkness* challenges binaristic thinking about gender through its creation of an androgynous alien race. The idea of non-binary gender is explored even more fully in Octavia Butler’s *Lilith’s Brood* series, which imagines a race of aliens with an additional third gender called Ooloi. The works I have selected by Heinlein, Dick, and Le Guin are all preoccupied with human (or not so human) empathy, which is a theme overtly explored in contemporary sf, such as the Wachowski siblings’ made-for-Netflix series, *Sense8* (2015).
The contemporary proliferation of dystopian science fiction is perhaps a reflection of our societal anxiety about the future right now in the second decade of the 21st century. Our current hyper-conservative political environment, the Trump presidency, the Googlization of our lives, and (the denial of) global climate change are alarmingly similar to some of the thought experiments conducted in earlier science fiction. Copies of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) sold out on Amazon in January 2017 following Trump’s inauguration. Margaret Atwood’s *Handmaids Tale* (1985) is being remade as a television series for Hulu to be released in April of 2017. The sequel to Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982), a film interpretation of *Do Androids Dream*, is coming out in October of 2017. All of this is to say that now more than ever popular culture is invested in science fiction. Revisiting the classics and tracing the sf lineage is an important task considering the contemporary focus on feminist and social justice themes in science fiction.

**Critical Approach**

My critical approach is rooted in philosophy, feminist and otherwise. I rely on the seminal works of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Luce Irigaray to lay my foundation, but turn to newer work on the philosophy of sex and of empathy from Thomas Nagel and Amy Coplan respectively. In teasing apart the depictions of gender and sexuality in these novels, I rely heavily on de Beauvoir’s theory of woman as other, Butler’s theory of gender performativity and compulsory heterosexuality, Irigaray’s theory of the dominant phallic economy, Nagel’s theory of sexual perversion and Coplan’s theory of empathy. Through a synthesis of these theoretical lenses, I will reveal how each of these texts illustrates some of the contradictions embedded in prevailing
gender ideology, particularly in regards to sexual pleasure and empathy. Specifically, I will look at the ways in which women and those with feminine qualities are othered or denied complete personhood in these texts. I will also address the ways in which both sexual pleasure and empathy both bridge the gap between self and other to intimately halt the process of othering, marginalization, and domination. In short, I examine sex and empathy as potential avenues for liberation and subversion.

Firstly, Simone de Beauvoir’s foundational *The Second Sex* stresses that women are characterized as the social other in patriarchal society and in language. Woman is the other to the default of man, which encompasses both the positive and the neutral, relegating women to definition by the negative, or ‘lack of.’ This opposition is culturally enforced, thus “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (35). Furthermore, women are defined by their otherness to men; this is what enables the belief that women are biologically determined, emotional, or moral. The opposition between man and woman is also qualitative: women are inferior others to the superior men.

*Stranger in a Strange Land* attempts to challenge the othering of women through “grogking” them; Heinlein’s utopic vision for the world promises to empower men and women equally, promoting sex positivity and bodily autonomy. However, Heinlein fails to truly grok his female subjects and overshadows the inclusion of feminine qualities with his narrative emphasis on logic and reason. The gritty, neo-noir, and androcentric style of *Do Androids Dream* demonstrates how hierarchical, patriarchal power can be threatened by a cyborg *femme fatale* who fractures identity categories. Women are depicted as the emotional and seductive other to the male hero. Finally, *The Left Hand of Darkness* plays with the idea of an androgynous race, which promises a disruption of gender binarism,
though this promise is only partially fulfilled. The male-dominated genre of science fiction has often relegated female characters to purely sexual roles, and in many ways The Left Hand of Darkness also falls into this trap, as characters are only described with female pronouns when they are in *kemmer*. The rest of the time, male pronouns are used, which puts their androgyny and femaleness out of mind for readers and Genly alike.

Secondly, Butler’s renowned *Gender Trouble* problematizes the notion of women as a stable identity category, positing instead that sex—like gender—is culturally constructed and *performative*. She argues that “the institution of compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire” (31). That gender and sexuality are culturally constructed “is not to assert [their] illusoriness or artificiality,” but rather demonstrates that one cannot reimagine or subvert heteropatriarchal power and language without acting within its scope (45). Butler offers up binary categories within homosexual identities as sites which contest the regulatory power of heteropatriarchy; the existences of butch and femme identities within the lesbian community suggest that these binaries are being challenged, not mimicked.

Perhaps the most visible application of Butler’s work is in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which features a planet with an androgynous race that is nonetheless gendered through language and submitted to near-totalizing heterosexuality. The cultural construction of gender and heterosexuality is also evident in *Stranger in a Strange Land* as Mike must learn the norms of gendered behavior and sexuality on Earth. In *Do Androids Dream*, the hierarchical position of the masculine over the feminine mirrors the
valorization of mind over body or human over machine, and a rigid gender binary regulates a strictly heterosexist worldview.

Thirdly, my critical perspective is based upon the theories set forth by Luce Irigaray’s *The Sex Which is Not One* (1985), particularly her theory that female sexuality is often depicted “within the dominant phallic economy,” and “on the basis of masculine parameters,” or in other words, only through direct relation to the phallus (24, 23). For example, vaginas are conceptualized as a hole to be filled by a penis, and the clitoris as a miniature penis, rather than as independent feminine entities. Women’s bodies are thus subject to the ideology of phallocentrism. In the dominant phallic economy, women are commodified as “exchange value[s] among men” (31). Irigaray suggests that women are not only denied independent sexuality, but also independent existence due to their role in often unpaid care and reproductive work, while male “subjects” are the “workers, merchants, consumers” (31). Irigaray’s solution to these problems is to acknowledge the plurality and power of “the sex which is not one,” i.e. women, whose bodies have many sexual organs—the vagina, labia, clitoris, breasts, and nipples—rather than one monolithic sexual organ. This revaluation is subversive through the recognition of a signifying economy that values women’s bodies and women’s work.

The world of *Stranger in a Strange Land* is a phallogocentric fantasy, filled with sexy nurses, secretaries, and strippers turned priestesses. Heinlein’s conception of sex for pleasure’s sake in *Stranger in a Strange Land* is limited by his depiction of female pleasure as dependent upon the dominant phallic economy. Women can take pleasure in sex, but this sex is actually a sanctioned exchange of women between men to cultivate a deeper male connection. Le Guin’s attempt at androgyny in *The Left Hand of Darkness*
fails to prevent the invisibility of the feminine that accompanies phallogocentrism\(^2\). As previously mentioned, all Gethenians are described with male pronouns, which erases their inherent femininity and the value therein. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* is predicated upon what Irigaray calls the dominant phallic economy, as female androids are sexualized and understood as property, but supposedly have no independent subjectivity.

Finally, this project’s understanding of sexual pleasure and empathy as avenues for understanding the other is built upon the writing of Thomas Nagel and Amy Coplan. Nagel’s chapter “Sexual Perversion” in *The Philosophy of Sex* (2013) and Coplan’s chapter “Understanding Empathy” in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (2011), outline some of the ways in which these intimate forms of interpersonal connection can radically impact the processes of othering theorized by Beauvoir, Butler, and Irigaray. Nagel argues that sexual desire is one way in which “an embodied consciousness” attempts to understand “the existence of others” (37). Similarly, Coplan argues “though empathy, we represent the other’s experience by replicating that experience. Rather than attempt to apprehend the other’s experience from an objective perspective, we attempt to share the other’s perspective” (18). Sex and empathy are non-traditional epistemologies, which also embrace the reality of failing to understand. Nagel claims the desire to understand others through sex is “doomed to fail” (37). Coplan emphasizes that “we have difficulty not allowing our own beliefs, values, and occurrent states to influence our simulation, which is why we regularly fail to

\(^2\) Like phallocentrism, which privileges the phallus over female genitalia, phallogocentrism is the privileging of the phallus and male subject through language
understand others or to understand them in a fine-grained way” (11). The inevitability of failure—of misunderstanding—is crucial, as it is the underlying drive that fuels our desire to understand one another, through both sex and empathy.

Despite the fact that *Stranger in a Strange Land* ultimately fails to grok women and female pleasure, grokking is an excellent praxis of empathy coupled with sexual pleasure as a means of understanding others. While there is no tangible salvation in Heinlein’s thought experiment in this novel, the story points to the power of pleasure and empathy as epistemologies. To a more successful extent, *The Left Hand of Darkness* takes an empathetic and sex positive approach to understanding alien others. Le Guin challenges her readers to empathize with characters whose lives and androgynous bodies are utterly different from their own. Finally, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* points to the bleak possibility that humanity’s obsession with power and hierarchy will co-opt pleasure and empathy as commodities: simulated mechanisms to make apocalyptic life bearable.

**Chapter Structure**

First, by examining depictions of sexual desire, intercourse, and pleasure in Heinlein, Dick, and Le Guin’s texts, I will argue that despite their heteronormative approaches, *Stranger in a Strange Land, The Left Hand of Darkness, and Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* provide subversive alternatives to the trappings of heteropatriarchal paradigms. Heinlein and Le Guin’s works offer sex-positive, pleasure-focused, nonmonogamous approaches in their imagined societies. *Do Androids Dream* challenges heteropatriarchy by confronting the taboos of sex between humans and non-humans and reworking the traditional assumptions of a femme fatale’s dangerous sexuality. I will investigate how sexual pleasure and sex positivity impact the societies
depicted in these texts. *Left Hand of Darkness* normalizes sexual pleasure on a global scale, while *Stranger in a Strange Land* hones in on a cult-like microcosm. *The Left Hand of Darkness* depicts sex as a tool of seduction and power. Some questions I will explore in this chapter are: How is sexual pleasure shown as a force of good that is both ethical and moral? How do depictions of sexual pleasure in these texts disrupt or contribute to compulsory heterosexuality? What can we learn about sexual pleasure and sexuality through these thought experiments?

My second chapter explores the implications of empathy both within my chosen sf texts and for readers of sf themselves. I will argue that depictions of empathy in these sf texts have subversive feminist potential as characters attempt to understand others who are different from themselves. I explore how the sf trope of telepathy functions as a literalization of empathy between self and other, and how these texts incorporate empathy into their invented religions. Through these explications, I will illustrate how science fiction points to empathy—caring about and for others—as one of the central features of humanity. Finally, I will demonstrate how science fiction fosters empathy in its readers and explore how empathy within the texts models a critical approach based in empathy, as opposed to critique. Some questions I explore in this chapter are: What exactly is empathy? How is empathy a gendered quality? How does empathy function as a feminist epistemology in these sf texts? Is misunderstanding an inevitability of empathy? How does reading literature make us more empathetic?

**Conclusion**

This introduction has established the legitimacy of science fiction as the object of scholarly study and pinpointed the ways in which the genre provokes questions of gender.
I have provided brief synopses of my chosen primary works along with a contextual timeline, explanation of the relationship between feminism and science fiction, described my critical perspectives, and outlined the focus of two chapters as they relate to my main area of investigation. It is an exciting time to be reading and writing about science fiction; it is my hope that this project demonstrates that it is lucrative to examine the depiction of gender and sexuality in these works of Heinlein, Dick, and Le Guin as it is nuanced by sexual pleasure and empathy.
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Sex in Science Fiction: Telepathic Polygamists, ‘Hermaphroditic Neuters,’ and Seductive Androids

In different ways, *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) subvert and sustain assumptions about gender and sexuality, both by the standards of the 1960’s and for contemporary readers. By examining episodes of sexual pleasure and seduction in these novels, it becomes clear that sex can simultaneously reinforce the trappings of heteronormativity and gendered power dynamics, but also successfully upend and destabilize gender codes and strict identity categories. While Heinlein and Le Guin’s stories offer sex-positive, pleasure-focused, nonmonogomous approaches to sexuality in their imagined societies, Dick’s novel is radical in its depiction of the phenomenon that Haraway calls the “informatics of domination”: postmodern hegemonic, patriarchal domination, exacerbated by the omnipresence of new technologies and the reification of gender distinctions. Sex in Heinlein and Le Guin’s novels validates female sexual pleasure and attempt to release sex from the prescriptions of patriarchal culture. Through sex between Rick and Rachael—a human and android—Dick explores the binary oppositions of nature/artifice, reason/emotion, and human/machine, which accompany the heterosexual paradigm.

At first glance, these novels may seem disparate: Heinlein’s is a buoyant utopia, Le Guin’s a measured gender experiment, and Dick’s a dystopian detective noir. Yet they coalesce around their inclusion of sexuality as a thematic element that challenges conservative values and the stability of gendered binaries. Sex in these novels also serves as a bridge between the self and other, which can be liberating even if the inevitable
result is an imperfect understanding. These texts were contemporaneous with the second wave of feminism, the free love movement, scientific advancements in birth control, political debate surrounding abortion rights, and the rise of an era characterized by technological discovery and innovation—specifically the advent of computers. But these texts should not be viewed in historical isolation; they hit a nerve with contemporary readers through their clear parallels with third wave feminist theory, current vocabularies of polyamory and kink, the ongoing politicization of birth control and abortion rights, and the technological advancements of the 21st century. In other words, I have grouped these novels together not only because they form a rather representative sample of 60s science fiction focused on gender, but because readers still return to these classic works to learn something about the contemporary world in which we live.

In teasing apart these depictions of sex, it is helpful to turn to Sallie Tisdale’s assertion that “sex is important because it is central to being human, because it intersects with everything else, because it is the physical realm’s metaphor for the chaos and texture of our spiritual and psychological lives” (6). Indeed, sex intimately demonstrates the inherent contradictions within social constructs of gender and sexuality, and with the consolidation and exercise of power, which is why it is such a useful arena for feminist literary criticism. This chapter relies on theories of sexuality established by Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler, Laura Mulvey, Jean Baudrillard, and many others to discover what can we learn about sexual pleasure and sexuality in these sf thought experiments. I conclude that despite these works’ various attempts to promote sex positivity, destabilize the exclusion of the other through sexual intimacy, and carve out sexual agency for women, their depictions of sex and sexual pleasure often fail to move beyond a tacit acceptance of the
dominant phallic economy, compulsory heterosexuality, and the marginalization of women and queerness.

*Stranger in a Strange Land*

*Stranger in a Strange Land* relies on a common convention of science fiction in its storytelling; an alien experiences the cultural norms of Earth for the first time and finds them quite strange. As sf critic Veronica Hollinger points out, this storytelling strategy succeeds in “defamiliariz[ing] certain taken-for granted aspects of ordinary human reality” (129). Thus, the journey of Valentine Michael Smith—a human born and raised on Mars who returns to Earth as an adult—provides readers with a fresh perspective with which to challenge the assumed standards of behavior, religion, government, and human sexuality in particular. As the Man from Mars experiences his coming-of-age on Earth, he introduces many Martian concepts that he learned from its inhabitants. Mike is enthralled with the existence of two sexes on the planet, which differs vastly from the Martian race. On Heinlein’s Mars, Martians are female in their early “nymph” stage and become male in their adult stage, but they lack “mankind’s tragic and oddly beautiful pattern of reproduction” (119). Martian sexuality diverges from “tumultuous human sexuality,” because “what must be termed ‘sex’ in a Martian is as romantic as intravenous feeding” (377, 355). Consequently, Mike has a long period of adjustment to the dual existence of men and women on Earth and to “romantic physical love [which] might be unique to this planet” (507).

Christine Kraemer offers useful historical context through which to view Heinlein’s philosophy of sexuality in this text, highlighting that though “the novel was intended to be satirical, and Heinlein was startled and puzzled by his readers’ eagerness
to confront the social wrongs he identified [...] in the following decades the numbers of young people who began to make a pilgrimage to Heinlein’s doorstep in the 1960s forced him and his wife to live behind a barbed wire fence, much like his character Jubal” (58). *Stranger in a Strange Land* highlights various social issues ranging from government corruption to sexual liberation, often with Jubal as the logical mouthpiece of Heinlein’s philosophies. Heinlein challenges his readers to be critical of the capitalist, bureaucratic society in the novel and embrace the alternate lifestyle of Mike and his followers. Clearly this novel struck a nerve with its readership due to its frank focus on sexual politics.

However, even with the novel’s focus on sex and sexual dimorphism, the text as a whole does not “grok” gender and sexuality “in fullness,” as Mike often describes the complete comprehension of something (186). While Mike’s utopic vision for the world promotes a literal orgy of sex positivity, combats the othering of women through empathic understanding, and demonstrates female bodily autonomy, Heinlein’s storytelling misses the mark on its depiction of female pleasure. Heinlein fails to grok the “wrongness” of his exclusion of sexualities outside of heterosexual pairings and his objectification of the female body. In her anthologized chapter, “Gender in Science Fiction,” Helen Merrick discusses some of Heinlein’s work, praising his early inclusion of issues of sex and sexuality as well as liberated and intelligent female characters (245). Despite these progressive qualities, though, “Heinlein’s women are re-contained within a normative gendered order most often through their desire for male appreciation, remaining ‘sexually dependent’ whilst ‘morally superior’” (245). Because the novel takes such a central and positive focus on sexuality—deeming it the most fundamental aspect
of humanity—it is crucial for readers to grapple with the inconsistencies of Heinlein’s imagination like those that Merrick indicates in *Stranger in a Strange Land*.

The Man from Mars groks sexuality to be a “great goodness,” deciding: “it’s the source [...] of all that makes this planet so rich and wonderful” (353, 507). Rather than viewing sex as a purely reproductive act, Mike celebrates the spiritual bonds and physical pleasure it creates: “physical human love—very human and very physical—[is] not simply a necessary quickening of eggs, nor [is] it mere ritual through which one grows closer; the act *itself* [is] a growing-closer, a very great goodness” (353). He celebrates sexuality as a way to enhance relationships, and consequently features kissing and sex quite prominently in the religious cult he creates to spread Martian teaching to the public: The Church of All Worlds. As a result of this philosophy, the residents of the Nest (the innermost sanctum and living space) at The Church of All Worlds adopt these polyamorous practices. Jubal—Mike’s avuncular guardian—classifies the “group as a plural marriage—a group theogamy” (445). The spiritual bond of marriage already existed between all of the Nests’ members through their water brotherhood, so physical love was thus a logical extension.

Notably, pleasure and emotional connection are cited as the only legitimate purposes for sex in *Stranger in a Strange Land*, as opposed to utilizing sex solely for reproduction or domination. From his first sexual encounter, Mike views sex as one of the best ways to “grow-closer” with one’s water brothers, and claims that sex “should bring happiness, or, at the very least, pleasure” (450). Both Jill and Mike directly repudiate reproduction-only and dominance models of sexuality. Jill elucidates that

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3 Water Brothers are those with whom one has shared water, a Martian ceremony which bonds people together permanently and spiritually.
“babies are the obvious result” of intercourse between men and women, “but not the primary purpose at all [...] only three or four or a dozen times in a woman’s life is a baby quickened in her [...] out of thousands of times she can share herself—and that is the primary use for what we can do so often but would need to do seldom if it were only for reproduction. It is sharing and growing closer” (497). Interestingly, Jill makes this proclamation of sex for pleasure’s sake in spite of the fact that that she is pregnant at the time. Though Jill is successfully fulfilling the patriarchal expectation of motherhood for women, she vocally supports its purpose for pleasure above reproduction.

In a different way, Mike cautions against sex as “indifference and acts mechanically performed and rape and seduction as a game [...] and children brought up to think that sex was ‘bad’ and ‘shameful’ and ‘animal’ and something to be hidden and always distrusted” (508). Mike openly rejects the use of sexuality to dominate, oppress, extort, shame, or manipulate others; he is critical of viewing sex as a thing that a man extracts from his wife as a term of their marriage. Instead he deems sex a consensual act that should initiated and enjoyed by all parties involved for the sake of pleasure and connection. Mike emphasizes with reverence “the actual joining and blending of two physical bodies and simultaneous merging of souls in the shared ecstasy of love [...] there’s nothing on Mars to touch it” (507). Embracing the physicality, emotional bond, and pleasure of sex challenges notions of sex as something sinful or “shameful.” This problematizes the traditional roles of women in patriarchy as temptresses and mothers—conduits of sin and shame—when the only proper purpose for sex is, as Jill claims, for “sharing and growing closer.”
In these ways, the Nest’s free love practices coincide with feminist sex-positive philosophy. The water-brothers would certainly earn Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy’s praise as “ethical sluts”. As ethical sluts, the water-brothers of the Nest:

celebrate sexuality according to the radical proposition that sex is nice and pleasure is good for you [...] sex and sexual love are fundamental forces for good, activities with the potential to strengthen intimate bonds, enhance lives, open spiritual awareness, even change the world [...] sluts share their sexuality the way philanthropists share their money: because they have a lot of it to share, because it makes them happy to share it, because sharing makes the world a better place (4).

Jubal also frames the Nest’s open sexuality in terms of morality, when Ben first explains what is happening in the living space of The Church of All Worlds. Ben struggles to adjust to their polyamorous lifestyle and properly cope with his jealousy, so he asks Jubal: “you think what they are doing is moral?” (447). Jubal responds: “Yes: all of it. Group orgies and open and unashamed swapping off at other times . . . their communal living and anarchist code, everything. And most especially their selfless dedication to giving their perfect morality to others” (447). Mike and his water brothers are “sharing [to] mak[e] the world a better place” and their happiness in doing so is repeatedly emphasized. Contrary to the preaching of traditional sexual mores, the open sexuality of the nest is depicted as moral, fluid, and pleasurable. Mike and his water brothers’ dedication to sharing their moral lifestyle with others promotes an ethic of sexual freedom or ethical sluthood.

In addition to this positive and pleasure-focused approach to sexuality, Heinlein endeavors to uproot the othering of women through Mike’s discipline of grokking—of simultaneous mindfulness and sexuality—which enables a brotherhood between people that can transcend gender. Grokking makes the ideological process of othering nearly impossible, for “it means ‘love,’ [and] it means ‘hate’—proper hate, for by the Martian
map you cannot possibly hate anything unless you grok it completely, understand it so thoroughly that you merge with it and it merges with you—then and only then can you hate it. By hating yourself” (266). This praxis of intentional, empathetic understanding of others means that one cannot easily fear and exclude another, because it necessitates the recognition of the other as an intimate part of oneself.

Stepping away from the binary opposition of male superiority and female inferiority may require untangling the notion that “the heterosexual dynamic is about difference” (Tisdale 64). As Sallie Tisdale highlights in *Talk Dirty to Me: An Intimate Philosophy of Sex*, “heterosexual relations [...] contain a fantasy of dualism, the blending of opposites, clash and resolution: male and female [...] when they work, they feel like a code deciphered” (64). Heinlein deciphers the code of woman as other by attempting to include and understand them as agentic, grokking beings. The water brothers of the nest accept that part of “‘growing closer’ by sexual union” is “this unity-into-plurality and plurality-back-into unity [...] [for] any pairing that excluded the others would be immoral, obscene, under the postulated creed” (453). Exclusion of the other is immoral in this group, whose practice of sharing water is symbolic of sharing the spirit. Water brotherhood occurs between equals, regardless of gender. Water brotherhood does not erase gender, but compassionately bridges the differences and similarities between men and women. In fact, Mike tells Jubal near the end of the story that “Male-femaleness is the greatest gift we have” (507).

Heinlein also makes an attempt to illustrate sexual agency for women. Aside from the female characters’ expressions of happiness within the Nest, Jill’s experiences as a showgirl in Las Vegas during her and Mike’s travels illuminate the possibility of female
pleasure and sexual exploration. Jill has a positive experience as a showgirl, and reflects that “she enjoyed displaying herself, as long as she was safe from hands she did not want to grab her” (373). Not only does Jill discover some of her own sexual preferences of exhibitionism, but she also realizes that her pleasure lies in control and consent. Furthermore, Jill develops a positive understanding of her particular fetishes and rejects externalized shame. She traces her independence from societal norms when she reflects how “‘exhibitionism’ had been to her simply a word used in abnormal psychology—a neurotic weakness she had held in contempt . . . but she didn’t feel abnormal; she felt healthy and happy” (374). Jill shirks societal stigma and pursues her own pleasure shamelessly.

However briefly, Heinlein explores the implications of total bodily autonomy for women. Those who are fluent in Martian are able to keep their bodies healthy, youthful, and change their appearances at will with enough practice. At the Nest’s dinner table, Jubal ponders the need for contraceptives, and questions what happens “when a female can conceive only when she elects to as an act of volition, when also she is immune to disease, cares only for the approval of her own sort [...] [and] any male who tried to rape her would die so quickly, if she grokked, that he wouldn’t know what hit him? When women are free of guilt and fear?” (487). These questions are an iteration of common feminist thought: what happens when women are no longer objects of male desire, when women are in control of their own bodies, when women do not have to fear rape and may pursue their own pleasure without stigma? What happens when women are empowered?

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4 Later in this chapter I will explore the limitations of this particular episode, not to knock its sex-positive potential, but rather to provide holistic reading in line with Merrick’s reminder that despite the sexual liberation of the characters, the novel remains in adherence with a “normative gendered order.”
The pure happiness and omnipotence of the Nest is a promising answer to these questions for readers.

However, there are major gaps in Heinlein’s understanding of gender and of the issues that can be solved through empathetic and mutual “grokking.” Perhaps this is due to the fact that “there are aspects of sex on which it is impossible to communicate between the two sexes of our race” as Jubal suggests, and Heinlein is not one of the “few exceptionally gifted individuals” who can “gro[k] by intuition across the gulf that separates us” (289). Heinlein’s positive approach to sexuality collapses due to his inability to conceptualize female pleasure outside of phallocentrism. Irigaray argues that “woman, in this sexual imaginary, is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man’s fantasies. That she may find pleasure in that role, by proxy, is possible, even certain. But such pleasure is above all a masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own, and it leaves her in a familiar state of dependency upon man” (25).

Despite its attempts at sex positivity and sexual agency for women, *Stranger in a Strange Land* falls into the trap of objectifying women. The pleasure Heinlein provides his female characters is always dependent on—and seemingly shaped to please—men.

Revisiting the episode of Jill as a showgirl we can see that Jill’s pleasure is shaped by and around the male gaze, however telepathically that gaze may occur. Her experience is described through Mike’s perspective: “Mike let her use his eyes to see herself. She looked at herself and felt his emotions . . . and felt her own swell in response in a closed and mutually amplified re-echoing” (379). This desire does not come from Jill, but from the men for whom she is posing: “She had been letting herself receive as
much as possible of the stranger’s emotions . . . and relaying them back to Mike—when suddenly the circuit was completed and she was looking at herself, seeing herself through strange eyes [...] and feeling the primitive need with which that stranger saw her” (378-79). This telepathic striptease alarmingly mirrors Irigaray’s words of caution that “woman takes pleasure more from touching than looking, and her entry into a dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her consignment to passivity: she is the beautiful object of contemplation” (25). Because Jill is experiencing her body through Mike’s eyes and receiving the emotions and lust of the men watching her, she is cast into the role of passive receptacle of male desire. Heinlein does not adequately imagine female pleasure beyond objectification and passivity, instead rationalizing it and assuming consent to its processes; “if a healthy woman liked to be looked at . . . then it follows as night from day that healthy men should like to look at them, else there was no darn sense to it” (374).

This scene is contradictory in nature: it demonstrates an attempt to normalize female sexuality through Jill’s self-discovery, but is also limited by its commitment to female sexual passivity. The dual interpretations of this episode reflect the paradox Irigaray describes; women may find some amount of pleasure in the passive roles forced upon them.

Further, the hyper-rational approach that Heinlein’s characters have towards pleasure, coupled with their superhuman abilities, prove problematic because they assume that women *always* have bodily autonomy. Given her telepathic connection with Mike and his ability to instantly vanish any wrongdoers, Jill needs not fear unwanted touch. However, she extends her Martian understanding of exhibitionism and safety to attest that women don’t *ever* have to fear unwanted touch, because after all, she “was
coping with wolves when [Mike] was still on Mars. Nine times out of ten, if a girl gets raped, it’s at least partly her fault. The tenth time—well alright” (376). Rape is clearly grokked as “a wrongness” in *Stranger in a Strange Land* because it is an act of needless violence, but Jill (and all her water-brothers) buys into victim-blaming nonetheless. Heinlein fails to understand the privilege of grokking, and mistakes Jill’s heightened bodily autonomy for a universal truth instead of the ultimate goal all humans must work toward.

The final, categorical issue with the depiction of sexuality in *Stranger in a Strange Land* is the novel’s blatant homophobia. One critic points out that despite the novel’s “interest in sacred sex and ethical nonmonogamy [...] Heinlein’s understanding of sacred sexuality falls squarely into a heterosexist paradigm” (Kraemer 63). The text is deliberate in its implementation of what Adrienne Rich and Judith Butler term “compulsory” heterosexuality, and thoroughly avoids any possibility of homosexuality, which is a remarkable task given its various depictions of group sex and polyamory (Butler 31). For example, Jill is aroused by the exhibitionism of being a showgirl, but decides “that she preferred not to be excited by women other than through his eyes [...] to have discovered in herself unsuspected latent Lesbian tendencies would have been entirely to much. But it certainly was a lot of fun” (380). In Rich’s essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Experience,” she explores the exclusion and invisibility of queer female sexuality in society and even in feminist scholarship, pointing out that “the bias of compulsory heterosexuality, through which lesbian experience is perceived on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent, or simply rendered invisible [...] are widely current in literature in the social sciences” (632). Jill’s rejection of lesbianism echoes this
assertion as she plays into the myth that female bisexuality is for male pleasure alone. Sure, it’s “a lot of fun,” but only ever for the male gaze and male pleasure.

Jill also worries about Mike being perceived as queer, and “had given him practical rules for avoiding even the appearance [of homosexuality] [...] he had followed her advice and had set about making his face more masculine, instead of the androgynous beauty he had first had” (374-75). Mike doesn’t initially understand homosexuality (or homophobia) and is happy to kiss his male water brothers as a way to ‘grow closer,’ but Jubal and Jill instill societal gender expectations in him. Jubal explains that kissing is “a fine way to grow closer . . . but just with girls” (216). Later in the novel, Ben explains to Jubal that in the Nest, water brothers greet one another with a kiss, including male water-brothers, “but it’s not a pansy gesture” (448). Androgyny and homosexuality are so feared that the water brothers of the nest are either “decidedly masculine men” or “very female women,” which falls into the pattern Butler observes: “naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation [...] accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire” (31). Furthermore, Jill “suspected that Mike would grok a ‘wrongness’ in the poor in-betweeners anyhow—they would never be offered water” (375). Curiously, Jubal and Jill are responsible for interpreting most of Mike’s views on gender and sexuality that fall beyond the scope of heteronormativity. Perhaps if Mike had been left to his own devices he would not have absorbed their prejudices. In the end, however, these tensions are not resolved and seem at odds with the mission of compassionate understanding taught by The Church of All Worlds.
The Left Hand of Darkness

Ursula Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* takes place on the planet of Gethen, a harsh wintery planet inhabited by an androgynous race, which differs vastly from Heinlein’s “decidedly masculine men” and “very female women” and from his sexless Martians (31). Gethenians were one of the early experiments of the Hainish colonizers, who populate hundreds of planets in Le Guin’s universe. Readers become acquainted with the odd customs, gender, and governments of Gethen through the first-person narration of Genly Ai, the First Envoy from the Ekumen, the interplanetary alliance which is banding together all inhabited planets for the purpose of cultural and intellectual exchange. As a human man, Genly grapples with the bizarre androgyny of the Gethenians, who find his permanent masculine state equally strange. In fact, it is “what they call perversion” (67). Brian Attebery points out that *The Left Hand of Darkness* “performs androgyny, or invites the reader to perform it” (134). Androgyny is a slippery signifier, at times marking difference and at others challenging male supremacy through its playful manipulations of the gender binary. Like the Envoy, readers must interpret for themselves the significations of androgyny in the novel. Are Gethenians a perfect yin-yang of masculinity and femininity? Or, as Le Guin herself admits in her essay “Is Gender Necessary,” do “Gethenians seem like men instead of menwomen” (169)?

Gender and sexuality formulate the central thought experiments of the text, with an entire chapter entitled “The Question of Sex”— written by earlier investigators on Gethen—that divulges the details of Gethenian sexuality. On Gethen, “The sexual cycle averages 26 to 28 days […] for 21 or 22 days the individual is somer, sexually inactive, latent. On about the 18th day hormonal changes are initiated by the pituitary control and
on the 22nd or 23rd day the individual enters kemmer, estrus.” (96). In kemmer, an individual has an equal chance of becoming the male or female partner and an equal chance of bearing or siring a child. Though Gethenians are “five-sixths of the time, hermaphroditic neuters,” as Genly classifies, “you cannot think of a Gethenian as ‘it.’ [...] they are potentials, or integrals” (50; 101).

Like *Stranger in a Strange Land*, the novel illuminates the possibilities of a sex-positive society, but demonstrates a more complete attempt at gender equity through its working model of androgyny. Le Guin consciously and critically positions Genly as an outsider and representative of a neocolonial force to challenge his fetishization of the other, particularly through the intimate relationship that blossoms between Genly and Estraven. Moreover, sexual agency is amply promoted by Gethen’s societies due to the equality promoted through its androgyny. Despite this agency, the somer-kemmer cycle of sexuality proves problematic when it comes to depicting sexuality beyond the dominant phallic economy and heterosexuality. Kemmer is explicitly described as *estrus*, which as I will expand upon later, damages—and perhaps prevents—an understanding of human sexuality independent of the phallus. Consequently, Le Guin’s attempt at androgyny is actually exclusive of women and queer relationships.

Still, the societies of Gethen are sex-positive ones, primarily due to the somer-kemmer cycle of androgynous sexuality that dictates life for the planet’s inhabitants. Genly Ai meditates on the normalization of fluid sexuality on Gethen, coming to the conclusion that:

Being so strictly defined and limited by nature, the sexual urge of Gethenians is really not much interfered with by society: there is less coding, channeling, and
repressing of sex there than in any bisexual society I know of. Abstinence is entirely voluntary; indulgence is entirely acceptable. Sexual fear and sexual frustration are both extremely rare. (190)

Because the “sexual impulse is tremendously strong” in kemmer, society has adapted around the presence of sex in daily life (96). Sex is not a source of shame, nor solely celebrated for its reproductive value. In fact, overpopulation is a major concern for a planet with such minimal inhabitable space, yet abstinence and indulgence are equally “voluntary” and “acceptable.” Though Le Guin characterizes kemmer as necessarily heterosexual, Gethenians are not also restricted by monogamous relationships. Some individuals choose to “swear kemmering” to one another in a custom similar to heterosexual marriage, but “kemmer is not always played by pairs. [...] in the kemmer houses of towns and cities, groups may form and intercourse takes place promiscuously among the males and females of the group” (98). Monogamy, polyamory, and celibacy are all celebrated as options in the sex-positive philosophy of Gethen.

Yet readers’ comprehension of this sex-positivity is constantly colored and complicated by Genly Ai’s role as Envoy, as colonizer, and as outsider. As Genly admits to his readers: “culture shock was nothing much compared to the biological shock I suffered as a human male among human beings who were, five-sixths of the time, hermaphroditic neuters” (50). As the single embodiment of a colonial force, he makes considerable effort “to see the people of the planet through their own eyes” (12). After all, to the people of Gethen, Genly appears quite as strange as Gethenians do for readers. Wendy Gray Pearson explores Genly’s singular presence in “Postcolonialism/s, Gender/s, Sexuality/ies and the Legacy of The Left Hand of Darkness,” offering the observation
that: “The postcolonial or anticolonial nature of the work resides in Genly’s role as the Ekumen’s Envoy, sent alone in a strange new world precisely in order to avoid the dangers of colonization and deculturation” (Pearson 188). The Ekumen’s first envoy always arrives to a new planet alone, and consequently must confront his own role as other. This perspective of being both one and other is emphasized by the flitting back and forth of the narrative between Genly’s first person observations and Estraven’s journal throughout the story. It is Estraven who articulates this phenomenon of mutual, sexual alienhood during their adventure across the glacier in the end of the novel, when the two make their escape back into Karhide: “after all [Genly] is no more an oddity, a sexual freak, than I am, up here on the ice each of us is singular, isolate” (250).

Le Guin is able to resist the tendency of characterizing racial others as both abject and fetishized through the tender friendship and sexual tension that arises during this time on the ice. During their journey, Estraven enters kemmer, and due to Genly’s permanently masculine presence, s/he transforms into his/her female phase. Genly explains: “it was from that sexual tensions between us, admitted now and understood, but not assuaged [...] that the great and sudden assurance of friendship between us rose” (267). Pearson notes that “the two refrain from a sexual encounter at the precise moment when it becomes most possible,” because as Genly illuminates: “for us to meet sexually would be for us to meet once more as aliens. We had touched, in the only way we could touch. We left it at that” (194; 267). Pearson argues that this alienation would occur if they acted upon their sexual tension due to Estraven’s feminization in kemmer, coupled with Genly’s discursive “tendency to masculinize everything [...] we can only have an

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5 I have chosen to use s/he and his/her instead of the singular they to reflect the duality of gender encapsulated in Le Guin’s androgyny and the motif of dualism in the novel.
encounter between a man and a woman or between two men,” which ultimately denies Estraven his/her true androgyny (or abject otherness) (194). By resisting their sexual desires, Genly and Estraven cement a mutual understanding rather than entering a sexual union predicated upon the fundamental misunderstanding of gender and sexuality. In this way, their deliberate avoidance of hetero sex is a way of appreciating while preserving the other’s alien otherness.

By electing not to act physically on their desire, Genly and Estraven consign their shared pleasure to a practice of look-but-don’t-touch. This moment, therefore, can also be viewed as a transracial, interplanetary mirror stage, in the context of Laura Mulvey’s theories of scopophilia, the “pleasure in looking,” set forth in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (170). Mulvey ties the pleasure in looking to the mirror stage in infants, where the psychological process of identification and othering begins by projecting an idealized, misrecognized image of the self as “alienated” other (171). Mulvey also points to Freud’s isolation of “scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality which exist as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones. At this point he associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (170). Genly and Estraven are certainly curious, but it is not until nearly the end of the novel that readers know for certain that Genly is not objectifying Estraven as sexual other. In other words, Genly doesn’t indulge in the oppressive tendency of scopophilia, where the male gaze objectifies the female body. It is through one meaningful, sexually tense glance that Genly is finally able to understand Estraven’s gender identity and personhood:
then he looked at me with a direct, gentle gaze. His face in the reddish light was as soft, as vulnerable, as remote as the face of a woman [...] saw then again, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not to see in him: that he was a woman as well as a man [...] what I was left with was, at last, acceptance of him as he was. Until then I had rejected him, refused him his own reality. (266)

Through the process of and pleasure in looking, Genly sees not “an objectified other,” but a whole person, a friend, and his lover.

As previously mentioned, this (mis)understanding is two-sided. It is not only Genly imposing a gender dichotomy; Estraven also struggles to understand Genly’s permanent masculinity. Gethenians are “reticent about discussing perversion [...] excessive prolongation of the kemmer period, with permanent hormonal imbalance toward the male or female” (67). Genly is aware that “three or four percent of adults may be physiological perverts or abnormals—normals by our standard. They are not excluded from society, but they are tolerated with some disdain” (67). But it’s not until readers are privy to Estraven’s internal musings that we become aware of his/her difficulties in viewing Genly as anything other than a “sexual freak” (250). When the two are climbing up onto the great glacier of Gethen, Estraven observes “a frailty about [Genly]. He is all unprotected, exposed, vulnerable, even to his sexual organ, which he must carry always outside himself” (245). This is one of few comments that Estraven makes about Genly’s sexual difference, yet readers should not overlook it as evidence of Estraven’s curiosity about Genly’s continual sexual state. Estraven struggles to comprehend what we—along with Genly—would characterize as normal human sexuality. His/her hypothesis that “a
strange low-grade desire it must be, to be spread out over every day of the year and never to know the choice of sex,” hypersexualizes Genly, but also brings about his/her realization: “but there it is; and here I am” (250).

Estraven comes to accept Genly’s masculinity and sexual dimorphism in general by coming to the conclusion, that like Genly and his Terran people, “we are dualists too. Duality is an essential [...] so long as there is myself and the other” (252). Genly agrees, acknowledging: “I and thou [...] yes, it does, after all, go even wider than sex . . .” (252). Estraven ceases to view Genly as a perversion when s/he draws the connection between the process of sexual othering and denial of subjectivity. Viewing the other as the object of one’s sexual desire requires a certain amount of objectification, which denies the other’s subjectivity to some extent. This point is elaborated in Thomas Nagel’s chapter “Sexual Perversion,” where Nagel discusses Sartre’s philosophy that “sexual desire [is] one form of the perpetual attempt of an embodied consciousness to come to terms with the existence of others, an attempt that is doomed to fail” (37). Essentially, Nagel argues that when it comes to sex there is a subjectivity paradox, where both sexual actors engage in a process of objectifying their partner and denying the other’s subjectivity, which “has the consequence that there can be no such thing as a successful sexual relation, since the deep aim of sexual desire,” i.e. to understand and merge with the other, “cannot in principle be accomplished” (37). Nagel’s framework extends to Genly and Estraven’s ultimate decision to refrain from having sex together, knowing that doing so would make them alien to one another and would ruin their rapport of respect and mutual trust. Perhaps Genly and Estraven’s sexual relation is successful in that they are both aware of the paradox—the risk of mutual alienation—and choose instead to acknowledge their
misunderstandings. By acknowledging the impossibility of a perfect understanding of such alien differences, the novel realizes the inevitability of misunderstanding and that misunderstanding is a site of empathy and compassion. In this way, *The Left Hand of Darkness* repudiates the fetishization and objectification of others.

Additionally, the novel promotes sexual agency through its androgyny and the cyclic nature of Gethenian sexuality. Readers are explicitly asked to consider the possibilities of a society that normalizes sexuality, that “discuss[es] sexual matters freely, and talk[s] about kemmer with both reverence and gusto” (67). Moreover, Gethenians start out on equal footing; it is a world to which patriarchal power is absent and alien, and consequently, sex is not a tool of domination. In “The Question of Sex” it is posited that this colonial gender experiment successfully eliminated aggression and violence enforced through sexual difference. Genly wonders if violence is “a purely masculine displacement-activity, a vast Rape, and therefore in their experiment [they] eliminate[d] the masculinity that rapes and the femininity that is raped?” (102). In this sense, Gethenian androgyny allows room for the feminine by removing the threat and power of a toxic, hegemonic masculinity, by demolishing the hierarchy. Readers are asked to “consider: there is no unconsenting sex, no rape. As with most mammals, coitus can be performed only by mutual invitation and consent otherwise it is not possible” (100). The threat of rape is utterly neutralized within the somer-kemmer cycle, where one must find a consenting partner also in kemmer in order to have sex. Otherwise, “a Gethenian in first-phase kemmer, if kept alone or with others not in kemmer, remains incapable of coitus” (96).
Aside from the implications of necessary consent on Gethen, readers are also told to “consider: there is no division of humanity into strong and weak halves, protective/protected, dominant/submissive owner/chattel, active/passive. In fact the whole tendency to dualism that pervades human thinking may be found to be lessened, or changed, on [Gethen]” (100). Again, it is through removing the hierarchal gender dichotomy that sexual agency and equality are promoted in the novel. As Brian Attebery suggests in his chapter “Androgyny as Difference,” “masculine and feminine are not interchangeable counters in the game of gender: the polarity is also a hierarchy. To move from feminine to masculine is to move up the ladder of status and power. To shift from masculine to feminine is to lose both rank and purity” (135). Le Guin’s model of androgyny seemingly removes this ladder of status and power altogether, enabling individuals to make their own sexual choices, because “burden and privilege are shared out pretty equally; everybody has the same risk to run or choice to make” (100). The amazing possibilities of this equality should not be understated. As Genly reminds us, on Gethen “one is respected and judged only as a human being. It is an appalling experience” (101).

However empowering their society may be, Le Guin’s androgynous Gethenians are not wholly subversive. As Attebery points out: “two objections have been raised to the book: first, that it does not go far enough in its depiction of androgyny; and second, that androgyny itself is, rather than a liberating vision, a betrayal of feminist aims” (131). Genly utilizes masculine pronouns to describe Gethenians unless they are in kemmer or unless he is observing negative feminine qualities about them. Le Guin justifies this pronoun usage in the “Question of Sex” chapter, which is narrated by an earlier explorer.
from the Ekumen, claiming that “lacking the Karhidish ‘human pronoun 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
feminine” (101). This justification is quite familiar to readers of Simone de Beauvoir’s
_The Second Sex_, as this phenomenon is precisely what she rejects. Despite Le Guin’s
efforts to depict a society predicated upon gender equality, Genly’s male point of view
and masculine discourse complicates her attempt.

The phallogocentrism of _The Left Hand of Darkness_ could perhaps be resolved “if
the controlling consciousness of the book had been either a Gethenian or a female Terran,
[but] the book would probably not have been so well received by the largely male SF
readership (and literary establishment) of 1969” (Attebery 131). Nevertheless, readers
are stuck with Genly’s arms-length human male perspective, which leaves many readers
questioning the practicality of the sexual androgyny of Gethenians. With the exception
of “The Question of Sex” chapter, it is quite easy to read Gethenians as ken-dolled men
with ambiguous and undefined genitalia. Though Le Guin explicitly tells readers: “there
is no myth of Oedipus on [Gethen]” in attempt to dispel Freudian models of sexuality on
Gethen, she is complicit in the dominant phallic economy by her failure to establish an
androgynous sexuality independent of the phallus, both in language and sexual biology.
In the words of Judith Butler, “the possibility of another language or signifying economy
is the only chance at escaping the ‘mark’ of gender which, for the feminine, is nothing
but the phallogocentric erasure of the female sex” (36). Le Guin escapes the ‘mark’ of
gender not by “the ‘equalizing’ of it in androgyne,” or giving Gethenians equally
valuable feminine and masculine qualities but through “a denial of difference,” by
glossing over the finer details of the novel’s androgyny and defaulting to masculine pronouns (Le Guin 102; Attebery 149).

Gethenian androgyny also fails to provide an alternative to the compulsory heterosexuality that Judith Butler explores. The somer-kemmer cycle is prohibitive of any non-heterosexual erotic interactions: “When the individual finds a partner in kemmer, hormonal secretion is further stimulated [...] until in one partner either a male or female hormonal dominance is established. The genitals engorge or shrink accordingly, foreplay intensifies, and the partner, triggered by the change, takes on the other sexual role” (96). Heterosexuality is a reactive totality in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, despite the novel’s repeated assertions that sexuality is celebrated beyond its reproductive value. There seems to be some confusion in the investigative reports from the Hainish explorers initial reports about Gethenian sexuality, though. In a parenthetical aside in “The Question of Sex,” there is a question of whether heterosexual pairings occur “(? Without exception? If there are exceptions, resulting in kemmer-partners of the same sex, they are so rare as to be ignored)” (96). Butler suggests that “the replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original” (43). In this sense, Le Guin’s androgyny and its heterosexual eroticism reflect our deep commitment to straightening out the queer possibilities, which push a thought experiment too far, challenging our reliance on “a stable and oppositional heterosexuality [...] within an oppositional, binary gender system” (Butler 31). Thus, *The Left Hand of Darkness* bars queerness from its androgyny.

In a similar way, the novel’s androgyny is exclusive of feminine qualities. As previously mentioned, Genly’s perspective as human male renders an understanding of
Gethenians as truly androgynous extremely difficult, if not impossible altogether. The male-dominated genre of science fiction has often relegated female characters to purely sexual roles, and in many ways *The Left Hand of Darkness* also falls into this trap, as characters are only described with female pronouns when they are in kemmer. The rest of the time, male pronouns are used, which puts their androgyny and femaleness out of mind for readers and Genly alike. For example, Le Guin gives readers a glimpse of Genly’s thoughts early on in the story: “I was still far from being able to see the people of the planet through their own eyes. I tried to, but my efforts took to the form of self-consciously seeing a Gethenian first as a man, then as a woman, forcing him into those categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential to my own” (12). What Genly also admits to in this candid moment is that he prioritizes the masculine over the feminine. He sees Gethenians “first as a man, then as a woman,” and not the other way around. This prioritization is also reflected in the language of the story. While the dialects of Gethen have neutral pronouns and neutral views of androgyny, Genly utilizes male pronouns to describe Gethenians except when they are in the female phase of kemmer, thus limiting the depiction of femininity to association with sexuality.

*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

Where *Stranger in a Strange Land* focuses on sexual dimorphism and freedom, and *The Left Hand of Darkness* toys with androgyny, Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* is anxiously preoccupied with sex, power, and the blurring lines between human and machine. The story centers on Rick Deckard’s mission as bounty hunter to find and kill six escaped androids on a post-apocalyptic Earth. Importantly, this mission is shaped and corrupted by his reliance on the Nexus-6 android Rachael Rosen,
who is a marketing tool of the Rosen Association used to demonstrate the advantages of their new, exceptionally life-like line of humanoid robots. His sexual attraction to the female androids—Luba Loft and Rachael—leads him to question whether he empathizes with androids. The action of the story, driven by Deckard’s mission, is compromised by Rachael’s role as femme fatale, as dangerous, inhuman seductress. Though he is successful in his mission by the end of the novel when he kills the android Pris, who is the same ‘model’ of android as Rachael, Rick Deckard is defeated by Rachael’s sexual dominance.

In the novel, sexual desire makes it difficult to draw neat boundaries between human and machine, natural and artificial, real and virtual. As Donna Haraway explicates in her “Manifesto for Cyborgs,” even as it becomes harder to distinguish between humans, animals, and machines, the exclusionary powers of these categories—rigid as ever—are simply renamed. In other words, traditional values, projected into a future world, become problematic (205). This ambivalent dystopian world of Do Androids Dream recalls French philosopher Jean Baudrillard’s description of “the desert of the real itself” in Simulacra and Simulation: a world of hyperreality, where simulations are more real than the originals after which they were modeled (1). Usefully, Baudrillard makes direct reference to “the novels of Philip K. Dick,” which he claims are “not about a parallel universe, a double universe, or even a possible universe—neither possible, impossible, neither real nor unreal: hyperreal—it is a universe of simulation” (65; 125).

In this world of simulation and hyperreality, Philip K. Dick does not posit alternatives to the heteropatriarchal domination, but he explores its manifestations in the context of dystopian science fiction in such a way that readers begin to call it into
question. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* does not move beyond a formulation of sexuality as a (sometimes subversive) tool of heteropatriarchal power, as revealed in its cold illustration of seduction. Readers are presented with the fetishization of female androids, though this is contested by the novel’s focus on empathy and personhood for androids. Rachael’s role as a femme fatale provides an opportunity for readers to imagine sexual agency for women, but this agency is vilified due to its negative consequences for the novel’s hero. Like Heinlein and Le Guin’s stories, Dick’s novel is unsuccessful resisting phallocentric and compulsory heterosexuality. As a hyper-masculine dystopian noir, women and queer individuals are ultimately excluded from its internal logic.

Sexual decorum in the society of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* emphasizes the reproductive value of sex, where sex is the mechanical act through which colonial populations grow and sustain the off-world colonies. Even on Earth, which is permeated by deadly radioactive dust, abortion is illegal: “you can’t [get one]. It’s a life sentence and people are always watching” (44). Reproduction is permitted only by those not “classed as biologically unacceptable, a menace to the pristine heredity of the race. Once pegged as special, a citizen, even if accepting sterilization, dropped out of history. He ceased, in effect, to be part of mankind” (13). The novel frames the act of reproduction in Post-World War Terminus, as the defining feature of normal, socially acceptable sexuality. However, this may not have always been the case. Deckard’s wife, Iran, reminds him in the happy moment when he brings home a new pet goat, to “remember[,] when we first met [...] much love. And very much pleasure” (150). This suggests, however vaguely, a time *before* when love and pleasure were valorized.
independently of reproduction, as evidenced by the fact that Rick and Iran have no children despite their non-special status.

Nevertheless, in Dick’s world, sex is a pleasureless reproductive act which marks the difference between normal humans and specials or androids, for whom reproduction is forbidden and impossible. At the very beginning of the novel, Deckard and Iran bicker over the use of their Penfield Mood organs, a device that stimulates emotional responses and that is used frequently in the depressingly empty, post-apocalyptic San Francisco. The argument progresses until Iran says: “Okay, I give up; I’ll dial. Anything you want me to be; ecstatic sexual bliss—I feel so bad I’ll even endure that. What the hell. What difference does it make” (5). Where in the other novels, readers are presented with sex positive and polyamorous societies, “ecstatic sexual bliss,” even between a husband and wife, is something to be dreaded and merely endured in Dick’s world. Readers get the impression that the spark of sexual passion and curiosity is dying with the rest of the Earth.

In fact, female androids are the only source of sexual attraction and curiosity for Rick—and Phil Resch, another bounty hunter—in the story. Rachael Rosen is a “beautiful, dangerous, and duplicitous femme fatale,” whose childlike body and intelligent eyes capture Rick’s attention (Brammer 99). He lingers on “Rachael’s proportions [...] with her heavy mass of hair her head seemed large, and because of her diminutive breasts her body assumed a lank, almost childlike stance. But her great eyes, with their elaborate lashes, could only be those of a grown woman” (164). While there is some indecipherability about who initiates their sexual encounter, readers are aware of the impossibility of reproduction. “I wonder what it’s like to kiss an android,” Rick
ruminates, and then “leaning forward an inch he kissed her dry lips. No reaction followed; Rachael remained impassive. As if unaffected. And yet [Rick] sensed otherwise” (165). Though readers do not know that Rachael is seducing Rick to prevent him from completing his bounty-hunting assignment, her reaction is disconcertingly cold and “dry.” Despite her assertion that “we androids can’t control our physical, sensual passions” and her “careful deliberation and attention” in undressing and getting into bed, the sex scene reads as detached and passionless (172; 168). The image of Rick “expos[ing] her pale, cold loins” is not an image of hot, wet, sexual passion (169). Thus, both sex as reproduction and sex as pleasure are established as sites of critical, dystopian deconstruction as the human experience devolves.

The attraction and empathy Rick feels for female androids also problematizes the delineation of human and machine and fetishization of female androids. The blending together of human body and android construction erodes the boundaries of self and other: of genuine emotion and cyborg simulation. In the moments before Rick and Rachael have sex, Rachael admits: “I understand—they tell me—it’s convincing if you don’t think too much about it. But if you think too much, if you reflect on what you’re doing—then you can’t go on. For ahem physiological reasons [...] from a philosophical standpoint it’s dreary” (170). Sullins expands upon this philosophical dreariness in his essay “Replicating Morality,” where he argues that Do Androids Dream “provides a chilling example of what a faux sexual relationship with a realistic android would be like and the results are violent and depressing. Healthy human sexual behavior is more than just a purely physical act [...] to be a good sexual partner you need to have a deep empathy for the feelings of your lover” (205). Empathy is precisely what Nexus-6
androids lack, precisely what Deckard measures for in his Voight-Kamff test before he systematically kills them, and precisely what is not reciprocated in his sexual encounter with Rachael. Rachael reminds Deckard “I am not alive! You’re not going to bed with a woman. Don’t be disappointed, okay?” (169-70).

He is nevertheless victim to the simulation of sexual love, prompted by his fetishization of and confused remorse for killing Luba Luft, another female android masquerading as an opera singer. Phil Resch—a bounty hunter more experienced in these matters—warns Rick: “if it’s love toward a woman or an android imitation, it’s sex. Wake up and face yourself Deckard. You want to go to bed with a female type of android—nothing more nothing less” (125). Not heeding to this warning, Rick’s understanding of the world is totally destabilized: “so much for the distinction between authentic living humans and humanoid constructs,” he laments (125). Baudrillard’s theory of seduction is an apt reminder that “seduction is a challenge to the very existence of the sexual order” (42). Rachael’s act of seduction is also a challenge to Rick’s dependence on rational order. His desire for Rachael goes against his training not to empathize with the androids he “retires.” Rick can no longer distance himself emotionally from androids after the death of Luba Luft, and he struggles with the realization that he “had never felt any empathy on his own part toward then androids he killed. Always he had assumed that throughout his psyche he experienced the android as a clever machine—as in his conscious view [...] but Luba Luft had seemed genuinely alive; it had not worn the aspect of simulation”. (123)

This moment also reiterates Nagel’s assertion, previously mentioned in this chapter, that “sexual desire [is] one form of the perpetual attempt of an embodied
consciousness to come to terms with the existence of others, an attempt that is doomed to fail” (37). Rick’s position as hero, as agentic actor maintaining the peace on Earth, is wholly challenged by Luba’s beauty and Rachael’s seductive power. He admits that “what I’ve done; that’s become alien to me. In fact everything about me has become unnatural; I’ve become an unnatural self” (204). Despite the fact that Rachael is an “unnatural self,” it is Deckard who is defeated and who questions his own humanity.

Prefiguring what Baudrillard calls seduction, Georges Bataille defines “eroticism as the disequilibrium in which the being consciously calls his own existence in question [...] the subject is identified with the object losing his identity” (31). Rick is thrust into disequilibrium as he oscillates between objectifying the female androids and empathizing with them. This conflict calls his own existence into question as he finds his own identity as a man and human threatened. A good example of this fluctuation is his frequent slip of the tongue, calling Rachael, Luba, and Pris ‘she’ instead of ‘it.’ Resch, whom Rick strongly suspects is actually an android until he passes the Voight-Kampff test, advises Rick that physical attraction to their female victims “constitutes a prime problem in bounty hunting [...] don’t kill her—or be present when she is killed—and then feel physically attracted. Do it the other way [...] go to bed with her first [...] and then kill her” (125-26). Resch and Deckard are in the business of killing androids, a business which is disrupted by sexual attraction. Unlike The Left Hand of Darkness, where Genly and Estraven’s attraction and subsequent abstinence help dissolve the fetishization of the other, or the practice of grokking in Stranger in a Strange Land, where one becomes intimately linked with others, sexuality in Do Androids Dream illuminates the paradoxical process by which fetishizing a sexual object can corrupt one’s understanding
of self and other, subject and object, human and machine, seducer and seductress. In the words of Baudrillard, “no more dominant and dominated, no more victims and executioners [...] no more separate positions” (45).

By turning these power positions on their heads, Dick’s novel offers the possibility of sexual agency for women through Rachael’s role as seductress. Rachael asserts her sexual power over Rick and succeeds in screwing with Rick’s mission by literally screwing him. Seduction is a subversive, agentic act, and this is not Rachael’s first rodeo. “No bounty hunter has ever gone on [...] after being with me. Except one. A very cynical man. Phil Resch,” Rachael shares with Rick after her act of seduction is complete. Dick shapes this scene so readers are unaware of Rachael’s motives and agency until after it has ended. Once her true intentions—to seduce Rick in order to prevent him from completing his mission to kill the escaped androids—are revealed to Rick and to readers, he turns on her and claims he is going to kill her. He feels betrayed yet finds himself unable to “retire” Rachael, due to the confusing emotional connection he cannot shake off. The chapter ends with a striking portrait of Rachael as a victorious seductress and femme fatale: “beside him in the darkness the coal of her cigarette glowed like the rump of a complacent lightning bug: a steady, unwavering index of Rachael Rosen’s achievement. Her victory over him” (178).

The full impact of her victory is not revealed until Rick kills the remaining three androids, one of whom is the same ‘type’ as Rachael, meaning their bodies and faces are identical. Returning home, he is greeted by his grieving wife who is distraught from the murder of their new goat, which was purchased with Rick’s bounty money from his first three kills. Iran tells him the aggressor was “a small young-looking girl with dark hair
and large black eyes, very thin” and Rick realizes instantly that Rachael has avenged the death of her body double, Pris, whom Rick has just killed (200). Rick has “been defeated in some obscure way” by the events of the day (204). He puzzles over “where I made the wrong decision” and decides “it can all be traced back to [...] my going to bed with [Rachael]” (208). Rachael’s defeat of Rick evokes a sense of her power and her sexual agency in spite of the sexual objectification she faces from the bounty hunters.

While Heinlein’s conception of female pleasure is dependent on the dominant phallic economy, and Le Guin’s androgyny fails to include female sexuality in its phallogocentric imagination, Dick’s novel prominently features female androids as literal property and tokens of exchange in the phallic economy, perhaps intentionally holding them up to readers for scrutiny. When Deckard first identifies Rachael Rosen as an android, he firmly tells her that she won’t be killed because she’s not an escaped android on Earth illegally. Instead, she is “the property of the Rosen Association, used as a sales device for prospective emigrants” (52). The novel has no qualms about depicting a seemingly life-like woman as “custom-tailored humanoid robot[s]—designed specifically for YOUR UNIQUE NEEDS, FOR YOU AND YOU ALONE,” as an incentive to leave Earth for the colonies (14). This adheres to Irigaray’s argument that “woman is traditionally a use-value for man, an exchange value among men; in other words, a commodity [...] whose price will be established [...] by ‘subjects’: workers, merchants, consumers” (31). Dick’s female androids become the tokens of sexual exchange in the dominant phallic economy.

Irigaray asks the right question when she inquires: “how can this object of transaction claim a right to pleasure without removing her/itself from established
commerce?” (31). As demonstrated in the cold, passionless seduction episode, female androids have no pleasure in their prescribed roes when “sex, itself, is nothing but the inscription of the privileged signifier” (Baudrillard 115). In the hyperreal world of *Do Androids Dream*, female androids are sexy, streamlined products and though “it’s illegal” to have sex with one, “people do it anyhow” and “in the colonies they have android mistresses” (125). Reframed in this light, android women are little more than exceptionally life-like sex robots for (human) male pleasure. Dick literalizes the concept of woman as commodity and demonstrates how cold, pleasureless, and morally bankrupt this ideology is.

Furthermore, *Do Androids Dream* maintains a compulsory heterosexual framework. The plot plays out the noir formula of the male hero’s temptation by the femme fatale at the expense of the female redeemer and moral center of the story. In this case, Deckard’s wife provides this moral grounding, which is particularly visible through her religious devotion in the story. As Butler testifies in *Gender Trouble*, the performance of heterosexuality contributes to the maintenance of the so-called naturalized gender binary: “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (45). However, just because gender is performative does not mean that the performance of gender has no real impact; “to claim that gender is constructed is not to assert its illusoriness or artificiality, where those terms are understood to reside within a binary that counterposes the ‘real’ and the ‘authentic’ as oppositional” (Butler 45). Some of the questions of Deckard’s precious Voigt-Kampff test—designed to test the very dichotomy of “artificial” and “authentic” human—prompt
Rachael to ask during the interrogation: “is this testing whether I’m an android [...] or whether I’m a homosexual?” (43). Perhaps this suggests that sexuality, like humanoid robots, is a site of performance: a construct only recognizable as natural through a society’s determination to make it so. Aside from this brief mention of homosexuality, any possibility of queerness is excluded from this dystopian narrative.

This chapter has explored the ramifications of episodes of sex, pleasure, and seduction in three classic novels from the 1960s. While Robert A. Heinlein, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Philip K. Dick demonstrate diverse storytelling techniques, these texts highlight the role of sexuality in determining what makes us human, and what differentiates self from other. Grokking, androgyny, and androids are central metaphors in the thought experiments of these stories, which illustrate for readers the possibilities and limitations of sexual pleasure, of de-fetishizing the other, and of sexual agency for women. While these novels offered some radical propositions for their decade, a theoretical framework rooted in feminism, postmodernism, and the philosophy of human sexuality helps provoke questions about the novels’ dominant phallic economy, compulsory heterosexuality, and the marginalization of women and queerness.
Works Cited


Empathy as a Feminist Epistemology in Science Fiction

One of the most alluring qualities of science fiction is its ability to summon readers to actively imagine other realities—alternative futures, pasts, or parallel universes—and challenge normative assumptions through the invitation to suspend one’s disbelief. While all literature transports its readers on some level, the narrative worlds of science fiction are an open invitation to speculate and extrapolate from one’s reality to a nearly limitless extent. However, readers are particularly vulnerable participants when called upon to immerse themselves in the disorienting worlds that the genre is famous for. As a result of this vulnerability, sf authors build a special trust with their readers by acting as guides through their strange landscapes and plots. Authors curate their stories to encourage their readers to question their own positionality, subjectivity, and humanity: a charge which readers willingly take up. This phenomenon is easily observable in Heinlein’s Stranger in a Strange Land (1961), Dick’s Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? (1968), and Le Guin’s The Left Hand of Darkness (1969), which each ask readers to think about what makes us human. These texts also share an answer to this question, demonstrating that intelligence alone is not enough to explain human subjectivity and our desire to understand others, but that empathy is a necessary quality of humanity.

Empathy is at the heart of these 1960s cult classics, reminding modern readers that empathy is not only central to being human but also to the act of reading. This duality of empathy—that it is a dynamic acting within and outside of these novels, in the world of the text and in the exchange between author and reader—will frame the

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6 Readerly transportation is a phenomenon first described by Richard Gerrig to explain how “readers become ‘lost in a book,’” how “a narrative serves to transport an experiencer away from the here and now” (Gerrig 3).
organization of this chapter. First, I will look within the texts, beginning with an examination of the definitions, etymology, and epistemology of empathy as a thematic underpinning of these three novels. Next, I will investigate the binary division of reason and emotion and explore how empathy may be a gendered and/or feminist value. This will lead me to my three primary and interrelated arguments and my explication of the texts. Firstly, I argue that the presence of empathy as an epistemology in science fiction underlines a feminist reclamation of a traditionally derided value in women: caring for and about others. Because women have been traditionally characterized as more emotional and empathetic, while men have been characterized as more rational and logical, these texts’ valuation of empathy as an epistemology has subversive feminist possibilities. Secondly, I argue that these 1960s science fictional attempts to literalize empathy through telepathy circumvent empathy’s most precious epistemological contribution: misunderstanding. Thirdly, I argue that the centrality of empathy to the invented religions of these novels evidences its meaningful overlap with faith, or at least with the suspension of disbelief. Ultimately, these texts reveal the importance of empathy as humanity’s drive to understand and care about people different and other than ourselves. Finally, I will move beyond the page and turn to the intersection of empathy and literature in order to tease apart the epistemological value of reading science fiction. By investigating the relationship between the reader and the science fiction text, I will come to the conclusion that science fiction makes us more empathetic and opens us up to the possibilities of feminist criticism.

Etymology & Definitions of Empathy
To begin with the etymology and various definitions of empathy, I will turn to its original formulation in psychology and philosophy before shifting to a discussion of the ways it is reimagined in science fiction as Heinlein’s “grøkk,” Le Guin’s “nusuth,” and Dick’s “fusion.” The creation of the English word “empathy” is credited to the psychologist Edward Tichener, who translated the word in 1909 from the German word “einfühlung,” which means “to feel into” (Stueber). Though empathy was used initially in regard to aesthetics, Theodor Lipps “transformed empathy from a concept of philosophical aesthetics into a central category of the philosophy of the social and human sciences” (Stueber). In other words, Lipps turned away from the use of empathy to describe emotional responses to art and began exploring the implications of attempting to understand the emotional states of others. Empathy then became a topic of social scientific study throughout the 20th century, particularly in psychology and neuroscience.

Interestingly, the lineage of the word becomes messy after its entry into popular parlance and psychological research. Karsten Stueber reminds us that “everything and nothing seems to have to do with empathy,” in acknowledgment of the plethora of definitions obscuring modern conceptions of empathy.

Some psychologists have made an effort to delineate some of these diverging processes, pulling apart concepts such as emotional contagion, which is feeling what someone else is feeling (i.e., laughter is contagious), or sympathy, which is feeling pity or distress for the other who is suffering (i.e., feeling bad for someone whose mother has just died) (Stueber). These semantic webs cause a certain amount of frustration on the part of psychologists and philosophers. For instance, as Amy Coplan describes, “depending on whom you ask, empathy can be understood as one or more of several...
loosely related processes or mental states […] feeling what someone else feels […] caring about someone else […] being emotionally affected by someone else’s emotions and experiences […] imagining oneself in another’s situation” etc. (Coplan 4). While Coplan views this profusion of definitions as corrosive, its multitude also demonstrates the amount of attention and importance empathy has earned as an interdisciplinary subject of study. For the purposes of this chapter, my working definition of empathy aligns with Coplan’s, which states that “empathy is a complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person’s situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation” (Coplan 5). However, Coplan maintains a strict psychological perspective on empathy, which holds less importance in this literary analysis of science fiction. Though the etymology of the word evokes its psychological and philosophical roots, empathy has as much to do with narrative world building and reading literature as it does with psychological and neurological development.

In regard to world building, each of the primary texts engineers its own version of empathy through constructed, alien languages (in *Stranger in a Strange Land* and *Left Hand of Darkness*) and through the shifting of signifiers (in *Do Androids Dream*). Ria Cheyne provides useful insight on this phenomenon, highlighting “the linguistic relativity hypothesis […] the idea that the language that people speak affects the way that they think” as a tool that science fiction writers use in the construction of their worlds (387). Cheyne’s main point is that “the created sf language is […] simultaneously complete and incomplete: used within the text to develop the reader’s understanding of the alien to exactly the point the author seems appropriate, but also tantalizing the reader with a larger linguistic system that remains out of reach” (399). Specifically, readers are
tantalized by their inability to learn the alien language, as in *Stranger*, by the imperfect translations available to characters, as in *Left Hand*, and by the defamiliarization of recognizable signifiers, as in *Androids*.

As I explored in the first chapter, Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* centers on the experience of a human born on an inhabited Mars, who returns to Earth to share his Martian wisdom with a growing, cult-like community of followers. The superhuman abilities enabled by fluency in the Martian language are featured throughout the story, with the most prominent of these concepts being grokking. As the Earth-born characters slowly discover through the events of the novel, “grok means to understand so thoroughly that the observer becomes a part of the process being observed—to merge, to blend, to intermarry, to lose personal identity in group experience. It means almost everything we mean by religion, philosophy, and science” (266). Perhaps this perfect understanding and loss of self is ideal for Martians, but as such it’s not human. The human condition is characterized by misrecognition and the persistence of a distinction between self and other, no matter how empathetically connected. The characters are further limited in their comprehension of this alien form of empathy because—as Dr. Mahmoud, the language specialist on the mission to Mars that brought Mike home, reminds us—“you need to think in Martian to grok the word ‘grok’” (264). Jubal concurs by citing almost word for word the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity: “Mike thinks in Martian—and this gives him an entirely different ‘map’ of the universe from that which you and I use [...] language itself shapes a man’s basic ideas” (264). When it comes to the word *grok*, specifically, the implication is that Martians (and those who learn Martian through
Mike’s teaching in the Church of All Worlds) share a different reality: a reality where empathy takes center stage.

Le Guin constructs two languages in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, one for each nation on the planet of Gethen. In English, Gethen is named *Winter*, so it is perhaps unsurprising that in both Karhide and Orgoreyn there are many different, nuanced words for various types of snowfall that do not have perfect translations in English. The English translations of Le Guin’s Karhidish words unfold slowly in the story, particularly of the word *nusuth*. *Nusuth* is consistently mistranslated as “no matter,” by Genly, the protagonist who is an outsider visiting Gethen to recruit the planet for an intergalactic alliance. But because narrative control is shared with Estraven, a native Gethenian, readers are privy to its true definition: “*Nusuth.* The admirable is inexplicable” (83).

*Nusuth* encapsulates the message of the Handdara, a religious sect in the novel that values the unknown and celebrates the inability to perfectly understand others as the cause of the desire to connect with one another. The business of the Handdara “is unlearning, not learning,” which challenges a positivist endorsement of reason over emotion or spirituality (72). The novel makes a project of “unlearning” normative assumptions about gender, through the androgyny of Le Guin’s Gethenians, and of “unlearning” the valuation of reason over emotion. The expression of “*nusuth*” is thus tied to empathy, as it provides a commentary on our desire and failure to comprehend other minded beings. This piece of Handdara wisdom reminds characters and readers alike of the value of the imperfect understanding of others, because it is the underlying drive of interpersonal connection.
Though Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* does not feature a constructed language, it toys with and defamiliarizes some familiar signifiers. Empathy—usually a slippery and abstract concept—is concretized by the presence of the empathy boxes, which are used by the human characters to “fuse” with Mercer. In Dick’s dystopian world, empathy is the only quality separating humans from the increasingly life-like androids and thus is used as justification for the superiority of humans and their enslavement of humanoid robots. Philip K. Dick transforms empathy from an ambiguous signifier of emotional and spiritual connection to a measurable phenomenon, aligning it with positivist notions of logical measurement and empirical evidence. The irony of empathy in the novel is that it is seemingly artificial. It is simulated and measured through technology: “empathy box[es],” “Penfield mood organ[s],” and the “Voight-Kampff Empathy test (17, 3, 26). This model of empathy is opposed to ‘natural’ conceptions of empathy where emotional identification it is stimulated by interpersonal connection. The most poignant and paradoxical example of the novel’s complicated depiction of empathy is the process of fusion, “physical merging—accompanied by mental and spiritual identification—with Wilbur Mercer,” a religious prophet not unlike Sisyphus, who is trapped in an endless cycle of life and death (18). While holding “the two handles” of an empathy box, one experiences oneself “as encompassing every other living thing” (18). Though empathy is artificially facilitated by Mercerism’s empathy boxes, its followers nonetheless feel “spiritually together” with “everyone else, all over the world, all who had fused at the same time” (151). Even after it is revealed that Mercerism is a hoax, its faithful followers still benefit from the stimulation of empathy in
fusion, which comes to signify the artificiality of empathy and the failure of human beings to connect organically in an entropic world.

Examining the etymology of empathy and its science fictional reinventions—as grokking, *nusuth*, and fusion—reveals the lack of consensus on the precise value and meaning of empathy. Empathy is a complex human quality, one which has been researched and written about in many different disciplines, but the only interdisciplinary point of agreement seems to be that empathy—our ability and motivation to understand the other—is a key part of what makes us people. Thus, empathy is highlighted and celebrated for its vital role as an *epistemological* process. However, as a means of knowing, empathy is hinged upon its fundamental failure to facilitate a mutual understanding between two minded beings. This chapter utilizes an epistemological definition of empathy that is closely in line with Coplan’s: empathy is humanity’s subjective drive to understand and care about other minded beings. I argue that the result is inevitable misunderstanding, but that this misunderstanding is in turn the driving force of meaningful emotional connection with the other, no matter how strange or alien.

**Empathy as a Feminist Value**

For a feminist analysis of empathy as an epistemology in these science fiction stories, it is especially important to address the fact that reason and emotion have long been characterized as diametric opposites, formulating a Cartesian dualism that separates the rational mind from the emotional body, which is also directly tied to the gender binary (Sousa). Women—the childbearing and caretaking sex—have been doomed to association with the body and with emotion, while men are associated with reason and with the elevated life of the mind. Though feminism works to dismantle these
misconceptions and stereotypes, they prevail in our culture, our literature, and our lives, nevertheless. Simone de Beauvoir famously protested the assumptions of “women’s emotionalism” in her landmark text, *The Second Sex*, denouncing the characterization of women as hysterical or neurotic and criticizing the so-called science of sex differences in regard to reason and emotion. Beauvoir repudiates the idea that biological facts “establish for [woman] a fixed and inevitable destiny” (Beauvoir). Put differently, Beauvoir rejects a positivist argument for differences in emotional capacity in men and women and places blame for these differences on the hegemonic, patriarchal social structure.

With this in mind, empathy is a particularly gendered emotional drive, tied to women’s “ethics based on care, rather than [men’s] rigid principles” (Prinz 223). As Le Guin reminds us in *The Left Hand of Darkness*: “it’s extremely hard to separate the innate differences from the learned ones. Even where women participate equally with men in the society, they still after all do all the childbearing, and so most of the child-rearing” (253). However, feminists and philosophers alike have rejected essentialist arguments that women are inherently or naturally more empathetic than men. Prinz argues that:

“there are a number of social factors that might promote an empathy-based orientation in women. First, women have lower status than men in male dominant societies, and sensitivity to the emotions of others may be a good coping strategy under such circumstances. Second, because women are often subordinate to men, they may develop more concern for the underdog because they can relate” (224). Eisenberg and Lennon’s 1983 research study on sex differences in empathy found that “gender differences in empathy may be an artifact of measurement,” because though
women self-reported a larger number of empathy indicators, this did not match the researchers’ nonverbal and physiological cues for empathy (126). While it cannot be completely dismissed that women tend to at least present themselves as more empathetic than men, “the fact that women are more empathetic than men is [...] a consequence of social roles that emerge under conditions of male dominance” (Prinz 225). Prinz urges his readers to question whether “empathetic orientation in women” is “a useful tool for liberation or [if] it serve[s] to sustain the inequality from which it springs?” (225). While both assertions are important to keep in mind, this chapter takes the approach of empathy as a tool of liberation.

**Gendered Depictions of Empathy**

So far this chapter has reviewed the etymology and epistemology of empathy, and its redefinition in these works of science fiction. I have also illuminated the feminist possibility of empathy to unify the gendered values of reason and emotion. Reclaiming the effeminate quality of empathy can be an empowering way of addressing intersectional vulnerabilities. Next, I will explore the first of my three arguments about empathy in these works of sf: that its featured presence in these stories can be read as a subversive feminist act. By featuring empathy so prominently in their stories, Heinlein, Le Guin, and Dick show their readers that empathy—a traditionally feminine quality—can be beneficial to characters of all genders. All three authors depict empathy as being easier for and more natural to feminine characters, while also demonstrating that empathy is an important and powerful force that should not be underestimated or devalued. While this verges on essentialism in Heinlein’s and Dick’s novels, Le Guin’s novel addresses the association of the feminine with empathy directly. Because of science fiction’s frequent
focus on the hard sciences and its traditionally male readership, the reclamation and celebration of empathy may be unexpected for readers who must address their own relationship with empathy. Thus, the feminist possibilities of empathy emerge in these texts; Heinlein’s grokking is a practice of radical care for others, Le Guin’s focus on empathy is in conjunction with the possibilities of removing binary gender codes, Dick’s valuation of empathy stands in stark, ironic contrast with the totalizing hierarchy of patriarchal power.

*Stranger in a Strange Land* depicts empathy as a natural feminine trait and as a powerful force through its illustration of grokking and the abilities that grokking enables. In the story, women are characterized as more empathetic through their roles and careers as caretakers, while men are shown to be more skeptical. Even Mike’s empathetic nature is described as effeminate; as a result of the novel’s strict adherence to the gender binary and traditional gender roles, Mike’s unprecedented abilities to empathize are described as being part of his “androgynous beauty” (375). Jill is introduced to readers as a no-nonsense nurse, a nurturing caregiver who feels compelled to rescue Mike. Anne, Dorcas, and Miriam—Jubal’s three live-in secretaries—take care of Jubal and his home and seem to enjoy doing so, despite his curmudgeonly grumblings. Before characters and readers are even aware of Mike’s extensive powers, Jill helps and protects him from being held captive by the government because she intuitively cares about Mike and seeks to understand him. But when Jill arrives with Mike at Jubal’s house, Jubal questions her motives. Her explanation centers on an empathetic instinct: “I thought he was being held a prisoner and I thought [...] that he might be in danger. I wanted to see him get his rights” (113). At this early moment in the story, Jill is unaware of the bonds of water
brotherhood that she already shares with Mike, but acts empathetically to rescue him
nonetheless. Jubal is much more hesitant to help, claiming that he is “always suspicious
of a disinterested interest” (113).

This gendered rift in empathetic ability extends throughout the novel, though the
gap closes somewhat by Mike’s demonstration of the power of grokking. By the end of
the novel, Jill, Dawn, and Patty—all devoted female followers of Mike’s Church of All
Worlds—are the most talented at grokking, speaking the Martian language, and using the
telepathy, teleportation, telekinesis, and bodily control that they enable. While several
female members of The Church of All Worlds rise quickly to the highest position
available in the Church—High Priestess—due to their mastery of grokking, none of the
male characters aside from Mike achieve the title of High Priest. At one point, Jill
commends Patty’s abilities, explaining that “Patty never has any doubts, she just
automatically always does the right thing. She’s very much like Mike. She’s the most
advanced of any of us” (427). On the other hand, male characters such as Jubal and Ben
express concern about accepting Mike’s Martian teachings without first questioning
them. When Ben first visits the Nest and witnesses its unorthodox sexual practices, he
tells Jubal: “what I saw worried the hell out of me” (406). Ben does not understand their
practices and panics, passing judgment on the group rather than empathetically
attempting to understand. Jubal and Ben finally reason through what Ben witnessed and
are ultimately convinced by the logic and rationality of the clear benefits of grokking,
rather than relying purely on their desire to understand mysterious others, as the female
characters are depicted as doing. Grokking is a radical practice embraced most readily by
female characters in Stranger in a Strange Land, suggesting that its basis in empathy is
more accessible for women than for men. However, rather than dismissing this practice of radical care for others as stereotypically feminine, nurturing, or reproductive in nature, Heinlein’s story holds up grokking as a practice that could change the world for the better. Grokking is presented in the story as a subversive, feminist possibility.

Le Guin calls into question the derisive association of empathy with the feminine in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Genly frequently struggles with the androgyny of Gethen’s inhabitants and often misgenders characters as female rather than as androgynous individuals when they act empathetically or in other traditionally feminine capacities. For example: he classifies Estraven’s behavior at the dinner table as “womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance” and questions whether or not it is “this soft supple femininity that I disliked and distrusted in him?” (13). Genly does not see Estraven’s behavior as welcoming, missing the fact that s/he is attempting to build trust and offer Genly advice on how to approach the King with his request for the planet to join the Ekumenial alliance. “How could I expect this man or any other to believe my tales about other worlds, other races, or a vague benevolent government somewhere off in outer space?” Genly ponders (19). He is so distrustful of Estraven’s genuine desire to help that he ignores his/her assertion of “‘I believe you’” early in the story (19). Estraven’s willingness to put trust in Genly, suspend his/her disbelief, and to try to understand Genly’s struggles—Estraven’s empathy, in short—-is gendered as feminine despite his/her true androgyny. Estraven reflects that “I am the only [person] in all of Gethen that has trusted you entirely, and I am the only [person] in Gethen you have refused to trust” (214). The alien otherness of Estraven’s androgyny makes it difficult for Genly to empathize with his/her circumstances, though ultimately he is driven to empathetic
understanding when he witnesses Estraven in kemmer, the part of the Gethenian sexual cycle where a person is sexually active and transforms into either a man or a woman. Genly is finally able to put his trust in Estraven when he comes to terms with the fact that Estraven “was a woman as well as a man [...] until then I had rejected him, refused him his own reality” (266).

Despite Genly’s distrust of and initial scorn for Estraven’s effeminate capacity for empathy, it is the driving force of strength and resolution to the problems in the story. Readers learn the value in empathy and care for the other alongside Genly during the pair’s long trek across the glacier near the end of the novel. At one point on their journey, Estraven thinks Genly is ill and tells him they should stop for the day. At first, Genly is “galled by his patronizing. He was a head shorter than I, and built more like a woman than a man, more fat than muscle; when we hauled together I had to shorten my pace to his” (235). But after Estraven shares that he was “anxious” for Genly’s wellbeing, Genly realizes that Estraven “had not meant to patronize. He had thought me sick [...] and expected a reciprocal frankness that I might not be able to supply. He, after all, had no standards of manliness, of virility, to complicate his pride [...] Perhaps I could dispense with the more competitive elements of my masculine self-respect” (235). Genly acknowledges the toxic aspects of his masculinity and realizes the power in shirking machismo in exchange for empathy and “reciprocal frankness.” Genly’s turn towards empathy and humility allows him and Estraven to complete the impossible task of crossing the enormous glacier. Ultimately, they convince the King of Karhide to join the interplanetary alliance because of their teamwork and ability to empathize with one another despite their alien differences.
Unsurprisingly, gender roles are especially rigid in the post-apocalyptic society of *Do Androids Dream*, but at the intersection of gender and empathic power these identity categories become contested. Iran shows the novel’s value system based on empathy to be erratic despite its clear hegemony, particularly in relation to gender. As mentioned earlier, the social world of *Do Androids Dream* is awash with machines used to stimulate and maintain emotions and empathy. The novel pays special attention to Iran as she negotiates her relationship with her mood organ and empathy box. This demonstrates both the blurred line between humans and machines and her remarkable capacity for empathy and understanding, which is tied to her role as wife and homemaker. Though she antagonizes Rick, Iran shows readers the power of feeling organic emotions. However, she also reveals that sometimes the natural thing to do is rely on technology when connection would be impossible otherwise. In the end, she is the only character to emerge unscathed because of her empathic strength, which challenges Rick’s superior positionality as a human man in the story.

In the beginning of the novel, Iran and Rick argue about the use of their “Penfield Mood Organs” (3). Rick is frustrated by his wife’s skepticism of dialing emotions on the device. When she claims she doesn’t want to dial anything, he suggests she dials a 3, which is “a setting that stimulates [the] cerebral cortex into wanting to dial” (4). Iran’s response synopsizes the crux of the problem with mood organs: “If I don’t want to dial, I don’t want to dial *that* [setting] most of all, because then I will want to dial, and wanting to dial is right now the most alien drive I can imagine” (4). There is something unnatural about mood organs. However, she also finds a way to manipulate the device to help her attempt to digest the gloom of Earth. “I finally found a setting for
despair,” she tells Rick, “so I put it on my schedule for twice a month; I think that’s a reasonable amount of time to feel hopeless about everything, about staying here on Earth after everybody who’s smart has emigrated” (4). Iran’s discerning use of her mood organ reveals that her empathy is adaptable and subversive. She balks at its anesthetic uses and refuses to rely on it to get her through apocalyptic eternity one day at a time, but she deems its use acceptable when triggering deep thought and reflection, which no other human character does in the story.

Indeed, Iran’s expanded empathy in the face of artificiality is what empowers her at the end of the novel. Though Rick succeeds in his mission, he is mentally and emotionally depleted, particularly after the discovery that the toad he found in the desert is just an electric animal. Iran, on the other hand, takes it all in stride, calls an artificial animal manufacturer and orders artificial flies for it to ‘eat.’ The final sentence of Do Androids Dream declares that “feeling better, [she] fixed herself at last a cup of black, hot coffee” (216). Iran manages to reach the setting “481 [a]wareness of the manifold possibilities open to me in the future; new hope,” entirely organically (3). Iran alone is triumphant, in spite of her inferior position to her husband in the novel’s oppressive hierarchy and because of her effeminate empathy.

**Empathy and Telepathy**

Next, I will explore the second of my three arguments about empathy within these texts: that empathy is literalized in the motif of telepathy, which exposes some of the epistemological challenges of empathy as means of knowing the other. Heinlein, Le Guin, and Dick all attempt to *perfect* empathy as a means of knowing the other by relying on various forms of telepathy. The sharing of water between water brothers in *Stranger in
*a Strange Land* creates a rapport of mutual grokking: a precise form of empathy that goes hand in hand with telepathic communication. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, mindspeech—telepathic communication—is an instinctual skill predicated upon empathy, which is cultivated, taught, and shared by the Ekumenial colonial alliance. In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, the act of fusion facilitated by empathy boxes allows humans to share their thoughts, emotions, and moods with one another across Earth, Mars, and Lunar colonies. While all three authors present empathy as an innate human quality, its naturalism is often at odds with events of the stories, where empathy is shown as a quality acquired through socialization and ingrained in culture. As an ideal form of empathetic interpersonal communication, telepathy poses some epistemological problems: it disinhibits the self-other distinction necessary for empathy, eliminates the potential for misunderstanding that is the driving force behind empathetic connection, and defies the notion that empathy is an innate quality.

Robert A. Heinlein adopts a humanist, rational, and logical approach to defamiliarizing philosophy, religion, art, science, and empathy in *Stranger in a Strange Land*, which is typical of the “New Wave” of science fiction writing that began in the early 1960s (Broderick 51). Damien Broderick, a sf critic, goes as far as to call Heinlein’s idealism “triumphalism,” criticizing the self-congratulatory water brotherhood of the novel, championed by Jubal and Mike (55). Whether one reads *Stranger* as a deliberate satire, dated relic, or cringe-worthy religious manifesto, the novel makes empathy one of its central focuses—along with gender and sexuality—through its creation and use of the word “grok.” I have already given several of its provided definitions in the novel, but first and foremost, “its literal meaning, one which [...] goes back to the origin of the Martian
race as thinking, speaking creatures—which throws light on their whole [linguistic]
‘map’—is quite easy. ‘Grok’ means to drink” (265). On Mars, where water is a precious
rarity, sharing water is symbolic of sharing life with one another. Elaborate kinship
networks are formed through the sharing of water, a relationship called water
brotherhood. For Mike’s Earth-born friends, the bond of trust established by water
brotherhood is the first step in their Martian education.

Readers are introduced to water brotherhood with the accidental sharing of water
between Jill and Mike at the beginning of the story, when he is imprisoned in the hospital
where she works as a nurse. Jill sneaks into his room to see the mysterious “Man From
Mars” and asks him: “May I get you water?” (29). From Mike’s perspective, “this
woman creature had offered him the water ritual. It wished to grow closer” (30). After Jill
helps him escape and they turn to Jubal for help, readers and some of the characters
themselves come to realize the full implications of water brotherhood, which is a
relationship of mutual care and concern. Sharing water is a serious act to any Martian,
“much more serious than getting married” as Jubal explains, “I myself accepted water
brotherhood with Mike before I understood it—and I’ve become more and more deeply
entangled with its responsibilities the more I’ve grokked it. You’ll be committing
yourself never to lie to him, never to mislead or deceive him in any way, to stick to him
come what may—because that is just what he will do with you” (222). Despite the
accidental bonds forged at the novel’s outset, water brotherhood is typically an
intentional, empathetic relationship based on trust and investment in the wellbeing of one
another. Essentially, water brotherhood is the interpersonal relationship of grokking, both
as it means “to drink” and as it means to “blend, intermarry, to lose personal identity in group experience” (265, 266).

It is this latter definition and consequence of grokking that poses a problem for my interpretation of grokking as an epistemological process of knowing and caring about others: if one loses “personal identity” there is no distinction between the self and the other. Even Mike—the master of Martian wisdom—has trouble maintaining his self-identity in the beginning of the novel. Eventually, though, he understands “himself to be self [and is] free to grok ever closer to his brothers, merge without let. Self’s integrity was and is and ever had been” (325). The dilemma of self/other differentiation posed by collective grokking is further complicated by its facilitation of telepathic communication. As I noted in the previous chapter, grokking makes the entire process of othering nearly impossible. Because, by “the Martian map you cannot hate [or fear or despise] anything unless you grok it completely, understand it so thoroughly that you merge with it and it merges with you—then and only then can you hate it. By hating yourself” (266). As an empathetic epistemology, grokking requires the recognition of the other as an intimate part of oneself. As Dr. Mahmoud, the linguist, explains to Jubal: “the human cliché ‘this hurts me worse than it does you’ has a Martian flavor to it, if only a trace” (266). The value in misunderstanding one another is perhaps lost when one groks or has the “trance rapport” necessary for telepathic communication (483). Telepathy allows for the direct transmittance of one’s thoughts and feelings and leaves no room for interpretation. Grokking is a technically perfect, but perhaps inhuman means of knowing the other, due to the collapse of the self/other divide. Heinlein presents grokking as an ideal form of empathy—but, importantly, not an innately human form of empathy—in this way,
Heinlein sets up an ideal to aspire to, but humans will (for the most part) fall short, as we justifiably struggle to let go of the self.

The final issue with telepathy and grokking as an empathetic epistemology, is the problem of *learning* to grok. After all, if empathy is an innate human quality, why must “a person [...] start with a willingness to learn and follow it up with some long, hard study” (490)? Readers are shown that telepathy, telekinesis, and teleportation are “quite simple, once you learn the language—it’s the language that is so difficult” (474). In this way, *Stranger in a Strange Land* provides an interesting illustration of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity, but does not demonstrate that empathy is an inborn quality for humans. Perhaps this point is unimportant, but it certainly causes problems for empathy as the answer to the question of what makes us human, particularly because Martians are much more adept at empathy.

Mindspeech—Le Guin’s form of telepathy in *The Left Hand of Darkness*—more closely enacts true empathy, as I have defined it. Though mindspeech requires an empathetic rapport between its practitioners, it leaves distance between the self and other, which leads to ample misunderstanding and thus to a strengthened desire to connect and make up for one’s misunderstanding through care. Le Guin is also more successful in navigating the nature/nurture paradox of empathy. She addresses its complexity by depicting mindspeech as a natural empathetic tendency that can be strengthened through learning and practice, but is neither entirely natural nor entirely taught.

The members of the interplanetary alliance of the Ekumen are advanced practitioners of mindspeech, and typically wait to introduce the skill to the planets they colonize until they have established a relationship of trust. However, Genly—the lone
Envoy of the Ekumen—is impatient with this mandatory withholding of mindspeech, because it is an extremely useful tool of honest communication. In fact, it is impossible to lie in mindspeech. During his and Estraven’s trek across the glacier near the end of the novel, he decides to try teaching mindspeech to Estraven. They have some initial difficulty communicating, and both express frustration. Genly reflects that he “had never before sent repeatedly to a total non-receiver. The experience was disagreeable” (271).

When they finally are able to communicate telepathically, the experience is just as jarring as not making the connection in the first place. Estraven is able to hear Genly’s words inside his mind, but only in the voice of his/her dead sibling. “You said there would be words, I know” Estraven says aloud to Genly, “yet I imagined it as an understanding” (272). Genly then explains the logistics of mindspeech, clarifying that “empathy’s another game, though not unconnected. It gave us the connection tonight. But in mindspeech proper, the speech centers of the brain are activated” (272). Unlike the telepathy enabled by grokking in Stranger in a Strange Land, mindspeech is an imperfect process. Though both are predicated on empathy and rapport, mindspeech doesn’t allow unadulterated access to the consciousness of another because it relies on words and therefore leaves room for the cyclical misunderstanding that underlies empathy as an epistemology.

Put differently, the self and the other are so separate in mindspeech that the process can actually feel unpleasant even with an existing empathetic connection. Genly is troubled by Estraven’s reaction to mindspeech, mulling over how “He heard my voice bespeaking him as a dead man’s, his brother’s voice. I did not know what, besides love and death, lay between him and that brother, but I
knew that whenever I bespoke him something in him winced away as if I had touched a wound. So that intimacy of mind established between us was a bond, indeed, but an obscure and austere one, not so much admitting further light (as I had expected it to) but showing the extent of the darkness” (274).

Genly is unable to understand Estraven’s pain despite their “intimacy of mind,” which leads to more misunderstanding between them instead of less. The novel uses this misunderstanding between Genly and Estraven as a thematic, antagonistic force that triggers the action of the story, but also brings the two together in the end as friends and lovers. Genly cannot understand Estraven’s motivations in the beginning of the novel and takes his/her actions to be deliberately unhelpful, when in reality Estraven is on Genly’s side from the start, trying to convince the King of Karhide to join to Ekumenial alliance. Estraven explicitly says to Genly at one point: “we’ve seen the same events with different eyes; I wrongly assumed they’d seem the same to us” (212).

As previously mentioned in this chapter, from an epistemological standpoint, empathy is an inherently flawed means of knowing. The deep empathy shared by Genly and Estraven and their ultimate success in convincing the governments of Gethen to join the Ekumen emphasize the importance of misunderstanding as an impetus for action. The novel reiterates the point throughout that “the only thing that makes life possible and permanent, intolerable uncertainty: not knowing what comes next” (75). This doubles as a summation of empathy as an epistemology: caring about the other is meaningless if one’s understanding is perfect.

The fact that mindspeech is taught by the members of the Ekumen, but not already present in the populations they colonize presents an interesting depiction of the
nature/nurture paradox for empathy. Early on in the novel, when Genly visits one of the Fastnesses of Karhide—the religious retreats where one can spend the night or a lifetime—he is unable to resist the urge to use mindspeech, which is prohibited by the Ekumen until adequate trust has been built. Genly finds himself “moved to bespeak” Faxe, a Gethenian who is part of the Handdara sect (61). He realizes that Faxe is “a Listener [...] a natural empath: and probably a powerful telepath as well” which is what enables Faxe’s role as a Weaver in the religious ritual of foretelling, the Handdara’s practice of predicting the future. Genly intuitively recognizes Faxe’s strong natural empathy, and cites it as the reason why Faxe is “the Weaver, the one who can keep the tensions and responses of the group [during the foretelling ceremony] running in a self-augmenting pattern until the strain breaks the pattern itself and you reach through for your answer” (71). Thus, telepathic communication is represented as both a natural inclination and taught skill, not dependent upon linguistic relativity.

Philip K. Dick’s telepathic communication in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* is featured less prominently, yet provides a crucial commentary on the empathy of humans, which is at the thematic heart of the novel. Empathy boxes, utilized by the followers of Mercerism, facilitate telepathy and connection with physically distant others. Empathy enabled through fusion is “an entity which is manageable by this so-called telepathic voice of Mercer” (185). Though there are several other depictions of empathy in the novel, telepathy is the aspect most interesting to reconcile with empathy as an epistemology. Fusion is dependent on simultaneity and so manages to enforce a divide of self and other despite the shared group experience. Fusion is a successful process of making meaning and connecting people in an entropic world. However, the tensions
surrounding whether empathy is truly a natural human quality or if it is a social performance remain unresolved.

Readers are first presented with the process of fusion when Isidore—a “special” who “had failed to pass the minimum mental faculties test” as a result of radiation exposure—uses his empathy box before leaving his empty apartment complex for work (15). Isidore turns on his empathy box and “the usual faint smell of negative ions surge[s] up” (18). He then “cross[es] over in the usual perplexing fashion; physical merging—accompanied by mental and spiritual identification—with Wilbur Mercer [...] as it did for everyone who at this moment either here on Earth or on one of the colony planets. He experienced them, the others, incorporated the babble of their thoughts, heard in his own brain the noise of their many individual existences” (18). Unlike grokking, but analogous to mindspeak, the self and the other maintain some separation through telepathic conversations and voices remain distinct: “you felt it too, [Isidore] thought. Yes, the voices answered” (19). The other protagonist of the story, Rick Deckard, worries about losing positive feelings to the misery of others during fusion, “they’ll have our joy” he says to his wife after he brings home a new pet goat, “but we’ll lose. We’ll exchange what we feel for what they feel. Our joy will be lost” (152). Iran reminds him that “we won’t really lose what we feel, not if we keep it clearly in mind” and accuses her husband of “never really [getting] the hang of fusion” (152). Identity collapse is not a concern for those who find fusion to be a valuable experience. Rick’s hesitation actually indicates “a defect in [his] empathic role-taking ability” (123).

Fusion is a meaningful process because it is an accessible way to connect and share emotions with an empathetic audience in a sparse, post-apocalyptic world.
Epistemologically, the empathy box may be an ideal device, as it can foster connection between “specials”—like Isidore—with the rest of society, where they would ordinarily be outcasts. Isidore is heartened by the experience of fusion, for “he live[s] alone in [a] deteriorating, blind building of a thousand uninhabited apartments, which like all its counterparts, fell, day by day, into greater entropic ruin” (17). Because he lives under the burden of “the contempt of three planets” for his subnormal intelligence, fusion helps give his life meaning. Isidore and many others are “buoyed up” by the ability to share one’s experience with others (18). Fusion gives many people in Dick’s society a meaning and purpose in life, and motivates them to try to connect with and understand others.

However, fusion is also a paradox of nature and nurture. Empathy is described as an innate quality found in humans that their android counterparts lack: “empathy, evidently, existed only within the human community, whereas intelligence to some degree could be found throughout every phylum and order [...] for one thing, the emphatic faculty probably required an unimpaired group instinct; a solitary organism, such as a spider [or android] would have no use for it” (26). Androids, who are solitary organisms, lack the “emphatic faculty” that sets humans apart. However, many of the humans in the story, including the protagonist, Rick Deckard, seem to struggle with empathy. Rick talks about emotions as he is “required to feel” them, and as Iran points out, he “hardly ever undergo[es] fusion” (125, 151).

Empathy is a celebrated quality in Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep, yet is evoked mainly for appearances. This is apparent to readers from the novel’s outset, when Rick ponders the implications of owning an electric animal. Humans’ care for their animals—which are all endangered due to the radiation—is supposedly an indicator of
their empathic abilities, but animal ownership becomes a status symbol, so much so that it is better to own an ersatz, electric animal and pretend it’s real than it is to not own an animal at all. Is empathy natural? Or is it a socially conditioned trait? As literary critic David Palumbo argues of the novel, “this society makes both special and androids its scapegoats, much as the dominant members of many real societies employ racism to make scapegoats of designated minorities [...] in order to define themselves as possessing only those positive traits they want to believe they embody” (1280). “It’s the empathy that humans have,” which androids lack, that is “a way of proving that humans can do something [androids] can’t do” (185). In other words, empathy (whether inherent or not) distinguishes humans’ superiority over androids and justifies their enslavement.

**Empathy and Faith**

My third argument for empathy in these sf novels is that their depictions suggest that empathy requires faith, or at least the suspension of disbelief. This is shown mainly through the significant role of empathy in their various religions: The Church of All Worlds in *Stranger in a Strange Land*, The Handdara in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and Mercerism in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*. Though empathy contributes little to morality, which is concerned with distinguishing right and wrong, it does have a prominent place in many religious faiths. From the Judeo-Christian tradition of “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” to the duty of compassion in Hinduism, empathy is central to the practices of many religions. Though empathy as an epistemology is not useful in determining right and wrong, good or evil, some amount of faith or suspended disbelief is required to empathize.
As I have explained earlier in this chapter, because grokking is Heinlein’s attempt to perfect empathy as a means of knowing—circumventing the possibility of misunderstanding the other—faith is not needed to bridge gaps between people. By learning the Martian language one has tangible access to powerful abilities and mustn’t rely on faith to believe the powers of grokking. For example, Mike explains that The Church of All Worlds is “not a religion. It is a church, in every legal and moral sense […] But we are not trying to bring people to God […] we’re not trying to get people to have faith, because what we offer is not faith but truth—truth they can check; we don’t urge them to believe it” (428). However, muting one’s skepticism to appreciate grokking and importance of The Church of All Worlds—suspending one’s disbelief—is a necessary step to learn their superior ways.

Heinlein expresses concerns about the irrationality of relying on faith through several of his characters. Jubal admits he has “never been able to understand ‘faith’ myself, nor to see how a just God could expect his creatures to pick the one true religion out of an infinitude of false ones—by faith alone. It strikes me as a sloppy way to run an organization, whether a universe or a smaller one” (158). Mike is frustrated that “every time, without fail [religious texts] ask you to take the hard part on faith. Faith! What a dirty Anglo-Saxon monosyllable” (382). He contrasts Earth’s “multiplicity of religions” to his life “among the Martians, [where] there is only one religion—and that one is not a faith, it’s a certainty. You grok it” (381). Yet Heinlein includes a catch for The Church of All Worlds: in order to learn to grok and empathize perfectly, people “have to learn Martian first. That’s the only hitch—finding people who are honest enough to believe what they see and then are willing to do the hard work—it is hard work—of learning the
language it can be taught in” (428). Paradoxically, Heinlein does not conceptualize this commitment to learning something strange and new as a leap of faith but rather as evidence of the superiority of some “honest” people over others to whom the salvation and empathetic knowledge of grokking are off limits.

Le Guin is less convoluted about expressing the centrality of faith to empathetic understanding in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Both Genly and members of the Handdara of Gethen articulate the necessity of faith to accessing the epistemological benefits of empathy, such as telepathy and telling the future. Particularly for this latter phenomenon, having faith in the unknown empowers farfetching and foretelling, the psychic practices of the Hainish people and Handdara respectively. Genly explains that

“High-flown speculation is an essential part of my job. Without some capacity I could not have qualified as a Mobile, and I received formal training in it on Hain, where they dignify it with the title of Farfetching. What one is after when farfetching might be described as the intuitive perception of a moral entirety; and thus it tends to find expression not in rational symbols, but in metaphor” (158).

Genly describes the suspension of disbelief particular to farfetching in terms of intuition, moral symbolism, and metaphor, rather than in terms of logic or “rational symbols.” Farfetching is dependent upon one’s intuition in the same way that empathizing is. Thus, just like linking the present to the future, linking the self to the other hinges on faith to some degree.

The Handdara’s practice of foretelling also helps to highlight the importance of faith, despite the fact that they are on the surface eliminating the need for it altogether through their ability to perfectly answer questions about the future. The Handdara base
their spirituality on the fact that “we in the Handdara don’t want answers. It’s hard to avoid them, but we try to” (74). They value the presence of faith over absolute certainty, and its practitioners come “to the Fastnesses [the Handdara’s retreats] mostly to learn what questions not to ask,” and “to exhibit the perfect uselessness of knowing the answer to the wrong question” (74). This is quite the lesson for having faith and empathy, and celebrating their imperfections as processes of (not) knowing what the future holds and (not) knowing the other. Le Guin’s science fictional religion imparts on her readers the message that “the unknown […] the unforetold, the unproven, that is what life is based on. Ignorance is the ground of thought. Unproof is the ground of action. If it were proven that there is no God there would be no religion” (75). Thus, the Handdara values misunderstanding and having faith that the unknown leads to wonderful possibilities and connections.

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep illustrates the bleaker possibilities of faith, demonstrating that a fraudulent religion supposedly based on empathy may lead people to simply maintain the surface-level appearance of empathy. However, as Palumbo points out, “the novel’s most unequivocal theme is that faith enables people to survive, regardless of whether the object of faith is real or fake. Both definition and theme are demonstrated on a large scale through Mercerism’s very popularity” (1285). The novel finds that faith is a positive quality in that it enables humanity and individual human beings to survive regardless of the reality they inhabit (Palumbo 1288). In other words, though the TV exposé reveals that “Mercerism is a swindle” and that Wilbur Mercer is just an actor hired to create a religion to give hope to the masses in the post-World War Terminus world, “nothing has changed” (189). When Isidore fuses after hearing the
devastating news that Mercer was a hired actor, the telepathic voice of Mercer reassures him that “you are still here and and I am still here [...] I lifted you from the tomb world just now and I will continue to lift you until you lose interest and want to quit. But you will have to stop searching for me because I will never stop searching for you” (189).

Both John Isidore and Rick Deckard are able to suspend their disbelief and have faith in Mercerism at moments where they are starved for empathetic connection and must fight for survival. For Isidore, this moment occurs immediately after the revelation that Mercer is a fraud, when he is in his apartment providing shelter for Pris, Irmgard, and Roy Baty, the escaped Nexus-6 androids. Roy makes the accusation that “the whole experience of empathy is a swindle” and Irmgard says to Isidore, “without the Mercer experience we would just have your word that you feel this empathy business, this shared, group thing” (185). Meanwhile, Pris is using scissors to cut off the legs of a precious spider that Isidore found, tormenting Isidore who loves and cares for all animals. Isidore has a breakdown, but—surrounded by apathetic androids and desperately needing to share his emotions and to receive an empathetic response—he approaches his empathy box and fuses with Mercer. Mercer assures him that “I am a fraud” but also promises Isidore that “nothing has changed” (189). He then gives Isidore back his spider with its legs restored and Isidore takes it outside of the building to release it safely away from the androids. He ponders: “was it actually the spider that Pris had snipped apart [...] probably not. He would never know. But anyhow, it was alive” (192). Isidore has faith in Mercer despite the impossibility of the scenario, even though “the spider Mercer gave [him] probably was artificial” (214).
Likewise, Rick maintains his faith in Mercer at the end of the novel when he nearly loses all hope in humanity and empathetic connection after killing off the last of the escaped androids, with whom he has began to empathize. He drives out into the abandoned countryside, and begins to climb up a hill in the Oregon desert, which bears a strong resemblance to Wilbur Mercer’s trek up the mountain from the tomb world. As Rick recalls, “I had the absolute, utter, completely real illusion that I had become Mercer and people were lobbing rocks at me. But not the way you experience it when you hold the handles of an empathy box. When you use an empathy box you feel you’re with Mercer. The difference is I wasn’t with anyone; I was alone” (207). Rick’s salvation after this trauma is the discovery of a toad, “extinct for years now. The critter most precious to Wilbur Mercer” (209). This gives Rick renewed faith, and the energy to journey back home: “so this is what Mercer sees [...] in every cinder of the universe Mercer probably perceives inconspicuous life. Now I know” (211). Though Iran discovers the toad to be an electric fake, Rick’s faith and ability to connect with other living things is restored for long enough to save his life and save him from a total mental collapse.

The illusions that Isidore and Deckard believe in empower them to escape from situations devoid of empathy and to seek connection again. Though they knowingly believe in a religion proved fraudulent, their continued faith is what distinguishes them as empathetic beings. The empathy enabled through fusion may not be real, but they still allow humans to connect to one another in a dark, entropic world.
Empathetic Readers

Interestingly, much of the scholarly writing about the epistemology of empathy describes the empathic process in relation to narratives and literature. Perhaps this is because empathizing with characters in literature proves problematic for empathy as a way of knowing. How can we feel something for characters that, logically, we know are not real? Even embracing empathy as a means of knowing in the real world may be difficult because it requires, as one political theorist points out, dismantling “the reason/emotion split—the positivist understanding of objectivity—[which] is so conventionally embedded that we cannot easily conceptualize an alternative model of knowing” (White 111-12). Despite the difficulties that empathy poses, many theorists have been able to move beyond “the paradox of fiction, in which the primary emotional responses to what readers know to be untrue are both possible and rational” (Feagin 149). Richard Gerrig labels this phenomenon “transportation,” based on the frequency of readers’ “critiques of fictional narrative [that] almost invariably make reference to the emotions engendered by the experience of the narrative” (Gerrig 179). Even if it defies the assumptions of rational thought, readers empathize with the characters they read about, despite the fact that “readers should not have emotions about situations they know to be unreal” (Gerrig 179).

This paradox has been somewhat resolved with simulation theory, which “holds that we represent the mental states and processes of others by mentally simulating them, or generating similar states and processes in ourselves” (Gordon). In other words, we empathize with characters in literature because we have been in comparable situations and can emulate the associated emotions and mental states. Susan Feagin suggests that
empathizing with literary characters may be more successful than real-world empathy because, “simulating mental activity is likely to be easier with respect to characters in narrative literature than with actual people since literature is written for those who would appreciate it—something not to be assumed of the ‘narratives’ that people create as we live our lives” (Feagin 161). Additionally, “it is often held that the cognitive value of literature is not in its power to convey propositions, but rather in it enabling its readers to experience what it is like to be a participant in the scenarios being described” (Matravers 29). This point is crucial to understanding how readers can simulate and empathize with characters in sf texts, where there are very few empirical similarities between reader and character. It is nearly impossible to imagine what it is like to meet a man who was born on Mars, live in an apocalyptic world where androids exist, or inhabit a planet like Gethen, but quite possible to feel compassion, concern, or curiosity for characters in these situations.

Ultimately, the paradox of empathetic readership leads to “the issue of whether empathy could be a route to knowledge of something about [the other], and, if so, whether empathy is the only way of gaining that knowledge” (Matravers 21). Explanations of transportation or simulation do not fully justify readers’ reactions to fiction, and “the doubts concerning the extent to which people react in similar ways may well be significant enough to throw into doubt the claim that empathy is generally reliable” (Matravers 23). However, there seems to be a special case for empathizing with characters in speculative and science fiction. As Johan Smedt and Helen Cruz detail at length: “speculative fiction, unlike analytic philosophy, elicits transportation by drawing readers emotionally into a story and reduces the need for cognitive closure. As a result,
speculative fiction allows for a richer exploration of philosophical positions than is possible through ordinary philosophical thought experiments” (59). This connects with Ursula Le Guin’s long touted position that the “thought experiments” of science fiction is the genre’s best and most unique trait (xiv).

The implications of empathy and science fiction move beyond the purely theoretical and actually have tangible effects for readers. For instance, a 2013 study found that “reading fiction increases empathy over time, but only if the reader feels transported into the story, and strongly identifies with the main characters. Nontransported readers, by contrast become less empathic” (Smedt & Cruz 62). The study showed that reading “stories relates to how people sympathize with others, are able to take multiple perspectives, and feel for unfortunate others. Increase of empathy is important for people because empathy is positively related to creativity, performance at work, and prosocial and cooperative behaviors” (Bal & Veltkamp 9). Thus, science fiction—a particularly transporting genre due to its rich descriptions of other worlds and strange characters—makes for more empathetic readers than those reading philosophy or theory.

As readers of science fiction we can see the potential of empathy as a driving force of interpersonal connection despite alien differences between the self and the other. Science fiction—which often interposes the possibilities of the hard science with the emotional impact of literary tropes of other worlds, the future, or apocalypse—can help us conceive of reason and emotion not as diametric opposites, but as overlapping phenomena. A feminist reading of science fiction requires readers to engage open-mindedly with strange and frightening others, dismantle the texts’ depictions of power
and positionality, and challenge fundamental assumptions about the way things are. These are excellent strategies for feminist theorizing and reading in general, but are especially facilitated through science fiction. All of this is to say that as empathetic, feminist readers of science fiction, perhaps we can uproot “the whole tendency to dualism that pervades human thinking” and adopt an intersectional approach to understanding how the depictions of empathy in these texts are impacted by gendered conceptions (Le Guin 100).

These science fiction stories offer enormous potential for feminist and for what Rita Felski has called “postcritical” reading; Heinlein’s utopian story is highly critical of American capitalism and conservative sexual mores; Le Guin’s thought experiment presents alternatives to gender binaries and traditional conceptions of gender roles; Dick’s dystopia demonstrates the dangers of hegemony by depicting intersectional oppression for androids, specials, and women in his story. While literary criticism often takes the approach of “skepticism as dogma,” science fiction texts actively encourage readers to suspend their disbelief (Felski 9). This chapter, though an exercise in literary criticism and meditation on the philosophical implications of empathy in science fiction, must respect the experience that readers have when engaging with science fiction. Perhaps the most effective critical approach for science fiction is Felski’s “postcritical reading,” where “we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible” (12). While feminist criticism often highlights the ways in which gender and sexuality do not live up to ideals of equality, postcritical reading asks readers to empathetically analyze what a text offers up without comparing it to an outside ideology.
Conclusion

This chapter has detailed the thematic centrality of empathy as an epistemology in three science fiction novels of the 1960s. I have defined empathy as the fallible drive to care and understand about others that results in unavoidable misunderstanding between self and other, which in turn triggers the desire to connect. By exploring the etymology of empathy and its science fiction reinventions, I have exposed the linguistic and philosophical complexity of empathy. I have resisted the characterization of reason and emotion as diametric opposites and described how gender differences in empathic ability are enforced by hegemonic patriarchal power.

Through my explication of *Stranger in a Strange Land, The Left Hand of Darkness*, and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, I have illustrated how empathy is reclaimed as a feminist value through its gendered depiction. I have shown that by literalizing empathy as telepathy, the possibility of misunderstanding and celebration of empathy as an innate human quality are challenged. By emphasizing the role of empathy to the invented religions of the novels, the underlying necessity of faith comes to the surface. Finally, I have reviewed some of the relevant literature on the epistemology of empathy, demonstrated the important connection between empathy and narratives, and highlighted the role of literature in deepening readers’ empathy through transporting storytelling. Ultimately, it is fruitful to examine empathy as a means of knowing the other in the context of science fiction because empathy has been the research focus of many different disciplines.
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‘The Future is No Longer Determined by the Past,’ Or: How to Take Pleasure in 
Reading 60s Science Fiction as a 21st Century Feminist

One of the primary challenges of this project has been maintaining a critical 
feminist approach to analyzing depictions of gender, sexual pleasure, and empathy in the 
texts of Heinlein, Le Guin, and Dick, without holding these authors unfairly accountable 
to contemporary expectations of intersectionality or feminist politics. Immersing myself 
in these futuristic and alien worlds has undoubtedly enabled me to experiment with 
radical possibilities for liberation in science fiction: with new epistemologies of sex and 
empathy. However, as a 21st century reader, I often find these thought experiments be 
antiquated and unsuccessful in repudiating the status quo. I feel visceral frustration that 
Heinlein’s utopia is dependent on beautiful, sexually available secretaries. I’m vexed that 
Le Guin—who has since expressed regret about her use of masculine pronouns for 
Gethenians—was unable to bypass phallogocentric signifiers in the universe she created. 
I can’t quite decide if Dick’s dystopian future is truly critical of the rigid hegemony it sets 
forth or if its sexed-up androids indicate complacency instead. All of this is to say that it 
can be difficult to remember that in the act of reading, I am a time traveler, for I am 
reading these stories more than 50 years in the authors’ futures, in a new wave of 
feminism and feminist sf. Yet despite these challenges, I love reading science fiction. I 
find Heinlein’s lecturey prose and curmudgeonly attitude deeply entertaining. Le Guin’s 
deliberate experimentation is poetic, beautiful, and a joy to read. Dick’s action-packed 
story appeals to my aesthetic sensibilities and is unputdownable. In short, reading science 
fiction is a deeply pleasurable and comforting ritual to me, despite my frustrations with 
some of its limitations.
My conflicting feelings about sf have been reinforced through this project and its processes. A critical thesis should be just that—critical—yet criticism somehow feels counterproductive to the purpose of sf thought experiments, which ask readers to engage with them, play with them, and reimagine whole universes with them. Close reading and analysis can dissipate the exhilaration of reading something new and strange. The writing process can bog down the once-excited reader. Revision can exhaust the inspired writer. These consequences are unavoidable, yet necessary components to the production of criticism. The contrarian critical persona also seems fundamentally opposed to the epistemologies of sex and empathy that this project establishes, which embrace misunderstanding as a tender, inevitable, integral part of human interaction and meaning-making. A critic acknowledging misunderstanding is a critic admitting failure, divulging a lack of intellectual sophistication, or apologizing to her readers. For these reasons, I have (re)discovered the need to carve out a space for pleasure and empathy within feminist readings and criticism of science fiction, or, as I phrase it in my introduction, to grok these texts. To grok a text is to recognize the simultaneous role of pleasure and empathetic connection in the process of understanding it, and to be self-aware: not to assume detachment and objectivity, but to acknowledge partiality, misunderstanding—to approach a text with humility and openness. Throughout this project I have pointed for the simultaneity of grokking within the texts and also outside of the texts; empathy and pleasure are both themes within these novels and components of my critical practice. I’ve found solace in and precedent for this idea in the works of Hélène Cixous on women’s writing Rita Felski on postcriticism.
In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous buoyantly articulates that “the future is no longer determined by the past. I do not deny that the effects of the past are still with us. But I refuse to strengthen them by repeating them, to confer upon them an irremovability the equivalent of destiny” (27). In line with this assertion, grokking doesn’t repeat the effects of the past. Through reading and writing about sf, I strike a balance between understanding the circumstances in which these texts were written, while also addressing their ideological and political limitations. In other words, grokking these novels does not mean taking off my feminist cap, pretending that their limitations do not exist, or refusing to problematize their purported thought experiments. Rather, grokking means to understand the history, aesthetics, and effects of these texts by cherishing them—to use Heinlein’s word—for what they bring to the table. This isn’t blind respect for the canon or paying homage to a genre that has marginalized the groups which feminists strive to give voice to. This is a playful assertion of my right to take pleasure in analyzing and writing about the texts I am ardently pouring over.

After all, Cixous’ feminist call to arms announces that it “is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence” (33). Writing is paramount for women according to Cixous, who believes that when women write they address the locus of the other within themselves; they are empathetic to difference. As Cixous claims, “writing is precisely working (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and of the other […] infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another” (36). Cixous leaves ample room for difference—for an interchange
with others who are different from ourselves—or, as I like to look at it, room for
grokking. As a woman, feminist, and grokker, I benefit from this strategy of reading and
writing that “doesn’t annul differences but stirs them up, pursues them, increases their
number” (36). For me, the process of writing is a form of grokking, as writing facilitates
a deep understanding of these sf texts. The writing process is at once critical and
empathetic; it is a process which allows me to merge with these texts while preserving
distance and allowing for potential misunderstanding.

I am also heartened by Rita Felski’s rejection of critique as the dominating
method of the Academy and literary world. Felski suggests that:

rather than looking behind the text—for its hidden causes, determining conditions,
and noxious motives—we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on
what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible. This is not idealism, aestheticism, or
magical thinking but a recognition—long overdue—of the text’s status as coactor:
as something that makes a difference, that helps make things happen (12).

Felski calls this understanding of a text as a coactor (rather than as an object of suspicion)
postcriticism, which recognizes the power of “receptivity” (12). She also makes the
interesting observation that “Academia has often been a haven for the disgruntled and
disenchanted, for oddballs and misfits,” which rings especially true for the sf community
(12). She reassures us critics that “reigning in critique is not a matter of trying to impose
a single mood upon the critic but of striving for a greater receptivity to the multifarious
and many-shaded moods of texts” (12). In a way, Felski is calling for critics to grok, to
be more sophisticated through empathy, to be more receptive to the emotions and
information offered up by a text.
Ultimately, I am pulled back to Genly’s narration in the beginning of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, where he urges readers to toy with the notion that “the truth is a matter of the imagination” (1). This is excellent advice for sf readers: to dream, to invent, to engage with their perceived reality and sf texts alike, without relying on the security of criticism. Engaging with a sf text doesn’t mean to poke holes in its logic or imagination, it means to agree to suspend one’s disbelief, play along, and take pleasure in the adventure. It has been an immensely pleasurable experience to read, re-read, analyze, and write about these science fiction novels. I have learned how to be a better feminist critic through grokking these texts and I have learned to respect the power of time-travel that happens when we read literature, and science fiction in particular. Most importantly, I have learned to yield to the inevitability of imperfect understandings and I have let this fuel my desire to engage with science fiction, the genre that impossibly attempts to predict the future and in doing so reveals the manifold possibilities of our present.
Works Cited

