

**Limina: A Journal of Historical and Cultural Studies**

**Volume 30, Issue 1: On Crisis**

**May 2025**

**ISSN 1833-3419**

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## Two Left Hands: Deconstructing Transness as a Crisis of Identity through SFF Fiction<sup>1</sup>

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*Modern transgender existence has long held a link with a state of crisis. This paper challenges the assumption that to be trans is to inherently be in crisis, or that crisis is an internal force working upon the trans body. Through a close reading of two science fiction/fantasy texts, Linsey Miller's *Mask of Shadows* (2017) and Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, this paper argues that crisis is an external force imposed upon the trans body by mainstream society and can be relieved through a social model of accessibility. By examining the unfixed state of gender within the texts and within modern queer and gender theories, this paper argues that the sense of crisis experienced by the trans community is also unfixed, and therefore a world beyond this state of crisis is possible.*

Transgender and gender diverse individuals, that is, those whose gender is something other than the gender assigned to them at birth, have been increasingly in the spotlight in recent years. There has been a surge in people seeking gender affirming healthcare, an increase in media representation (both positive and negative), and an alarming number of anti-trans legislations being passed through governments worldwide.<sup>3</sup> A cursory glance at any newsfeed over the past decade reveals common links between transness and crisis. Trans people are often described as experiencing an identity crisis, and even the medical diagnosis needed for many people to access gender affirming care, Gender Dysphoria Disorder, hints at the idea that gender diverse people are unwell, pathologising transness as a medical crisis.<sup>4</sup> Within the trans community, the word 'crisis' has crept its way into every corner: trans-led health organisations focus on the emotional and physical crises experienced by

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<sup>1</sup> This research was carried out while the author was in receipt of an Australian Government Research Training Program Stipend Scholarship at The University of Western Australia.

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<sup>3</sup> Katie Eyer, "Transgender Constitutional Law." *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 171, no. 5 (2023): 1405–1513.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Elizabeth Jones, "Being My True Self: An Existential Phenomenological Inquiry into how Transition Influences Identity in Trans Men." Order No. 30730680, (England: Middlesex University, 2023). <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/being-my-true-self-existential-phenomenological/docview/2861285425/se-2>.

those unable to access care and of those experiencing transphobic abuse, crisis hot-lines are set up to deal with our community's pain, and many trans individuals use the language of identity crisis to understand themselves and their journey. As a trans masculine non-binary person, I have seen this pattern recur across our community spaces. However, as a trans masculine non-binary person, I do not think this is the way our lives need to be.

Through a close reading of two SFF (Science Fiction/Fantasy) novels, Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and Linsey Miller's *Mask of Shadows* (2017), this paper argues that the trans experience is not an internal, individual crisis, but a social crisis caused by the dominant narratives of the mainstream, and therefore can be alleviated with societal changes. The two novels analysed both present alternative narratives where non-binary gender identities (that is, gender embodiment that rejects the male/female binary system of gender which includes multiple specific gender identities such as genderfluid, or agender) are the central focus. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the Gethenians are the dominant people, and their non-binary gender is a central focus of the text. In *Mask of Shadows*, the main character Sallot Leon (Sal) is genderfluid, and their gender plays a significant role in the narrative. This essay will argue that the fictional world-building in these two novels can be viewed through modern transgender theory and the social model of disability lens to conceptualise a real-world possibility where transness is no longer experienced as a crisis.

In Mike Oliver's social model of disability, disability is viewed at the social level, and it seeks to understand how societies impose barriers upon differently-abled individuals, which then causes a lack of accessibility (a 'disability'), comparing disability to other socially imposed barriers such as race, gender, or class discriminations.<sup>5</sup> The social model of disability is concerned with removing these external barriers on a whole of society level, moving the focus away from trying to 'fix' the individual and toward removing barriers for that individual to create equitable access to society.<sup>6</sup> This essay will apply similar thinking to gender diversity, in that gender diverse individuals are not in need of 'fixing' (as trans people are not a 'problem') but rather social barriers for trans people (such as those that limit access to medical care, legal protection, public bathrooms etc.) need to be removed to create equitable access for trans and cisgender (non-trans) people.

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<sup>5</sup> Sofia Adam and Athanasios Koutsoklenis, "Who needs the social model of disability?" *Frontiers in Sociology* 8, December (2023), 1305301–1305301. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2023.1305301>.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Shakespeare, "The Social Model of Disability", in *The Disability Studies Reader (4th ed)*, ed. Lennard J Davis (New York: Routledge, 2014).

## The Left Hand of Darkness

In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin examines how the lack of accessibility in society for those that are ‘othered’ is a reflection on the problems with society, not with the individual.<sup>7</sup> This aligns with the argument that social acceptance is more important than individual effort in minimising an individual’s crisis state. On the planet of Gethen/Winter, the dominant people have no fixed gender and are non-binary (in the sense that they are not male or female, though their gender is not referred to in-text as non-binary, but ‘androgynous’<sup>8</sup>), except when ‘kemmering’, where they develop either male or female primary sexual characteristics in order to reproduce. Winter is an alien planet, but the story is being told through Genly Ai, an Earth-born human sent to Winter on a diplomacy mission by the Ekumen, an interplanetary governing body. His (Genly is a cisgender man) mission is to convince the Gethenians to join the Ekumen. The novel is presented mostly as field notes from Ai, with folklore tales, journal entries from his traveling companion Estraven, and notes from earlier outside explorers interspersed throughout. It is implied though that even the chapters from other points of view have been compiled and presented to the reader by Genly Ai.

*The Left Hand of Darkness* was published in 1969, the same year the Stonewall Rebellion occurred, an event largely credited as the beginning of the modern queer rights movement.<sup>9</sup> Despite the prominent role trans women such as Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera played at Stonewall, transgender rights were not an immediate after-effect of the riots. Stonewall sparked the modern lesbian and gay revolution, but in an effort to retain this new found ‘privileged’ status, many lesbian and gay organisations actively distanced themselves from the transgender community.<sup>10</sup> Alongside the growing tensions in the queer community in the 1960s, second-wave feminism was taking hold, examining women’s oppression socio-culturally, the psychological construction of women, and, most damaging to the trans liberation movements, further development of the definition of ‘woman’ being linked to shared physical, bodily experiences. These definitions directly caused a decline in acceptance for trans women in many women’s spaces, and a lack of acknowledgment and affirmation for the identities of trans men, often misgendering them as ‘butch women’.<sup>11</sup> It is important to note this because Le Guin, a cisgender woman, was writing in response to the world she existed in and she states that feminist theory, especially regarding gender and sex, was an explicit focus of *The Left*

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<sup>7</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (USA: Ace Books, 1969).

<sup>8</sup> Le Guin, *Left Hand*, 90

<sup>9</sup> Fienberg, *Transgender*, 97.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution* (New York: Seal Press, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Fienberg, *Transgender*, 112-113.

*Hand of Darkness*. She says in the essay, 'Is Gender Necessary?', 'Along about 1967... I began to want to define and understand the meaning of sexuality and the meaning of gender, in my life and in our society'.<sup>12</sup> There is evidence in text of this examination of gender and sexuality. When Genly Ai meets a Gethenian who is permanently in kemmer, he explains to the reader:

Excessive prolongation of the kemmer period, with permanent hormonal imbalance toward the male or the female, causes what they call perversion; it is not rare; three or four percent of adults may be physiological perverts or abnormal – normals, by our standard. They are not excluded from society, but they are tolerated with some disdain, as homosexuals are in many bisexual societies.<sup>13</sup>

In *Underdogs: Social Deviance and Queer Theory* (2021), Heather Love argues that modern queer theory (defined by its emergence in the late twentieth century) has, in all aspects, precedents and connection to early mid-century sociology theories. She says, 'the roots of queer theory should be located in activist ferment and traditions of radicalism coming out of the AIDS crisis, the women's health movement, in debates in feminism, and in movements for gay and trans liberation that emerged in the late 1960s'.<sup>14</sup> In this framing, Le Guin can be understood to have been writing amongst and in connection to the earliest roots of modern 'queer theory', placing this text in the lineage of modern transgender theory. It can then be argued that *The Left Hand of Darkness*, specifically Winter and the Gethenians, are an example of how gender 'deviant' bodies can exist outside of the crisis state.

The story opens with Genly Ai two years into his mission to Winter. His primary objective is to convince the Gethenians to join the international collective, but Genly struggles particularly with the fact that gender does not exist on Winter in the way he has learnt it on Earth. Le Guin challenges the stability of gender in this text by creating a society that has a non-binary gender majority (non-binary again used in the modern sense for clarity in this paper) and ambisexual physical bodies. In applying Oliver's social model theory to the text, we can view the ways in which compulsory gender conformity works as a barrier to equitable access for trans people in our modern world. Le Guin does this through comparison of Genly Ai and the Gethenians, and again with readers and the Gethenian society. Genly Ai is frustrated that he is not accepted by the Gethenians for the fact that he presents his gender differently. To the

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<sup>12</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, "Is Gender Necessary? Redux", *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (USA: Grove Press, 1989), 7-16.

<sup>13</sup> Le Guin, *Left Hand*, 64.

<sup>14</sup> Heather Love, *Underdogs: Social Deviance and Queer Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

Gethenians, Ai is considered a 'pervert' and a 'freak' for having reproductive sex organs that denote him being permanently 'male'. The king of the nation of Karhide says to Ai, "I don't know what the devil you are, Mr. Ai, a sexual freak or an artificial monster or a visitor from the Domains of the Void".<sup>15</sup> These sentiments are repeated often throughout the novel. This kind of language has been, and still is, used in a derogatory way toward trans people in the real world. When Ai tries to explain that there are others like him, the reply from the king is, "So all of them, out on these other planets, are in permanent kemmer? A society of perverts?"<sup>16</sup> If readers can sympathise here that there is nothing wrong with Genly's gender presentation, that he is not a sexual deviant or a monster, he is simply in a world that is not built for him, then it can be understood that trans people in our world face a similar struggle. Genly Ai is therefore a vessel by which readers, particularly those in 1969 when this originally came out, can gently ease into the world of Winter and its complex statements on gender, fixing the reader's attention on a familiar (cisgendered human) figure navigating an alien world. Le Guin notes the effectiveness of this technique on male readers in particular, allowing them 'a safe trip into androgyny and back'.<sup>17</sup> When viewed through the social model lens, Genly becomes the 'other', the person who the world is not built for, even though the reader can easily imagine a place where he would be perfectly accommodated for.

*The Left Hand of Darkness* has been criticised by some modern readers for the fact that despite its removal of gender, all the Gethenians are given he/him pronouns when outside of kemmer (that is, when not exhibiting any sex-based physical characteristics). There are two potential reasons for this. One is that Le Guin was not comfortable using they/them pronouns in 1969, fearing the reader (or more likely, the publisher) would not accept this, something she references herself in the essay 'Is Gender Necessary?', expressing regret in hindsight at this choice.<sup>18</sup> The modern publishing industry still does not readily accept they/them pronouns, so I think Le Guin was justified in taking the path of least resistance in this case. The other theory is that as the story is predominately presented as field notes written by Genly Ai, these pronouns have been enforced upon the Gethenians by the outsider. Throughout the book, Genly Ai can be read as misogynistic, indeed the challenging of these views becomes a large part of his personal growth journey. Early in the novel Ai writes that he sees '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'.<sup>19</sup> The notion that outsiders have imposed gender roles onto the non-gendered Gethenians is

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<sup>15</sup> Le Guin, *Left Hand*, 32.

<sup>16</sup> Le Guin, *Left Hand*, 36.

<sup>17</sup> Le Guin, *Gender*, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Le Guin, *Gender*, 15.

<sup>19</sup> Le Guin, *Left Hand*, 12.

further supported during an excerpt from the notes of the first outside explorer to Winter, Ong Tot Oppong, who says:

I must say “he”, for the same reasons as we used the masculine pronoun in referring to a transcendent god: it is less defined, less specific, than the neuter or the feminine. But the very use of the pronoun in my thoughts leads me continually to forget that the Karhider I am with is not a man, but a manwoman.<sup>20</sup>

This indicates that Genly is perhaps only following the guidance of the earlier explorers, who are also employees of the Ekumen. Whichever way we view the decision to use he/him pronouns, whether it was to avoid criticism in the real world, or to highlight the patriarchal thinking of the Ekumen and Genly Ai, or a combination of both forces, the choice reinforces the idea that the crisis of identity is imposed upon the Gethenians: they do not have the same concerns as Ai has for them, as they are the norm. This reflects Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s ideas on queerness (in a linguistic, identity, and political sense), being a term used to produce subjects linked with an ideology of shame for existing outside heteronormative society.<sup>21</sup> Though the Gethenians are ‘queer’ to Genly Ai, he is the one ‘queer’ to them, and both sides view the other as the ‘shameful’ one. For Sedgwick, ‘queer’ has no fixed definition, other than to denote embodiment of the ‘shameful’ other, the outsider.<sup>22</sup> The Gethenians are, as Judith Butler also describes, ‘performing gender’: a non-binary form of gender that they all share.<sup>23</sup> It is only because Genly Ai is ‘performing’ something else that he becomes ‘the shameful other’, and a crisis of gender exists.

Gethenians have no fixed gender roles, because they have no fixed gender, and they do not have any accessibility issues regarding their gender presentation because their entire society is built to accommodate this. They live in large groups called ‘Hearths’ or ‘Domains’ to allow for enough pairings during kemmerings, and their lives revolve around the kemmering cycles, allowing for time off, indiscriminate access to ‘kemmering houses’ and even contraceptive drugs to counter kemmering should the individual choose. They have shared responsibilities for parenting. Each individual can do whatever job they like, due to there being no divisions of labour between male and female sexes. There seems to be no shame toward those who wish to skip the kemmer phase and no shame in being in kemmer, but there is a perversion to those who

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<sup>20</sup> Le Guin, *Left Hand*, 94.

<sup>21</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. “Queer Performativity.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. 1, no. 1 (1993): 1–16.

<sup>22</sup> Sedgwick, ‘Queer Performativity’.

<sup>23</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1990).

are permanently in kemmer, such as Genly Ai, but also other Gethenians who either naturally or with the assistance of hormones are also in this state.

Despite the Gethenians non-binary gender, Genly Ai imposes binary-gendered stereotypes upon various characters throughout the text, making remarks such as, 'he had a girl's quick delicacy in his looks and movements, but no girl could keep so grim a silence as he did.'<sup>24</sup> We see these examples again and again from Genly Ai, who seeks to divide all Gethenians into binary female and male roles, even outside of kemmer, and does so in misogynistic ways (reflecting, as earlier defined by Sedgwick, the 'shame' of his own gender construction as it sits in opposition to the Gethenians), always attributing weaker traits to the feminine and stronger traits to the masculine. When asked at one point if human women are a different species to himself, he says, "'No. Yes. No, of course not, not really. But... They don't often seem to turn up mathematicians, or composers of music, or inventors, or abstract thinkers.'"<sup>25</sup> At no point do the Gethenians make these same comments toward each other. The Gethenians attack each other for a range of transgressions such as being a traitor or having incestual relationships, but the misogyny Ai performs is not performed by the Gethenians because they do not have a divide between genders as they are all the same non-binary gender.

The way gender plays out on Winter reinforces the idea that transness is not an individual issue, but a societal one. Each time Genly Ai creates a false gender identity for a Gethenian, the facade crumbles further and we see what Butler meant when they wrote, 'the gendered body... has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality'.<sup>26</sup> Without these various acts, the 'reality' of gender that Genly Ai clings to simply falls apart. On Winter, Ai is faced with an unfamiliar canvas and attempts to paint on a familiar (Earth-learned) gender system. Perhaps after centuries of this some of it would stick, but in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, though it has been two years at least since Ai's arrival, the Gethenians remain unchanged. It is possible, through this futile attempt by Genly Ai, to imagine a similar action occurring in our world. What if gender hadn't stuck to us so? If being non-binary in our society was as readily accepted as being 'non-binary' on Gethen, would trans individuals face any crisis? Would trans people exist at all, or would we all simply be 'the norm', without the need to 'transition' anywhere, as we wouldn't have been assigned the wrong thing in the first place?

No greater is this unstable reality evidenced than through Ai's narrative arc with Estraven. Estraven is a Gethenian, a former prime minister of Karhide, who at the start of the novel is exiled by the king for being a traitor. When Ai

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<sup>24</sup> Le Guin, *Left Hand*, 299.

<sup>25</sup> Le Guin, *Left Hand*, 234-235.

<sup>26</sup> Judith Butler, "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions," *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 175-93.

also falls out of favour with the king and is then imprisoned by the neighbouring nation of Orgoreyn, Estraven rescues him and together they spend months traveling across a northern ice shelf that runs between Orgoreyn and Karhide, seeking to complete Ai's original mission of uniting Winter with the Ekumen. Ai admits, when looking back on this event, that they fell in love there upon the ice.<sup>27</sup> By all reasonable admissions, Estraven is Genly's closest person on Winter, but they did not start out that way. Early in the novel, Ai says, 'Estraven's performance had been womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit. Was it... this soft supple femininity that I disliked and distrusted in him?'<sup>28</sup> Ai attaches his own gender bias to Estraven's ungendered body, displaying a general distrust and dislike for Estraven because of the difficulty Ai has in ordering them into either a 'male' or 'female' category. The closer Genly and Estraven become, the more this bias exerts a sense of crisis upon the body of Estraven. When Estraven suggests a nickname for Genly that denotes being 'hearth-brothers' (friends), Ai thinks to himself: 'Neither man nor woman, neither and both... changelings in the human cradle, they were no flesh of mine, no friend; no love between us.'<sup>29</sup>

As Estraven and Ai spend more time together, Ai's concept of 'otherness' and gender begins to unravel, triggered in particular by Estraven entering kemmer and taking on the physical sex of a female. Initially this disgusts Genly. He says:

I 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... I had not wanted to give my trust, my friendship to a man who was a woman, a woman who was a man.<sup>30</sup>

The language used here, particularly in terms of fear, again reflects modern trans discourse. Much of the current anti-trans legislation is rooted in fear, such as bills in the United States (and attempts within Australia) to ban transgender people from playing sport.<sup>31</sup> The focus too on primary sexual characteristics denoting gender reflects struggles trans people face in our world. The fact that Estraven is presenting female, and Genly Ai is a cisgendered male, and therefore the pairing would be considered heterosexual (it is inferred from the text that Genly is also heterosexual), illustrates how powerful this fear can be and the power it can exert onto the trans body. Genly's fear and disgust manifest onto Estraven as though Estraven's body is monstrous or wrong, despite the fact their body is completely normal on Gethen. Le Guin challenges

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<sup>27</sup> Le Guin, *Left Hand*, 248.

<sup>28</sup> Le Guin, *Left Hand*, 12.

<sup>29</sup> Le Guin, *Left Hand*, 213.

<sup>30</sup> Le Guin, *Left Hand*, 248.

<sup>31</sup> Eyer, "Transgender", 1405.

the reader now by allowing Genly Ai to break through this initial disgust and to see beyond the binary thinking he has learned on Earth. He realises in this moment of fear that, 'it was from the differences between us, not from the affinities and likenesses, but from the difference, that love came'.<sup>32</sup> Ai even names this event a 'near crisis', an admission of the way crisis is placed upon the body, upon the 'other', even though in this situation Estraven is acting in the natural order of Winter, while Ai is the one who does not conform to the standard gender. This exchange, this movement from crisis to love, not only demonstrates how unfixed social conditions of gender are, but also represents a new state of relationship between Estraven and Ai, one where Ai freely calls him his friend. When Estraven is killed by guards at the end of their journey, Genly Ai shows this in action: 'I took his head in my arms and spoke to him, but he never answered me; only in a way he answered my love for him.'<sup>33</sup>

These events have a lasting impact on Genly, and we can see how he has grown across the novel when other humans from the Ekumen, humans who have a binary sex system the same as Genly's (this book does not touch on intersex variations at all), arrive on Winter and Ai is uncomfortable with their appearance. When the eleven Ekumen representatives exit their spaceship, Ai says, 'they all looked strange to me... Their voices sounded strange... They were like a troupe of great, strange animals'.<sup>34</sup> Here we see the crisis state transferred from the Gethenians to humans of Genly Ai's own kind, an example of how Butler's theory on gender as a repetitive act has worked to change Genly's own views. He has been submersed in and therefore repeating the Gethenian form of gender for long enough now that the 'other' has become himself. He does his duties in briefing the new arrivals, then hurries away to his rooms. When a Gethenian physician comes in to check on him, Genly describes how, 'his quiet voice and his face, a young serious face, not a man's face and not a woman's, a human face, these were a relief to me, familiar, right.'<sup>35</sup> That which he long feared, the 'trans' existence of the Gethenians, has now become a great comfort to him. This again supports that the 'othering' trans individuals face in society is not an internal state projected out onto the observer, but an external force imposed upon the trans body by the observer themselves. Genly has come to accept the normality of the Gethenians. The novel ends soon after this moment, so we can only theorise whether Genly Ai has broken free of the notion that each Gethenian body is a problem, and rather sees that the problem lies in society and the way mainstream ideologies exert otherness upon non-conforming bodies, or if he simply transfers his fears onto himself and other binary humans. One would hope that the self-growth he

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<sup>32</sup> Le Guin, *Left Hand*, 249.

<sup>33</sup> Le Guin, *Left Hand*, 284.

<sup>34</sup> Le Guin, *Left Hand*, 296.

<sup>35</sup> Le Guin, *Left Hand*, 296.

experienced on the ice with Estraven has been enough to break him of the gender-binary hold.

### Mask of Shadows

Where Le Guin explored the challenge of being binary gendered in a non-binary world, Linsey Miller's *Mask of Shadows* speculates on ways a gender-nonconforming person can find success and acceptance within a cis-normative one. *Mask of Shadows* was one of the first Young Adult (YA) novels to explicitly use the term 'genderfluid' to describe its main character.<sup>36</sup> Genderfluid is an identity that falls under the trans umbrella. Like all gender diverse identity labels, genderfluid may mean different things to each individual who self-describes as such. In general, genderfluid is used to describe those whose gender identity fluctuates from time to time. For main character Sallot Leon (Sal) specifically, this looks like being a girl, boy, or nonbinary on alternating days. Sal uses he/she/they pronouns, but only one at a time per day. For the sake of clarity within this paper, I will refer to Sal as the singular 'they' unless in-text references state otherwise.

*Mask of Shadows* was first released in the United States in 2017, a time of political upheaval for LGBTQIA+ people. In 2012 the US established marriage equality, allowing same-sex couples to marry in some states. Following this, opponents of LGBTQIA+ rights turned their attention away from homosexuality and began targeting the transgender community (a repeat of the events following Stonewall in 1969 which contextualised *The Left Hand of Darkness*). Anti-trans groups successfully campaigned to repeal anti-discrimination laws, arguing (amongst other things) that transgender individuals using the public bathroom that matched their current gender (as opposed to the gender imposed on them at birth) was leading to increased attacks on cisgender women by 'sexual predators'.<sup>37</sup> In 2016, Donald Trump, who is vocally anti-trans, was elected President of the United States. Book bans in the United States overwhelmingly targeted LGBTQIA+ books for teenagers. In this context, Miller so openly including a genderfluid character in her YA novel can be viewed as a powerful act of resistance against an increasingly hostile political landscape.

*Mask of Shadows* is a fantasy set in the fictional land of Igna. The narrative follows Sal as they compete in a violent audition to become a member of the Queen's 'Left Hand' (her assassin security team). Many Queer YA novels (defined here as novels which feature a main character who is LGBTQIA+) do not explicitly label their characters in the blurb, but *Mask of Shadows* does: 'Sallot

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<sup>36</sup> Linsey Miller, *Mask of Shadows* (Naperville: Sourcebooks Fire, 2017).

<sup>37</sup> Marie-Amelie George, "Framing Trans Rights" *Northwestern University Law Review* 114, no. 3 (2019), 555–632.

Leon is a thief, and a good one at that. But genderfluid Sal...'.<sup>38</sup> By giving Sal an identity label immediately, Miller is rejecting the use of internalised shame by YA authors to create a coming out narrative, or to use queerness as a shocking plot twist.<sup>39</sup> Sal's queerness is presented upfront, does not require Sal to come out in the first instance to the reader (though they do have to re-out themselves upon meeting new characters sometimes), and is not kept secret at all during the novel. Through Sal, Miller has created a character who has no gender identity crisis, though it is clear their gender identity is neither common nor wholly accepted by the society they live in, resulting in moments of discomfort for Sal.

As the novel is narrated in first person by Sal, there are only a few uses of their pronouns by others. Often characters will simply use their name or 'Twenty-Three', which is their number in the tournament. The first use of a pronoun for Sal occurs in the fourth chapter, when a guard says, "'They're here for the Left Hand auditions.'"<sup>40</sup> Sal is wearing a face mask at the time and is a stranger to the guard, which implies that using they/them pronouns when faced with a person of unknown gender is accepted protocol in Igna. All other characters prior to this point have been assigned he/him or she/her pronouns by Sal, including this same guard. Sal does not use they/them pronouns to refer to others, and does not ask anyone's pronouns, though others ask Sal about theirs. It can be inferred then that in this world gender-neutral pronouns are not the default for all citizens but reserved for those presenting outside the cis-normative expectations of the male/female gender binary, which appear to largely conform to modern Western gender standards. The only area where masculine and feminine lines overlap differently to the real world is in combat (including status, weapons, and dress), where there appears to be no division. This would explain why Sal was not immediately gendered by the guard, as both males and females hold equal status in the Left Hand arena. This concept mirrors what Adrienne Rich defines in terms of sexuality as a 'compulsory heterosexuality', in that everyone is presumed to be heterosexual, unless actively presenting in some way that challenges this.<sup>41</sup> By extension, everyone is presumed cisgender unless outwardly presenting in some way that challenges this. This is affirmed after Sal begins the Left Hand audition. Upon meeting their assigned servant, Maud, Sal lists their demands:

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<sup>38</sup> Miller, *Mask*, blurb.

<sup>39</sup> Barbara Pini, Wendy Keys, and Damien W Riggs. "Transphobic Tropes and Young Adult Fiction: An Analysis of Brian Katcher's *Almost Perfect*." *The Lion and the Unicorn (Brooklyn)* 42, no. 1 (2018), 57-72. <https://doi.org/10.1353/uni.2018.0004>.

<sup>40</sup> Miller, *Mask*, 25.

<sup>41</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5, no. 4 (Summer 1980), 631-660.

“No questions or gossiping about me. Not about my scars, my clothes, or my measurements. I dress how I like to be addressed - he, she, or they. It’s simple enough.” ...Even when I spelled it out for nosy people clear as I could, they couldn’t grasp why.<sup>42</sup>

The blunt, unprovoked way Sal states this to Maud indicates that their gender identity is not fully understood in this world, though obviously accepted enough that they feel safe to present openly gender-nonconforming. Sal notes that, ‘Our Queen preaches acceptance and peace. They’d accept me.’<sup>43</sup> This implies that the nation of Igna is at least partially accepting of LGBTQIA+ persons, confirmed later in the novel through two depictions of same-sex relationships, including one involving Ruby, a member of the Left Hand and a main supporting character. The Left Hand are members of the Royal Court and are the highest authority in the land other than the Queen herself, so an openly queer member of this group is significant.

However, the aside about ‘nosy people’ and Sal’s ‘measurements’ suggests that there are those in this society who, upon hearing Sal is genderfluid, seek to know their birth assigned sex. This is a phenomenon reflected for real-life trans people, where there is often a fixation by outsiders to know what a person’s body presented as at birth, with a particular fixation on genitals. Sal reaffirms this desire for secrecy about their body later when Maud brings them new clothes (and it should be noted that Sal has no problems getting or wearing uniforms of any kind, seemingly the Left Hand easily accommodates their requests). Maud says she had to guess Sal’s size. Sal replies, “‘Not a word about me to anyone. They know what I look like, I lose my shot at surprise.’”<sup>44</sup> In this context, we can assume Sal is referring to the idea that if the other Left Hand auditioners (there is only one open position, with many competing for this spot) know Sal’s birth assigned sex, they will make assumptions on their physical capabilities. This fear suggests that gender biases exist in this world, and these seem to mostly reflect real-world divisions of what constitutes stereotypical masculine and feminine traits. Sal’s desire to conceal their physical body is facilitated by the fact that all competitors wear full face masks. In a broader sense of trans identity, Sal’s desire to be judged solely on their gender presentation is them seeking to separate sex from gender, which is a key point in modern trans self-determination practices.<sup>45</sup> By removing the idea that sex is linked to gender, Sal challenges outsiders to consider that if they have an issue with Sal’s gender presentation, it is coming

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<sup>42</sup> Miller, *Mask*, 33.

<sup>43</sup> Miller, *Mask*, 34.

<sup>44</sup> Miller, *Mask*, 69.

<sup>45</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. Ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990).

from a sense of bias in their own world view and ideas of sex and gender, rather than an issue on Sal's part. There is no evidence in the text to suggest Sal has any issues accepting their gender identity or physical body at all.

Though Sal is comfortable with themselves, they experience repeated frustrations in having to explain their gender identity. When first meeting the other members of the Left Hand, Ruby, Amethyst, and Emerald, who are holding the auditions, Ruby refers to Sal as 'they'. Sal responds, "'you can call me 'she' when I dress like this. I dress how I am.'"<sup>46</sup> Sal goes on to explain to the reader, 'I wore a dress, and people treated me like a girl. I wore trousers and one of those floppy-collared men's shirts, and they treated me like a boy.'<sup>47</sup> This confirms that normative gender dress reflects modern Western standards. Judith Butler describes gender as an unstable identity, constructed externally of the body by stylised repetition of acts.<sup>48</sup> This is what they describe as the 'performance'. Sal reinforces this concept by using external devices (mainly clothing, but sometimes makeup and body language) to build a gender, tear it down, and rebuild a new one the next day. Sal demonstrates how by breaking free from the continuous repetition of a singular gender performance, the whole idea of a fixed gender becomes impossible. Sal's choice to dress in stereotypical male or female clothing to affirm their gender may seem to only reinforce the gender binary, but many trans people simply want to fit in, and Sal's reproduction of stereotypical gendered clothing may reflect a similar desire. However, this playing with clothing can also be looked at as a form of drag, of Sal purposefully messing with gender and appearance, acknowledging the power of the performance. If gender can change as easily as a change of clothing, how fixed is gender really? Whether Sal understands their relationship between clothing and gender as conforming or being subversive, it is theirs to play with and they freely explore these different ways to existing within this text and within the world of Igna. At no point does anybody attempt to stop Sal from dressing as any of their three 'genders'.

Following this interaction with the Left Hand, Sal goes on to explain their gender more clearly to the reader: 'I always felt like Sal, except it was like watching a river flow past... I ebbed and flowed, and that was my always'.<sup>49</sup> The metaphor of the river presents a nice symmetry to the fluidity of Sal's gender, that which changes day to day. Upon sharing this with the Left Hand there is never any further issue from them, and when Sal is misgendered by the main antagonist Five, members of the Left Hand correct him, implying that though it is uncommon for citizens of Igna to present this way, it is not unheard of. If we view this interaction through the lens of the social disability model,

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<sup>46</sup> Miller, *Mask*, 46.

<sup>47</sup> Miller, *Mask*, 46.

<sup>48</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

<sup>49</sup> Miller, *Mask*, 46.

we see how simple it is for gender diverse people to receive accommodations and be accepted, holding a mirror up to our own societies failings in doing this exact thing.

Sal sums it up best for themself when they are asking Maud about how she was assigned to them specifically. Each auditioner has a servant who assists them during the trials. Maud explains it was a random allocation, and she'd never have picked Sal because Sal is 'the scrawniest' (there is a promotion for the servant whose auditioner wins).<sup>50</sup> Sal is unphased. They think, 'I'd have picked me. I like me.'<sup>51</sup> This self-confidence and love for themself is a constant throughout the novel, even when they are facing hardships, failing tasks, injured, or tired: they always back themself. They challenge the idea of the sad trans person with an identity crisis, unable to 'pick' or struggling to find self-acceptance. Sal is a beacon of self-acceptance. They are unapologetically themselves, and through them, Miller challenges the idea that being trans is to suffer and supports the theory that it is the external society that enforces this suffering upon the trans body. Sal is an example of how there is nothing wrong with the trans body; the problem lies in society failing to accommodate the individual needs of trans people, in the same way the social model of disability advocates for changes to accommodate impaired individuals, rather than seeking to only 'fix' the impairment.

In the end, Sal wins the audition and is named 'Opal', the fourth member of the Queen's Left Hand. Sal expresses joy at their title now being 'Honourable', a gender-neutral term in their country, and an example of how a basic accommodation can easily remove any lingering discomfort Sal may have faced having to correct people using the wrong gendered title. Though we do not see how the rest of society (that is, everyone outside of this elite, privileged group) react to a genderfluid person being the new Opal, it can be inferred from the text that Sal's status is enough to quell any concerns. The Left Hand are well loved by the people of Igna, and are, after all, the Queen's hit squad, so it seems unlikely they would be bullied at all. It would be interesting to see a follow-up novel set in this world to see if Sal's role has had a trickle-down effect on the lives of other gender diverse individuals in Igna, as the only trans person we have access to in this novel is Sal themselves. Was it just Sal who managed to overcome the barriers of their world, or have doors opened for all gender diverse people now?

In *Mask of Shadows*, Miller has created a world that reflects aspects of our own in some ways but uses creative license to extend the possibility of genderfluidity being readily accepted by those in positions of governance or power, something that rarely occurs in real life, especially in the West. For the reader, the ease in which Sal exists in Igna may seem far-fetched, or

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<sup>50</sup> Miller, *Mask*, 67.

<sup>51</sup> Miller, *Mask*, 68.

unbelievable and this is itself a commentary on the way trans individuals in our society are expected to be at odds with the world, constantly facing crisis after crisis. Miller challenges the reader to imagine a possible future beyond the constraints of modern trans accessibility.

### **Between Two 'Left Hands'**

In the same way that the social model of disability argues that the issues faced by the individual are not an internal factor, but an external force placed upon the individual by a majority ableist mainstream, so too can transphobia be viewed as a symptom of this same pattern. Crisis, or tension, between gender and acceptance, only exists if the majority mainstream society is so oriented to force one into crisis mode: to feel ashamed by their sense of 'otherness' and to find the systems that should support them do not support them.

In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin presents a world that has reversed the script, where the people of Gethen are of a non-binary gender, while our protagonist must struggle with being ostracised and stigmatised for being a cisgender male from a binary gendered world. Genly Ai faces abuse due to his gender, but at the same time expresses that same prejudice toward the Gethenians by applying his own gender expectations onto them. On Winter, the systems do not support Genly to be permanently male. In the real-world, the systems do not universally support trans individuals to be trans, hence the barriers to social acceptance, gender affirming health care, and legal protections. It is the state of not being supported that leads to such realities as trans people having extremely high rates of self-harm and suicide. Genly comes to realise this when he finally accepts and loves Estraven for who they are, and when he comes to realise that his immersion in the alien world of Gethen has made members of his own kind seem 'alien' to him.

In *Mask of Shadows*, Miller presents a world where genderfluidity is uncommon, not openly celebrated, sometimes frustrating for Sal, but accepted enough that they are able to rise through the ranks to be appointed the title of Honourable Opal in the Queen's Left Hand, the second highest rank possible in the nation of Igna. Throughout the novel, characters in positions of power make accommodations for Sal with no push back. Authority figures provide gender diverse uniforms, acknowledge pronouns, and correct others who misgender Sal. Throughout, Sal demonstrates consistent self-love and self-acceptance, illustrating the point that to be trans is not to inherently be in a state of internal crisis or discomfort. Trans people can and should love themselves. It is the poor treatment of the trans body by outsiders that leads to the trans person suffering. While the ease of which Sal's gender is accepted may seem unrealistic compared to reality, this is precisely Miller's point. Why should gender nonconformity be such a crisis point? Why can't someone like Sal be accepted and honoured?

Le Guin takes her criticism of gender much further than Miller, examining how the stigma and gender biases Genly Ai imposes on the Gethenians is rooted in both fear and mass marketed gender performance by the mainstream society of his home world. However, both novels present us with examples of how trans bodies have a sense of crisis thrust upon them by external forces, even when the trans individual expresses inner acceptance. Applying the social model to transness could result in a world that lies somewhere between these two 'left hands'. Through the power of SFF fiction we can begin to imagine a world somewhere between *Ignia* and *Winter*, where gender diverse people exist, are accommodated for, and face no barriers because of their gender expression, in the same way cisgendered individuals are treated in our world. A world such as this, where all people, no matter their gender expression, can access society equally, would not require the trans person to change, it would require the world to catch up to the needs of the trans individual.