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Utopia's Extinction: the Anthropogenic Landscapes of Ursula K. Le Guin

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Abstract | In the Anthropocene epoch, the utopian prospect which has structured civilizational development throughout recorded history is extinguished almost entirely. Our anthropocentric fantasies of dominion over the natural world have proven harmful not only to the biosphere we inhabit, but to the continued existence of our own species. Instead, new conceptualizations which foreground the role of humanity within its environment must take precedence. Intricate portrayals of humanity's interdependence within its planetary environment—and illustrations of the damage that our daily lives inflict upon the natural world—have long been apparent in the Science Fiction genre. By emphasising the importance of fostering and recognizing our species' symbiotic relationship with its natural world through practices of daily life, the Anthropogenic landscapes of Ursula K. Le Guin's Science Fiction texts exert a posthuman vision which refutes anthropocentric ideologies, and decenters the notion of *progress* as an eschatology. Accordingly, this article closely analyses three texts of Le Guin's *Hainish Cycle* which particularly exemplify her Anthropogenic objective; *The Word for World is Forest* (1972); *Planet of Exile* (1966); and *City of Illusions*

(1967). These texts extrapolate the Anthropocene epoch into a cosmic paradigm, and so demonstrate the extinction of utopian potential it personifies vividly.

Keywords | Anthropocene; Science Fiction; Le Guin; Posthumanism.



Resumo | No Antropocénico, a perspectiva utópica que estruturou o desenvolvimento civilizacional ao longo da história registrada extingue-se quase por completo. As nossas fantasias antropocénicas de domínio sobre o mundo natural provaram ser prejudiciais não apenas para a biosfera que habitamos, mas também para a existência contínua da nossa própria espécie. Ao invés, novas conceptualizações, que dão a conhecer o papel importante da humanidade no seu ambiente, devem ter precedência. Retratações detalhadas da interdependência da humanidade no seu ambiente planetário - e ilustrações dos danos que o nosso quotidiano inflige ao mundo natural - há muito que são visíveis no género da Ficção Científica. Ao enfatizar a importância de fomentar e reconhecer a relação simbiótica da nossa espécie com o seu mundo natural através de práticas da vida quotidiana, as paisagens Antropocénicas dos textos de Ficção Científica de Ursula K. Le Guin exercem uma visão pós-humanista que refuta as ideologias antropocénicas, e distanciam a noção de *progresso* como uma escatologia. Consequentemente, este artigo analisa de perto três textos do *Hainish Cycle* de Le Guin que exemplificam particularmente o seu objetivo Antropocénico; *The Word for World is Forest* (1972); *Planet of Exile* (1966); e *City of Illusions* (1967). Estes textos extrapolam o Antropocénico para um paradigma cósmico, demonstrando assim a extinção do potencial utópico que vividamente personifica.

Palavras-chave | Antropocénico; Ficção Científica; Le Guin; Pós-Humanismo.



1. Introduction

Francis Fukuyama's infamous utopian declaration of "the end of history" (133) has never appeared more mistaken than in the context of the devastating, globalized impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. For Fukuyama, the global trend towards a "universal and homogeneous state" (204) of economic development and political hegemony in contemporaneity would preclude the realisation of any "new, higher order" (136) than capitalist democracies, and hence, human sociocultural development was consummate. Patently, however, Fukuyama's treatise entirely failed to recognise the interconnectedness of our species in its planetary environment, rendering his utopian assertions entirely void. Rather, contemporary human existence coheres about

our embeddedness in earth systems; as the unprecedented interruption of the global economy throughout 2020 by a microscopic virus has forcefully demonstrated, we are in no manner distinct actors from our planetary environment. In this sense, the pandemic has reaffirmed the appropriateness of the geological term Anthropocene as a means of describing the unprecedented epoch we inhabit in history; the phrase not only stresses that humanity “has become a geological force capable of affecting all life on this planet” (Braidotti 5), but also emphasises our species’ ephemerality in geological terms.

As this suggests, the advent of the Anthropocene is anathema to the two inmost fundamentals of utopian discourses—their eschatological conjecture of linear sociocultural *progress*, and their anthropocentric basis. In the Anthropocene epoch, “most human societies have increasingly adopted daily habits of living that are leading to a point of non-return in ecological and sustainable terms” (Ferrando 104), and so, our daily lives are quite literally facilitating the extinction of the utopian ideal. Consequently, the correlate term Anthroposcenic has become a critical locus “for the humanities and social sciences to play a more active role in shaping the climate change debate” (Matless 118). As a concept, the Anthroposcenic is any form of narrative which “foregrounds the way in which landscape becomes emblematic of environmental transformation” (Matless 118), and Anthroposcenic narratives consequently demarcate the extinction of utopian possibility in visceral terms, as a result of our exploitation of Earth’s environment. Hence, the Anthroposcenic demonstrates, in subjective rather than objective terms, the impact of its eponymous geological epoch on our lived realities, and broadens the scope of Anthropocene enquiry beyond exclusively scientific discourses. Crucially, the term is applicable to both fictional and corporeal landscapes, as Anthroposcenic narratives intentionally “act as a meeting point for imaginative and material worlds, and [...] signal their interconnections” (Matless 118). As this article will shortly proceed to demonstrate, the Anthroposcenic landscapes of Ursula K. Le Guin’s Science Fiction¹ work to vicariously demonstrate the interconnectedness of the Anthropocene epoch and daily human life.

Since the utopian truisms of progress and anthropocentrism have not only engendered, but also been decentred *by*, the Anthropocene epoch, there is an urgent

¹ Hereafter, SF.

need for our species to adopt alternative philosophical frameworks which are non-anthropocentric and non-teleological. In this vein, the discourse of Critical Posthumanism, which “focuses on decentering the human” (Ferrando 22), provides a suitable framework with which to analyse Le Guin’s Anthroposcenic landscapes. As Francesca Ferrando stresses, from a posthumanist perspective, “the Anthropocene marks the extent of the impact of human activities on a planetary level, and thus stresses the urgency for humans to become aware of pertaining to an ecosystem which, when damaged, negatively affects the human condition as well” (Ferrando 22). Correspondingly, the Le Guin texts discussed within this article render an Anthroposcenic vision of the posthuman future through estranged representations of mundanity, and provide a cautionary reflection upon how our everyday lives in the present delimit the future of our species.

By emending and rejecting many of the established tropes of Golden Age SF, Le Guin’s *Hainish Cycle* (1964 - 2000) redefined the assumptions of the future history motif, and became an instrumental proponent of New Wave SF. As George Edgar Slusser emphasises, “Le Guin’s ‘future history’ differs greatly from the Heinleinian variety, where each episode is a decisive step in man’s conquest of the universe. Here both man and technology are defeated” (10-11). Patently, Le Guin rejects the eschatological and anthropocentric tropes which had until that point been a staple of the SF genre, repudiating naïve utopian ideals in favour of an increased emphasis on subjectivity. Significantly, this dialectical departure is manifested in the *Hainish Cycle* via Le Guin’s prominent depiction of the primacy of the everyday within a multiplicitous array of posthuman societies. Nevertheless, Le Guin scholarship has historically neglected to engage at length with the conspicuously mundane qualities of her SF texts, despite there having been various calls for critics to do so. In 1979, James Warren Bittner proposed that Le Guin criticism “should concentrate on *relationships* between the so-called ‘zero world’ we operate in from day to day, and the ‘other’ worlds” (40) which comprise the overt Science Fictional² fundament of her series, and likewise, in 1981, John Fekete proposed that scholars consider how Le Guin’s SF figures “the reconstitution of everyday life” (97). This article endeavours to at least

² Hereafter, SFnal.

partially redress this scholarly deficit, by demonstrating the vital contribution of her texts' mundane and repetitive qualities to Le Guin's Anthroposcentic objective.

In the *Hainish Cycle*, our posthuman descendants persist only by virtue of the patronage of the Hainish species, whose spaceflight technologies alone have allowed Terrans to "leave our ruined world" (*The Dispossessed* 889). The series' post-apocalyptic Earth emblematises Le Guin's redress to the utopian and anthropocentric tendencies of Golden Age future histories, standing as a prominent archetype of the Anthroposcentic vistas that Le Guin evokes on numerous other worlds within the series' galaxy. Neither is Earth important; "the Terran Colony was an experiment" (*The Left Hand of Darkness* 453) of the Ancient Hainish, one dataset among dozens throughout the galaxy. As in the *Doctor Who* serial "The Dæmons" (1971), Terrans in the *Hainish Cycle* have been "just another laboratory rat" ("The Dæmons" n.pg.), manipulated unwittingly throughout the course of our recorded history by a more developed species.

Additionally, the narratives of the series are set within the ninety-third Hainish Cycle, suggesting that Hainish civilisation is explicitly recursive, encompassing "a history of three million years" (*The Telling* 598). Because Le Guin does not explicate the basis of these Cycles, readers must envisage the overarching SFnal history of the Hainish precisely by comprehending that they cannot cognitively grasp it. Hence, the role of Terrans is once more decentered, this time vicariously, through readers' frustrated perspective of the series' fragmentary plot. Even at its textual surface, the *Hainish Cycle* refutes the utopian telos common to its SFnal precursors, subverts humanistic ideologies of linear *progress*, and radically destabilises the term *Anthropos*. In tandem, the local mundane components which pervade of each text of the series compound these overarching posthuman moves at the narrative level.

Ultimately, the series' plot results from the Ancient Hainish having altered the humanoid species spread across the galaxy's "chromosomes [...] a million years ago" ("The Matter of Seggri" 255), for purportedly scientific purposes, before abandoning them entirely. As Sandra J. Lindow remarks, their negligent attitude towards their dataset is a "common aspect of the supposedly 'objective' scientific mindset" (Lindow 8) and, damningly, the majority of the genetic alterations which the Ancient Hainish have perpetrated have proved disagreeable to the undeveloped populations affected. Their separation from the technologies of their ancestors ensures that the protagonists of the series are rarely space-faring übermenschen in the utopian mould, but instead,

are typically modest natives, who are absorbed entirely with the minutiae of their everyday existences, and can scarcely comprehend the wider galaxy. Therefore, whilst the cultural differences engendered by genetic engineering are the prime SFnal quality of the series, the prominence of this aspect of the *Hainish Cycle* in itself disputes the purported objectivity of scientific enquiry. Hence, by consistently placing narrative focus upon representations of subjective experience throughout the series, rather than the genetic technologies used to produce those subjectivities, the schema of Le Guin's series literalises her New Wave move from technological, to environmental and sociological concerns.

Additionally, the unification strategies of the Ekumen—the contemporary Hainish organisation attempting to reunite the disparate peoples of the galaxy throughout the series—epitomise the perspective advanced by Clive Hamilton that “humankind became a unified entity—the *anthropos*—for the first time only in the second half of the twentieth century” (49) as a result of globalization, and hence, instigated the Anthropocene. Throughout the series, the Ekumen promulgate the same capitalist ideologies which have licensed humanity's turn away from largely circular, sustainable, practices of everyday life, and towards linear ideologies of *progress* and consumerist lifestyle paradigms. The proliferation of the Ekumenical age, in this light, becomes an extended textual metaphor for “the ouroboros of capitalism” (Hay 1), which is one of the prime causes of the Anthropocene. Accordingly, it transpires that the Ekumen's ostensibly utopian endeavours generate only Anthroposcenic outcomes in praxis.

This article now proceeds to closely analyse three texts of the *Hainish Cycle* which particularly exemplify Le Guin's Anthroposcenic objective within the series in micro; *The Word for World is Forest* (1972); *Planet of Exile* (1966); and *City of Illusions* (1967). In common, a close, sustained focus on the changeability of their fictional landscapes marks these three texts as Anthroposcenic. Within the narrative scope of *The Word for World is Forest* and *Planet of Exile* we witness the onset of momentous changes in their planetary landscapes, whereas *City of Exile* instead interpellates its readers to extrapolate the divergence of its deserted Earth from the milieu of their familiar planetary home. Accordingly, these three Anthroposcenic texts not only comprise potent exemplars of the value of subjective reflections within Anthropocene discourses, but additionally, they vicariously underscore the manner in

which the epoch will further transform our everyday lives, those of our descendants, and that of the vast array of non-human life across the globe.

2. *The Word for World is Forest*

The Anthroposcenic panorama of *The Word for World is Forest* centres upon the novella's didactic critique of colonialism. At the outset of the novella, the Terran military has annexed the densely-forested planet Athshe, enslaved its native population, and is now proceeding to implement extensive deforestation practices which will decimate the flora of the planet in a matter of years. Yet, in the context of Earth's recursive history of colonial and ecological atrocities, the planet Athshe might just as easily be "Idaho in 1950 [...] Kentucky in 1830 [...] Gaul in 50" BCE (*Forest* 8).³ Hence, Le Guin implies that Terrans will perpetrate almost identical genocides and ecocides on every planet they come to inhabit, and that Athshe is merely a novel territory for their enduring capitalist enterprises to exploit. The Terrans who have annexed Athshe justify their presence, the ecological devastation they wreak, and their violent subjugation of the natives with the rationale that it has "been done once before" (*Forest* 7), when the Ancient Hainish colonised the planet. By invoking historical atrocities as a justification, they fruitlessly attempt to rationalize the xenophobic violence and ecocide they perpetrate, vicariously reminding readers that the Anthroposcenic vistas perpetrated by their own societies are by no means unique in the annals of human history; they are the enduring legacy of anthropocentric and expansionist dogmas.

The military's incentive for invading Athshe is to collect wood which can be formed into "clean sawn planks, more prized on Earth than gold" (*Forest* 7), since Earth's demand for wood far outstrips the volume that its own deforested world can provide. Clearly, after destroying the forests of their own planet, Terrans have turned outward to find more of that lucrative material which is a "necessary luxury" (*Forest* 7) component of their daily existences. Thus, they reproduce the Anthroposcenic milieu of their home planet on each world they conquer. Their ignorant "hypothesis of the unlimited resources of nature" (Ferrando 174) is symptomatic of the anthropocentric ideologies which license the environmental devastation of our planet for commercial

³ Given the novella's contemporary context, Le Guin's implication was that "Vietnam in 1972" should be appended to this list.

gain in contemporaneity. Since the posthumans living back on Earth only see the end-products of these ecocidal atrocities, the novella allegorises the cognitive lacuna in our own world which lies between the violence of the Anthropocene and the tranquil everyday facade of our entirely causal consumerist behaviours. Maïke Weißpflug argues that in order to comprehend the Anthropocene, “narratives have to be told, recent and old narratives about human-environment relations” (26), which uncover the complexities of how closely our daily lives are implicated in the destruction of our planetary environment. In *The Word for World is Forest*, Le Guin, achieves that same anti-utopian goal on a galactic scale, by depicting the future of human-environmental relations via SFnal means.

Pointedly, the everyday lives of Athshean posthumans are radically different to those of Terrans. They dream throughout the day and night “ten to fourteen times in the diurnal cycle”, whilst awake and asleep, and dreaming is therefore a prominent, typified, aspect of their quotidian routines, conditioning “their life both day and night” (*Forest* 25, 62). Furthermore, via their understanding of violence as an “evil dream that must be understood lest it be repeated” (*Forest* 74), Athsheans comprehend the cyclicity of exploitative actions far more readily than Terrans do. Because their people have developed no high technologies, and are so embedded within their natural world as to rely on birds to provide their “garbage service”, they comprised “a static, stable, uniform society. [...] Perfectly integrated, and wholly unprogressive [...] a climax state” (*Forest* 28, 39) prior to the Terran exploitation of their world. Athsheans therefore provide an exemplar of symbiotic living, and a redress to the eschatological and anthropocentric ideologies of Terrans and the Ekumen themselves. As Lindow argues, the *Hainish Cycle* suggests that “[l]iving simply in community is far more important than cell phones and computers” (20), and thus, Le Guin implies that diffuse cultural agency and ecological modes of living are superior ideals to capitalist orthodoxies of *progress*.

As here, Le Guin’s Anthropocenic milieux comprise estranging “extrapolations of what the persistence of money and commodification holds in store for us” (Jameson 230), displacing our contemporary climate anxieties into the far future, whilst simultaneously bringing them to bear upon our own Anthropocene epoch figuratively, via their conspicuously mundane components. Hence, Le Guin’s texts comprise a form of anti-utopianism characterised not by “the standard dystopian lust

for power” (Jameson 162), but by their plausibly mundane rhetorical devices, which imply the proximity of ecological catastrophe to our own temporality. Rather than the dystopian or unknown, they posit the familiar as their central existential threat, and therefore, they figure the changing environment of our own world as an environ rapidly threatening to become inimical to human existence. Although “anxiety about extinction was common in the nuclear era, the posthuman condition, of the anthropocene [sic], extends the death horizon to most species” (Braidotti 111), and as such, Le Guin’s *Anthroposcenes* illustrate the proximity of utopia’s extinction in cosmic, yet strikingly allegorical, terms. *Planet of Exile*, meanwhile, emphasises the Anthroposcenic interruption which our species poses to established environmental paradigms.

3. *Planet of Exile*

In *Planet of Exile* the primacy of the environmental aspects of biological existence are further emphasised, via the explicit enclosure of the novel’s native protagonists within the recursive planetary cycles of the planet Alterra, each of whose Seasons spans sixteen Terran years. At the outset of the novel, the Alterran native Rolery is initially unconcerned at seeing a herald carrying news of “storm, disaster, winter, war” (*Exile* 119) to her people. Because each Year on Alterra is equivalent to sixty-five Terran years, her people necessarily have “short memories” (*Exile* 125) in respect of the seasonal occurrences of their planet. Likewise, after she narrowly survives a high spring tide on a stretch of the coast, Rolery cannot “stop shaking” (*Exile* 124) at first, but within a minute, is entirely focused upon “put[ting] her hair straight” (*Exile* 125). As her swift cognitive shift from existential to quotidian matters emphasises, she cannot comprehend the tidal wave which almost ended her life, as it lies entirely outside her cognitive frame of reference. In contrast, Wold, her Grandfather, is able to recall “a man who came running from the north with the side of his face burnt and bloody, crying, [...] that hoarse shout ring[ing] across his lifetime” (*Exile* 131). Unlike Rolery, he perceives the repetition of events from more than half a century before, as the onset of another sixteen years of Winter begins on Alterra.

Wold recognises the consummate extent to which the cyclical pattern of Alterra’s vastly protracted seasons habituates Tevarans to recursive developmental paradigms, generation after generation, as he has seen “men swarming to build up the

houses and walls of the Winter City with the old stones on the old foundations” (*Exile* 131) once before. Likewise, as Rolery explains to the farborn Jakob Agat:

‘I was born out of season, in the Summer Fallow,’ she said. ‘It does happen with us, but very rarely; and you see — when Winter’s over I’ll be too old to bear a Spring child. I’ll never have a son. Some old man will take me for a fifth wife one of these days, but the Winter Fallow has begun, and come Spring I’ll be old... So I will die barren. It’s better for a woman not to be born at all than to be born out of season as I was...’ (*Exile* 154-155)

Conspicuously, the iterative cycles of their planet entirely condition the tropisms and consciousness of Alterrans. As members of their civilisation have to contend with more than five “thousand nights of Winter, five thousand days of it” (*Exile* 222) over one unbroken stretch of their life, the omnipotence of their natural world is inescapable.⁴ As the journeys of “the hunters in Winter, the forays in Spring, the great wanderings of the long days of Summer” suggest (*Exile* 149), their societies must be conditioned by the principle of deep consonance with their natural world in order to endure. Hence, although Wold reminisces about “a lost brightness, Summer’s irrecoverable warmth” (*Exile* 149), he is humbly content with his mortality, since he recognises that his role within Alterra’s planetary cycle is naturally drawing to a close. Accordingly, he looks “with great benevolence on each day and on all younger men”, since the knowledge that he is “very far along the way to death” (*Exile* 186) provides assurance of continuity with the lives of his ancestors and descendents.

Although the iterative cycles of life on Alterra have remained stable for generations, it transpires, in a decidedly Anthroposcenic development, that Wold’s complacent attitude towards the natural cycles of the planet has now become outdated, as a result of the evolving behaviours of another of its civilizations. No longer content to merely subsist in wilderness spaces, the nomadic “Gaal are coming [north] all at once” (*Exile* 134) this Year, having adopted an expansionist ideology and become intent on conquering the settled populations they had passed by peacefully in the past. On a planet defined by protracted seasons, and a corresponding resource scarcity, the Gaal having “united all their tribes and made an army of them” (*Exile* 135) necessarily leads

⁴ This specific ecological aspect of the novel is conspicuously similar to numerous later SF&F works; in particular, Brian W. Aldiss’s *Helliconia* trilogy (1982-1985) and George R. R. Martin’s perennially incomplete series *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1991-).

to all Tevaran civilisations also becoming desynchronized from the planet's annual cycles of palimpsestuous repetition. Although the stark cyclical landscape of their planet remains stable, its connotations have now evolved drastically. Although the Askatevar now inhabit "a new time" (*Exile* 135), this Anthroposcenic development is unfathomable to their people, who are so wholly conditioned by the natural cycles of their planet that they anticipate cyclicity in all aspects of life. *Planet of Exile* therefore expresses the extinction of utopian possibility in allegorical terms. Just as the historical wisdom which Wold has accumulated over the decades of his life is delegitimized within the novel's narrative, our own habitual adherence to established lifestyle practices in the Anthropocene harshly delimits the potential of our species realizing Utopia, jeopardising—as Agat puts it—"the life of mankind on this world" (*Exile* 138).

As such, the Anthroposcenic paradigm shift on Alterra transforms Tevaran cultures irrevocably. As no individual on Alterra "remembers the Year before last" (*Exile* 148), the exclusively oral history of the Askatevar is profoundly recursive. Accordingly, the nucleus of their society is the ritual of Stone-Pounding, in which they have historically used rocks to produce a "single ceaseless rhythm, the concord, the hard heartbeat [...] pounding on, and on, and on" (*Exile* 145). Through its prominent repetitive and cyclical aspects, this ceremony has fostered awareness of continuity between the Askatevar, their ancestors, and the planetary landscapes which condition their existence. Yet, although the necessity of this practice of "completing the circle" (*Exile* 144) is deeply ingrained in their history and culture, the tradition has now become "meaningless, humiliating" (*Exile* 165); their co-dependent interrelation with the landscapes of their planet has been impaired. As such, "the pounding of stones" sounds like nothing but "clatter and conflict" at this point (*Exile* 165); the natural cycles which the ritual emulates have been perverted, effecting a conspicuous Anthroposcenic interruption within the otherwise consistent rhythm of the history of their civilisation.

In marked contrast, the quotidian lives of the neighbouring farborn people have become ever more closely interrelated within Alterra's iterative cycles since that colony's space-faring ancestors were stranded on the planet generations earlier. Historically, they had not even been able to digest Alterran foodstuffs without taking "periodic doses of certain enzymoids" (*Exile* 214), and so the fundamental biological process of nourishment had been a protracted chore for them for more than a century. In Rolery's time, however, a number of the farborn have recently seen no ill effects,

despite having not “taken an enzymoid shot or pill for two or three moonphases” (*Exile* 215), implying that their species’ digestive systems are gradually adapting to the local nutrients. Less fortuitously, their birth rate has steeply declined, and their settlement is now populated with “houses that ha[ve] been deserted” (*Exile* 218) for a generation. Likewise, whilst they had historically been immune to the pathogens of Alterra, there are now recorded instances of farborn individuals dying a “foul death” (*Exile* 211) from infection.⁵ Their bodies, it appears, are naturally adapting to the material conditions of the Alterran lifeworld “little by little” (*Exile* 155), and their biological processes are rapidly becoming subject to the planet’s protracted natural cycles. Hence, the farborn are becoming Alterrans *de jure*, but only ephemerally, as the process of acclimatisation to their new environment is literally precipitating the extinction of their people.

Likewise, despite their preservation of documents of their ancestors’ culture, the farborn are acutely aware that “from day to day and Year to Year a little knowledge would always be lost, supplanted by some more immediately useful bit of information concerning daily existence here and now” (*Exile* 143). As they “were written for men who knew more than” they do about scientific and technological disciplines (*Exile* 153), the books of the farborn are no longer anywhere near as relevant to their current situation as subjective knowledge of everyday life on Alterra is. Consequently, their ancestors’ rarefied knowledge is displaced by their own daily interactions with the Alterran environment, causing the gradual extinction of the former variety of knowledge in a measured entropic trend. The most efficient weapons that Alterrans have developed are “lances — long, crude, unfinished” (*Exile* 192), and the farborn are haunted by the prospect of becoming such “stupid barbarians” (*Exile* 216) as the natives, via their regression to such a low technological paradigm.⁶ Their rapidly declining birth rate, however, renders such concerns extraneous. As the farborn Pasfal asserts, their people will continue to die off “*little by little, one by one*” (*Exile* 163), until their group is quite literally extinct, along with the last vestiges of SFnal knowledge on Alterra.

⁵ This symptom of their adaptation to Alterra poignantly contrasts the narrative of Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Aurora*, wherein a mission of intergenerational interstellar colonists is forced to return from their colony planet immediately, due to their lack of immune response to an alien pathogen that they encounter there.

⁶ The trope of reversion to barbarism in an isolated colony is echoed in the 1977 *Doctor Who* serial “The Face of Evil”.

For Frederic Jameson, “the genuinely anti-utopian is always driven by the passionate desire to disprove Utopia” (Jameson 381). Correspondingly, Le Guin’s Anthroposcenic landscapes emblemise the dwindling prospect of utopian human society, and redirect the prospective gaze of the SF genre towards the comprehension of our deep interdependence with our planetary environment. Hence, although the increasingly expansionist regime of the Gaal is no fault of the Askatevar, it necessitates a profound transformation of their society nonetheless. As the farborn are simultaneously forced to recognise, the interconnections between the inhabitants of Alterra and the landscapes they inhabit are the principal condition of their existences. *Planet of Exile* thus stages an Anthroposcenic humbling of its posthuman civilisations in the face of the potency of their natural world. By illustrating the extinction of the posthuman future, Le Guin delineates the extinction of utopian possibility in the Anthropocene.

4. *City of Illusions*

City of Illusions, meanwhile, is set on a largely-deserted Earth, which has become rewilded over millennia by natural means, as a result of the enslavement of its vastly-reduced posthuman population by the alien Shing. Through this forsaken landscape, Le Guin envisages the cessation of *Anthropos* as a geological force, its scattered remnants reduced to pastoral existence upon a desolate planet which is gradually returning to a state of equilibrium in their absence. Only alien intervention, it appears, has halted the intensification of the Anthropocene, at the cost of the autonomy of Earth’s posthuman population.

When Falk, the novel’s central protagonist, is first introduced, his most significant concern is learning “not to wet the bed” (*Illusions* 229); although he was in fact an Alterran emissary to Earth named Ramarren, the memories of his former life on Alterra have been razed by the Shing, and his mind has become a *tabula rasa*. As Falk, he must not only relearn even the simplest tenets of civilised life, but additionally, must become acclimatised to the monotonous conditions of his new life on Earth. Falk-Ramarren’s reduction in stature parallels the situation of the Earth’s posthumans, whom the Shing have likewise enslaved psychologically, by exacerbating the mundane aspects of their lifeworlds. Like the ancestors of the Terrans he meets, Falk-Ramarren

once travelled casually between planets, but now “dare not go a hundred miles from home” (*Illusions* 238).

Equally, Terran foodstuffs are “sound but monotonous”, and their lives are defined by “frugality” to the extent that they cannot imagine how existence could be anything other than entirely dreary and changeless (*Illusions* 235). Their private lives are also “rigidly scheduled by rite, custom, and tabu” (*Illusions* 275), and thus, ritualistic behaviours condition their consciousness far more effectively than overt enslavement by the Shing ever could. One community of Terran posthumans, for instance, is perpetually absorbed in “sailing, swimming, and sex” (*Illusions* 377); the sibilance here emphasising the unmitigated similitude which characterises their decadent and lackadaisical way of life.

Furthermore, the Shing permit Terrans to operate “various automatic tools or devices used in house-cleaning, cooking, washing” (*Illusions* 234), but prohibit all other forms of advanced technology. Hence, the appliances in their homesteads are the most developed technologies available to the posthumans of Earth, and accordingly, domestic considerations are the most novel aspects of their lives. As the Shing readily employ “tiny impact-missiles programmed to home in on anything that contained a fusion element” (*Illusions* 273), Terrans are unable to develop any technology which might facilitate their escape from this monotonous subjugation. Via the entrainment of posthuman consciousness exclusively to the domestic sphere, the Shing need do “nothing themselves” (*Illusions* 367) to control the populace of Earth. Indeed, their rule cannot be considered anything but monotonous even in respect of their methods of discipline; they consequently “seem rather pitiful, lost on a world that is not their own and yet ruling it, without any joy in their conquest” (Bucknall 29).

As the disused tarmac highways covered by “pine and hemlock” (p. 245) which now delineate the borders between communities of Terrans make apparent, the end of human history has truly arrived, as *Anthropos* is no longer a geological force in any sense. As such, the changelessness of their lives seems nothing atypical or sinister to Terrans, and they readily acknowledge their dethronement as, ever since the “stars had been gained, and lost again [...] the years went on, so many years that the forest of archaic times, destroyed utterly during the era when men had made and kept their history, had grown up again” (*Illusions* 233). When Falk-Ramarren ventures away from the Terran community which has sheltered him for six years, he experiences anew the

necessity of living “by hunting [...] that slowed his daily pace”, and the nightly necessity of “build[ing] up a shelter of boughs and bark against the rain; and sleep; and next day go[ing] on” (*Illusions* 257). As he ventures through the wilderness in search of his lost identity, he must first learn to comprehend his embeddedness in the alien world which surrounds him over the course of “the next day, and the next” (*Illusions* 271), via a veritable torrent of repetitive perambulation.

Thus, even in the process of attempting to break free from the monotony of his Terran existence, he is drawn even more comprehensively within the lived realities of Earthly life, as the text’s emphasis upon the rigorous verisimilitude of his daily life at this point illustrates. Later in the novel, he must cross “the Great Plains on foot — which is soon said, but was not soon or easily done” (*Illusions* 288), a line synecdochic of Le Guin’s Anthroposcentic object more broadly. As here, Le Guin’s estranging survey of alien environmental modes of relation encompasses a pronounced stylistic divergence from the teleological utopian tropes common to earlier SF texts. Instead, by depicting alternate ecological frames of reference in rigorous detail, she foregrounds the oft-disregarded mundane events and phenomena which underpin reality, and resituates the SF genre’s abortive utopian gaze towards the prospect of sustainable existence enacted through everyday life.

After being recaptured by the Shing, Falk-Ramarren realises that his best defence against their plan to “raze [his] mind once” again is to reappropriate the memories of existence on Earth which he has assimilated over the past six years (*Illusions* 344). As he recognises, the experiences he has gained phenomenologically as Falk are both the only means by which he can prove the nefariousness of the Shing, and his sole chance of surviving the impending mind razing. Only through the adroit exploitation of his mundane, embodied experiences can he achieve either objective. He consequently decides to fight in the name of “the house in the forest, the sunlight in the Clearing” (*Illusions* 346) of Earth, and his resistance through the sphere of these lived realities proves decisive. As such, when he returns to consciousness after the attempted mind wipe, Ramarren is able to recall “the sunlight breaking through the dark of an old forest”, and realises that the skin of his hands is “toughened and weathered as if he had been out in the open for a long time” (*Illusions* 353).

These embodied artefacts from his life as Falk trigger the realisation that his mind has been razed, allow him to recover his Falk persona, and ultimately, effect his

manipulation of the novel's eucatastrophe. Hence, at the very climax of *City of Illusions*, the embodied experiences of his agrarian life on Earth are reinscribed with significance, and become the transcendent tools with which he evades the mental dominion of the Shing. As the conclusion of the novel suggests, environmentalism is the "issue that is immanent to all others, in so far as the earth is our middle and common ground" (Braidotti 81), and thus, it is only by reconnecting with the Earth first-hand that Falk-Ramarren is able to achieve self-actualization. Even on the forsaken Earth of the novel, his existence remains entirely contingent upon his biological interrelation with the natural world he inhabits. As readers, we are pressed to query the proximity of the novel's Earth against the Anthroposcenic horizons conditioned by our own everyday lives.

5. Conclusion

By emphasising the importance of fostering and recognizing our species' symbiotic relationship with the natural world through the practices of daily life, the texts of the *Hainish Cycle* exert an Anthroposcenic vision which refutes anthropocentric ideologies, and decenters the role of technological *progress* as an eschatology within the SF genre. By allegorically demonstrating the close interconnectedness of our daily lives with the advent of Anthroposcenic phenomena, Le Guin vividly demonstrates the comprehensive extent to which the prospect of utopia has been problematised in contemporaneity by the evolving context of the Anthropocene. As the Anthroposcenic turn of her *Hainish Cycle* emphasises, if they are at present not yet quite extinguished altogether, the last vestiges of utopian possibility—which have sparked deep within human thought for millennia—teeter on the edge of extinction. Aptly, however, the enduring relevance of Le Guin's Anthroposcenic texts to the SF genre is affirmed by the rise to prominence of a myriad of cli-fi texts over the last two decades—a development which Le Guin's works both anticipated, and acted as a vital precursor to.



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