

CIRCULATING OUR IMAGINARY EXTINCTION

Charlie Gleek

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Imagining The End

Imagination, extinction, and science fiction literature all coalesce in the later stages of Fredric Jameson's 2003 essay "Future City." In a paragraph invoking the seminal science fiction writers Philip K. Dick and Ursula Le Guin, Jameson reveals his often referenced, but not always accurately employed adage that, "Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world." (2003, 76) This enigmatic 'someone' is not Jameson, yet for all intents and purposes, the witticism has become widely attributed to him. More importantly, Jameson's suggestion that the representation of imaginary extinction through science fiction literature is a pervasive, distributed, and likely an effective ally in the myriad of approaches it will take to expose capitalism's contradictions is an important consideration for analyzing speculative literature. For what better way to free ourselves of alienation, albeit with no small sense of irony, than by working to build solidarity in imagining the complete and total extinction of the Earth. Readers can realize Jameson's perspective in the introduction to Douglas Adams' science fiction novella *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*:

"This planet has- or rather had- a problem, which was this: most of the people living on it were unhappy pretty much of the time. Many solutions were suggested for this problem, but most of these were largely concerned with the movements of small green pieces of paper, which is odd because on the whole it wasn't the small green pieces of paper that were unhappy. And so the problem remained; lots of people were mean, and most of them were miserable, even the ones with digital watches. Many were increasingly of the opinion that they'd all made a big mistake in coming down from the trees in the first place. And some said that even the trees had been a bad move, and that no one should ever have left the oceans." (Adams 1979, 1).

Here, Adams' science fiction classic points the reader to the conjunction of capitalism's crisis of accumulation, the alienation of labor, and the limits of path-dependent socioeconomic

development, along with foreshadowing a solution to capitalism's inherent problems through the phrase “or rather had.” For when “a girl sitting on her own in a small cafe in Rickmansworth suddenly realized what it was that had been going wrong all this time, and she finally knew how the world could be made a good and happy place...a terrible, stupid catastrophe occurred, and the idea was lost forever.” (Adams, 2) Readers of this story, and Adams’ four subsequent novels in the “Hitchhiker's Trilogy” will know that the “stupid catastrophe” is the destruction of the Earth and nearly all of the species who inhabit the planet. More sophisticated readers will acknowledge, and perhaps celebrate that each book in Adams’ series routinely reflects infinity knot logics and narrative structures that illuminate various and repeated forms of extinction to imagine a truly universal system of profit-taking, galactic greed, and solar-systemic capitalism. In so doing, readers of science fiction can use this extinction-capitalist dynamic to reimagine current material and social conditions which neither perpetuate capitalist logics nor end games of life as we know it on this planet. As Le Guin contends, “science fiction...extrapolate(s) imaginatively from current trends and events to a near-future that's half prediction, half satire.” (2009) In other words, the future catastrophes, disasters, and extinctions are rooted in contemporary affairs, and thus the allegorical lessons of science fiction require actions on the reader’s part in the present to avoid future calamities.

The following exposition is about how the reader encounters imaginary extinction, and the related concept of deforestation, in Ursula Le Guin’s 1972 Hugo Award winning novella, *The Word for World is Forest*. My analysis points to how *The Word for World is Forest* can be read to reveal a representation of extinction, both on Earth as well as on the fictional planet New Tahiti. Separated into three distinct threads, my first analytical section draws on theoretical

perspectives from Ashley Dawson in his 2016 work *Extinction: A Radical History*. The first thread of my analysis points to how the reader can come to see Le Guin's representation of extinction on Earth and deforestation practices on New Tahiti as an imbrication of capitalism, colonization, deforestation, and extinction that works in concert with Dawson's argument about how extinction is an overt feature of the inherent contradictions of capitalism.

Just as books are not understood absent of the sociopolitical context in which they come to press, are read, and survive, so too are books not limited simply to the textual information on the pages between their glossy soft covers, attached together by perfect binding. Indeed, it is the various front covers of different editions of *The Word for World is Forest* that is also useful artifacts of visual rhetoric which contextualize the notion of extinction and deforestation for the reader. Drawing on Genette's conception of paratext as a "zone of transaction" for the reader (1983, 1), I suggest that the various art which graces the covers of different editions of *The Word for World is Forest* not only reflect the commercial interests of publishers, but these transactional zones are also cultural sites where the "struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged; it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle." (Hall 1998, 453) In other words, the visual front matter of *The Word for World is Forest* that changes across time, place, and language, may reflect a contest over the representational power of extinction and deforestation tropes in the supposedly "inconsequential spaces" of a book's cover. (McCoy 2006, 158) In so doing, my analysis from this second thread of this essay points to how incorporating the perspectives of visual rhetorical analysis and print culture richly inform the criticism of specific texts and literary genres.

The close reading of a singular work of science fiction alone is likely insufficient to sustain an argument about how imaginations of extinction circulate around the world. This is one of Amitav Ghosh's criticisms of, "a new genre of science fiction called 'climate fiction' or cli-fi...made up of mostly disaster stories set in the future." (Ghosh 2017, 72) For Ghosh, stories of ecological calamity set in the future obscure those which speak to the path dependence or interlocking effects of Anthropogenic carbon consumption or resource extraction, "and most significantly, the present" state of affairs our environmental conditions (Gosh, 72). While Ghosh strains to walk back this claim with the invocation of Anglo-American writers such as Atwood, Jenzen, and Kingsolver, his analysis of the breadth and depth of climate fiction, science fiction, or imaginary literature about extinction, to say nothing of the absence of nonfiction stories in *The Great Derangement*, is woefully underdeveloped. Aesthetically, Jameson offers the reader an example of the imagined shopping mall (2003, 79), contending that reading imaginative work tethers us to our present extinction because we can dually imagine and create constitutive outsides: be they *terra nullius*, a shopping mall, or an off-world. More to the point, Jameson disrupts Ghosh's claim by seeing the mode of imaginary extinction found in science fiction as "mobilizing a vision of the future in order to determine its return to a now historical present" (1993, 287) In material terms, Shelley Streeby's *Imagining the Future of Climate Change* directly confronts Ghosh's claim that science fiction locates its extinction stories in an inaccessible future: "In contrast, I argue in what follows that people of color and Indigenous people use science fiction and other speculative genres to remember the past and imagine futures that help us think critically about the present and connect climate change to social movements." (2018, 5) My third thread of this essay neither expands on Jameson's aesthetics, does not point to

the plethora of science or climate fiction which Ghosh ignores, nor to the analysis found in both Streeby's recent work or, for example, in the pages of Grace L. Dillon's *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*. Rather, it is the methods and models of Book History and Print Culture which inform my analysis of Le Guin's text. As Vesser (2003, ix) argues, "every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices;" a claim that requires that literary criticism locate specific texts in historical and cultural contexts. The third and final thread of my analysis puts Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest* in conversation with both Robert Darton's (1983) as well as Thomas Adams and Nicolas Barker's (1993) respective models of book history, focusing on the publishing, manufacturing, and distribution of *The Word for World is Forest*. Drawing on publicly available bibliographic information in *WorldCat* and data from the Google Books Ngram dataset, I speculate that the book history of *The Word for World is Forest* works against Gosh's claim that science fiction is not as well positioned as mainstream literary fiction to address anthropocentric environmental concerns. In contrast, the publication, manufacture, and distribution of *The Word for World is Forest* is part of a larger global wave of books published on science fiction, extinction, and deforestation; a wave that crosses linguistic boundaries in similar, but not identical, ways.

The eclectic, interwoven threads of my analysis require some contextualization for the reader. While not an exhaustive review, I aim to situate the varied, and sometimes seemingly perpendicular ways of knowing, information, and articulation of data that will emerge in the following pages. First and foremost, I modestly seek to follow Jameson's advice to "always historicise" (1982, 9); in line with my previous invocation of Vessers' claim about the historical and cultural contingencies of textual production and analysis. While there are a variety of ways

in which I could locate the historical and cultural situations which contextualize the publishing, manufacturing, distribution, reception, and survival of Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest*, much of my historicization of this text comes from thinking about this text from the perspective of quantitative literary analysis; for example Moretti's "Graphs, Maps, and Trees" (2003) as well as his most recent edited volume, *Canon/Archive*. (2017) Invoking Moretti's perspective about literary studies opens up the possibility of thinking about the charts and graphs¹ that follow not simply as a measurement or counting of textual information, but also acknowledging that the production and circulation of *The Word for World is Forest* exist in market, political, and social conditions; the text and its interpretation are not exogenous from cultural conjunctures. While I don't employ advanced quantitative measures in my tracing of the published editions of *The Word for World is Forest* across temporal, spatial, and linguistic boundaries, or robust measures of reliability in comparing variances in book production across these same domains, my analysis, and employment of relatively simple data visualizations grow outward from these ways of knowing and I feel that work in this area could be fruitful in some future analysis.

I am also conscious that rigid adherence to method or framework can reinforce particular ways of knowing, especially those which serve to prop up or are emblematic of, sources of structural power. Barbara Christian's reflection on her work is instructive to understanding how methodological flexibility can counter status-quo thinking and practice: "My 'method'...is not fixed but relates to what I read and to the historical context of the writers I read and to the many critical activities which I am engaged." (2007, 50) In complementary fashion, Gayatri

¹ All of the publicly available bibliographic data on *The Word for World is Forest* used in this analysis are available from "ti: The Word for World is Forest," *WorldCat*, last modified 23 April 2018, <https://www.worldcat.org/>. Data tables and graphics derived from the *WorldCat* data and used in this essay are available at: Charlie Gleek, "Circulating Our Imaginary Extinction Data," last modified 24 April 2018, <https://goo.gl/oeA27c>.

Chakravorty Spivak (2003) theorizes that the text a critic incorporates into an analysis are confederates, rather than clients, in pursuit of a line of inquiry. I draw on Christian's and Spivak's respective thinking not only as a student in an interdisciplinary Ph.D. program, but as a way of remaining critically self aware to deterministic or overly-rigid interpretations, methods, or epistemological premises which could foreclose or otherwise narrow my analysis of Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest* in a truncated, ahistorical context.

Extinction and Deforestation in *The Word for World is Forest*

Extinction-- the complete and permanent destruction of a species-- is a regular, but perhaps an underrepresented aspect of ecocritical and postcolonial literature and criticism. Greg Gerard uses the case of the dodo's extinction to bridge both nonfiction and fictional treatment of the bird's demise, highlighting that the challenge of "writing extinction involves not simply the problem of representing absence, but also the difficulty of narrating outgoing systemic crises within intrinsically individualizing forms such as the travelogue and the novel. (2012, 178)

Similarly, Dawson invokes Marx's haunting trope to argue that contemporary cultural formations are "spectacular representations of ecological catastrophe" while real and material examples of species extinction and the carry on effects to ecological systems are not fully understood" (2016, 16)

Extinction then presents a challenge for activist ecocritical cultural work in literary circles insofar that addressing the total loss of flora and fauna requires the circulation and reception documentary storytelling for those in positions of power to address immediate crises, or once extinction has occurred, relying on the history and allegory of now-decimated species to warn and engage people's imagination about the next animals, plants, or ecosystems under threat of disappearance. Species and ecological extinction is not only a "global attack on the commons,"

(Dawson, 12) inexorably intertwined with capitalism's commodification of the environment to sustain its growth," (Dawson, 14) and the "leading edge of contemporary capitalism contradictions." (Dawson, 13), The problem of representing and circulating extinction stories emerges as "extinction is both a material reality and a cultural discourse that shapes popular perceptions of the world, one that often legitimates inegalitarian social orders. (Dawson, 15) In other words, addressing the immediate concern of extinction means circulating stories that both avoid tacit acceptance of exploitive social systems such as capitalism and imperialism and critiquing these systems as inherent to the cause of our impending demise.

The global circulation of extinction and related deforestation themes in *The Word for World is Forest* may be doing exactly this sort of work Dawson advocates for through the sustained publication, manufacture, and distribution of the book itself. However, it's also necessary to highlight, rather than narrate in their entirety, examples from Le Guin's text that do the work of linking capitalism, imperialism, and extinction in a critical fashion. The story's narrator muses on Captain Don Davidson's purpose on New Tahiti, the off-world planet setting for *The Word for World is Forest*:

"For this world, New Tahiti, was literally made for men. Cleaned up and cleaned out, the dark forests cut down for open fields of grain, the primeval murk and savagery and ignorance wiped out, it would be a paradise, a real Eden. A better world than worn-out Earth." (Le Guin 11)

The reader encounters an extinction tethered to the practice of imperialism in several ways. First, imaginary extinction exists in the present and future tense as New Tahiti is "made for men," evoking the principal of *terra nullius* and the settler colonialism that sustained this practice. The histories of the peoples of Turtle Island (North America) or those who inhabit the Pacific continent which came to be known as Australia speak to how *terra nullius* was employed by

European colonists acquire territory from indigenous inhabitants who were deemed unfit or not human to manage this land.² This imperial drive then points to how the land is to be “cleaned-out” of both unnecessary forests and the indigenous peoples, depicted in the racialized code of “the primeval murk and savagery and ignorance.” Second, imaginary extinction exists in the past with the “worn-out Earth,” the consequence of an implied history of unsustainable extraction on the homeworld, and embodied in the “report from Dump Island of crop failures, massive erosion, a wipe out” which Davidson ponders at the beginning of the story. (Le Guin 9)

Dawson connects stories of hunting and poaching wild animals to the “broader tide of extinction, the sixth mass extinction Earth has witnessed.” (8) Le Guin anticipates this connection of hunting and imagined extinction as Davidson considers his colleague Kees’ plea to order the camp’s loggers to stop poaching the local red deer: “I could stop ‘em. But look, it’s the me I’m looking after; that’s my job, like you said. And it’s the men that count. Not the animals.” (Le Guin, 13) The reader sees the Anthropocentric hierarchy embedded in Davidson’s material practices, privileging human actions over all others, even if it means tacitly endorsing the illegal trophy collection of “eighteen pair of antlers in the back room of the Lounge” (Lee Guin, 12) from just the day before. Unrestrained deer hunting is explicitly connected to imagined extinction a few pages later as the narrator explains:

“They were great animals, all right. Davidson’s vivid memory recalled the first one he had seen, here on Smith Land, a big red shadow, two meters at the shoulder, a crown of narrow golden antlers, a fleet, brave beast, the finest game imaginable. Back on Earth, the were using robodeer even in the High Rockies and Himalaya Parks now, the real ones were about gone.” (Le Guin, 14)

² Locke’s discussion of “Indians” and territory is an instructive digression to consider on this topic, see: John Locke, “Of Property,” *Two Treatises of Government*, 285-302, edited by Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) as well as Ashley Dawson, *Extinction: A Radical History* (New York: OR Books, 2016), 47-48.

The reader likely follows the narrator's implicit connection between a history of unsustainable hunting and extinction on Earth and the potential for repeating the process on New Tahiti, once that Davidson either can't see or is willfully blind to accept. Moreover, the reader encounters an explicit connection between the ecological consequences of poaching, extinction, and the broader structural implications of capitalist practices in Kees' disagreement with Davidson over the loggers' poaching: "they don't need to exterminate a rare native species 'for recreation.' If you don't act, I must record a major infraction of Ecological Protocols in my report to Captain Gosse." (Le Guin, 13) The reader sees how extermination comes as a recreation activity of settler colonial laborers, employed in the felling of a planet's worth of wood on New Tahiti. This example, in turn, works to align with Dawson's claim that any rhetoric or policies that "result in a 'war on poachers' ...ignore the underlying structural causes that are driving habitat destruction and overharvesting of animals." (Dawson, 11) Moreover, Dawson argues that the slaughter of large mammals are part and parcel with humanity's historical development and expansion as a result of establishing hierarchical, exploitive systems of social orders. These manifest themselves in a variety of ways, from the spectacle of "lions, leopards, bears, elephants, rhinos, hippos and other animals...tortured and killed in public arenas like the (Roman) Colosseum" (Dawson, 33), the over hunting of beavers as a part of the expansive and commodified fur trade in North America (45), to the technologically-enabled, profit-driving whaling industry where 'although it was clearly in the industry's interest to limit the accelerating predation, the competitive dynamic of industrial capitalism made...conservation impossible.'" (54)

Dawson connects the extinction of humans, not just as a species, but more often and more prominently to groups of racialized, marginalized, or othered humans through capitalist practices

of slavery and settler colonialism, what Cedric Robinson frames as “racial capitalism” (1983, 3). Describing the establishment of sugar plantations in the Americas as a part of European capitalist expansion, “indigenous peoples were displaced and slaves were imported to work the land, generating a brutal system of hitherto unequalled exploitation based on invented notions of racial difference.” (Dawson, 47) readers of *The Word for World is Forest* encounter these same dynamics in Davidson’s perspective on the indigenous Athsheans:³

“I think we might just clean out the areas we settle, instead of this Voluntary Labor routine. They’re going to get rubbed out sooner or later, and it might as well be sooner. It’s just how things happen to be. Primitive races have to give way to civilized ones.” (Le Guin, 21)

Here, the reader revisits the metaphor of “cleaning out” as equivalent to the term ethnic cleansing; a neoliberal euphemism for genocide developed as a rhetorical workaround to state avoidance of their obligations in international humanitarian law. Davidson’s “Voluntary Labor routine” evokes the history of rhetorical gymnastics of work described as slave, Coolie, ‘free,’ and contract; all forms of precariat labor structured by capitalist logics. Finally, the reader sees the inevitability racialized extinction in Davidson’s perspective on dehumanized, “primitive races”; a logic that extends for the reader in the next paragraph: “We’ll get on better without creechies here, just like we get on better without gorillas in Africa. They’re in our way...” (Le Guin, 47)

In *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, William Cronon documents a history of extractive colonial practices in North America during the 17th and 18th centuries, where “deforestation was one of the most sweeping transformations wrought by European settlement in New England.” (1983, 126) In turn, Raj Patel and Jason Moore situate

³ Davidson uses the pejorative term “creechie” to name the Athsheans.

the history of deforestation within the capitalism's expansion in Brazil, the Caribbean, China, across Europe, and in New Zealand as a part of the cheapening of nature embedded in the plantation-based sugar economy. (2017, 14-16) Dawson suggests that deforestation practices are part of the embedded practices of hierarchical, expansive societies dating back to the Sumerian empire where, "as the empire expanded, it exhausted its early sources of timber." (28) The over-consumption and extraction of timber resources beyond their replacement rate was a function of "short term needs outweigh(ing) the maintenance of a sustainable agricultural system' (Dawson, 28) so that "the sweeping deforestation of the region also contributed to the secondary effects of soil erosion and siltation that plagued irrigation canals, as well as having a significant impact on the biodiversity of the region." (Dawson, 29) In other words, the practice of deforestation, the permanent destruction a forest ecosystem, their trees and related flora and fauna, is a practice of extinction that traces over the arc of human history and is a necessary logic of exploitive social orders such as capitalism.

As Le Guin's title suggests, *The Word for World is Forest* frames the reader's reception around the metaphor that worldly existence is only possible with that of the forest. In turn, deforestation is not simply a threat to forest ecosystems, or a challenge of desertification, soil erosion, water management, and other ecological problems to be managed. Rather, deforestation is equivalent to extinction. This extinction is at once practiced by Davidson and his fellow loggers on New Tahiti, but also a structural formation which guides the Terran system of colonial settlement and political economy:

"(Davidson) couldn't see why a soybean farm needed to waste a lot of space on trees if the land was managed really scientifically. It wasn't like that in Ohio; if you wanted corn, you grew corn, and no space wasted on trees and stuff. But then Earth was a tamed planet and New Tahiti wasn't. That's what he was here for: to tame it. If Dump Island was just rocks and gullies now, then scratch it; start over on a new island and do better." (Le Guin, 10)

In this passage, the reader sees the capitalist logic of scientific land management as a part of expansive agribusiness, a process that devalues the necessary forest ecology to the production of soybeans. In turn, the reader encounters twin references to agricultural production back on Earth; an Ohio without the “wasted space” for trees on the “tamed” planet Earth. Moreover, the logic of expansion and assumption of limitless quantities of timber for human consumption play out in the movement from Earth to New Tahiti, and then from Dump Island to Smith Camp.

Capitalism’s extinction logic of forests as resources for extraction rather than preservation plays out in Davidson’s anthropocentric misguided privileging of humanity within the broader ecosystem:

“But see, we’re just ordinary joes getting the work done. Earth needs wood, needs it bad. We find wood on New Tahiti. So--we’re loggers See, where we differ is that with you Earth doesn't come first, actually. With me it does...When I say Earth, Kees, I mean people You worry about deer and trees and fiberweed, fine, that's your thing. But I like to see things in perspective from the top down, and the top, so far, is humans.” (Le Guin 13-14)

Here, the reader sees the imbrication of capitalism, colonization, deforestation, and extinction at work in a logic of never-ending extraction for the benefit of humans. The trope of the “ordinary worker” masks the gendered and racialized hierarchies of Terran and Athshean labor on New Tahiti, political economies that support the male-dominated logging industry. The reader sees how trees, deer, and other flora are subordinate to Davidson and the supposed universal humanity he co-opts in his worldview. It is in the name of humans, and likely only a select group of humans, that forests are destroyed, and ecosystems made extinct; a humanity that sustains exploitive structures through profit-seeking and perpetual expansion.

“For men were here now to tend the darkness, and turn the tree-jumble into clean sawn planks, more prized on Earth than gold. Literally, because gold could be got from seawater and from under the Antarctic ice, but wood could not; wood came only from

trees. And it was a really necessary luxury on Earth, so the alien forests became wood.”
(Le Guin, 16)

Deforestation is more than the extinction of flora and fauna; it is a practice done through the commodification, the capitalization, or what Patel and Moore see as the cheapening, of living, breathing trees and the life forms that they are interdependent with. The reader can establish this relationship between commodity and extinction through the phrase “planks more prized on Earth than gold.” Living trees, like slaves, pods of whales or herds of land mammals, are valued, worked, and ultimately destroyed because they are a commodity to be traded and consumed. Additionally, the reader sees the trope of imaginary extinction of forests as both a “necessary luxury” commodity as well as the present absence of forests and wood on the homeworld of Earth. Le Guin’s narration and exposition from Davidson leave the reader with an overt connection between capitalism and extinction through imagined deforestation; practices and evidence likely familiar to readers in the Americas, in Europe, and in Asia where deforestation remains part of our present extinction.

Deforestation, Extinction, and The (Para)Textual Condition

The various art, images, and other features which adorn the covers of different versions of *The Word for World is Forest* open up yet another site for exploring how the reader makes sense of the themes of extinction and deforestation in Le Guin’s text. The vast majority of these books are produced as mass market, paperback editions, likely reflecting the publisher’s desire to circulate and sell books at scale. Paperback books, combined with inked color and eventually thermal and laser printing technologies, allow for the rich display of cover art that draws the reader’s attention in the crowded field of a bookstore or library shelf, or more recently, on a computer screen. Thus, the typeface, color palette, and imagery displayed for the reader on the

front cover of any book are of essential importance to the marketing and selling of books.

(Adams and Barker, 55)

There are well over one hundred different extant versions of *The Word for World is Forest*, so any comprehensive survey of the archive of all of these versions in every language in which they are produced lies beyond the scope of this essay. However, the following examples of book covers serve as a representative example of the types of book covers a reader could expect to find in different countries and at different periods during the publication run of *The Word for World is Forest*.⁴ Although the imagery and visual rhetoric for each of these covers are read in a variety of ways⁵, I choose to organize these covers around the themes of deforestation, extinction, and a third residual category. An examination of *The Word for World is Forest* book covers further complicates the reader's understanding of imaginary extinction in that the images designed to entice the reader to purchase the book work both for and against Le Guin's representation of extinction, as well as to complicate the reader's expectations for Le Guin's novella before the first page is even read.

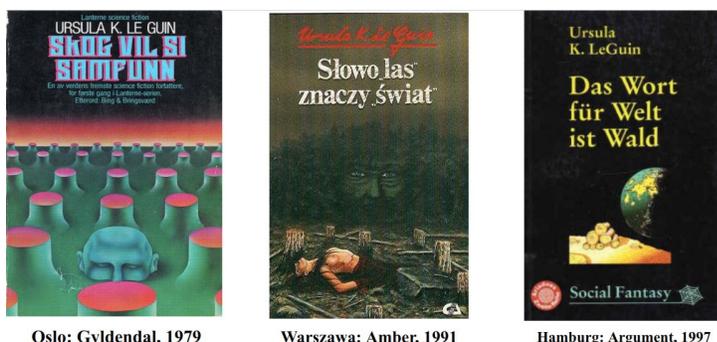


Image 1 (left) represent book covers which may most overtly represent the theme of deforestation in *The Word for World is Forest*. The 1979 Norwegian translation (far left) depicts a planned

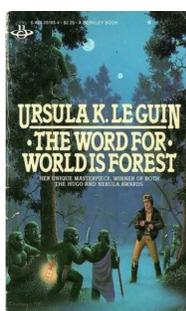
Image 1: *The Word for World is Forest*: “Deforestation” Front Covers

⁴ These images were either derived from *WorldCat* searches or were found through targeted Google searches and cross-referenced against the *WorldCat* database for accuracy. I assume responsibility for any mislabeling or misidentification of book cover images and their corresponding bibliographic information.

⁵ I concede that diving into the literature on the interpretation of visual culture in general, and science fiction in particular, also lies outside the bounds of a manageable seminar project. That said, humans approach the interpretation of imagery or visual cultural production from a complex set of structural and individual perspectives, see John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (London: Penguin, 1972).

pattern of stumps and barren landscape, possibly the result of the clearcutting, “eight mile-wide Strips on Smith Land” (Le Guin, 16) or the erosion and ecological disaster which befell Dump Island. (Le Guin, 9-11) A bald, green, half of a humanoid head- likely a Athshean- emerges from the land where the forest once stood in the center foreground of the cover. The Athsheans’s eyes are closed, suggesting either slumber or death. The positioning of the head, flattened on the top of the skull in similar shading to the depiction of the stumps, are in line with the decapitated trees points the reader to connect the act of deforestation with the extinction of the Athsheans themselves. The 1991 Polish translation (center) of *The Word for World is Forest* continues with the theme of deforestation. Stumps, scrap timber, and other debris litter the foreground of the book cover. These stumps may represent acts of clear cutting, but on closer inspection, the reader sees the black ash and soot at the base of the stumps, signifying something more than the simple cutting of trees. Yet the images of felled forests is a secondary consideration for the reader. A bloodied, half-nude white woman lies dead in the center-left of the foreground contrasted against a charred landscape. The woman, possibly one of the “Recreation Staff,” flown in to Central to meet the sexual demands of the demands of the all-male workforce on New Tahiti, (Le Guin, 11) was likely killed in the Athsheans raid on Smith Camp (Le Guin, 25-26) or the Athshean attack which wiped out a good portion of Centralville’s population (Le Guin 127-128). The white woman’s pose-arched back, neck exposed, and bare breasts- dually suggests a sense of sexual submission as well as racialized victimhood. A green, non-white face holds the reader’s gaze in the center of the image. With eyes wide open, this face gazes both upon the dead woman's body as well as back to the reader in an act of defiance. The face itself is embedded within the forest itself, perhaps referring to the forest’s non-human agency which brings down Davidson and

crew's hopper en route to attack the Athsheans. (Le Guin, 174) Finally, the 1997 German edition (right) of *The Word for World is Forest* depicts two illustrated planets on the cover. The reader sees a barren, dead landscape in the left foreground lit by an unseen sun. The reader's attention is drawn to neatly stacked cords of wood, out of proportion to both the planet where they lie, as well as the verdant planet in the distance, to the right of the reader's gaze. This cover does not likely refer to explicit scenes from Le Guin's narrative, but serve as a before and after motif, the consequences of clearcutting on a decimated homeworld which is located closer to the viewer, and the promise of continuing the practice on an untouched off-world, located away, and thus in the future, from the viewer's gaze. Therefore, while each of these covers includes images of cut down, felled, or trees processed into logs, each cover also evokes themes which complicate the reader's expectations for how deforestation will be considered in Le Guin's novel. Absent in all of these images are Davidson and his fellow loggers- those who perpetrate the violence against both the forests on New Tahiti and against the indigenous Athsheans- and members of the League of Worlds and their corporatist allies who fund Davidson and company's extractive expeditions. In addition, the Athshean presence in the Norwegian and Polish covers border on the ominous, providing the only visual presence of agentic conflict, again in the absence of the Terrans who rape and kill the indigenous Athsheans while they extract material resources from New Tahiti.



New York: Berkeley/Putnam, 1980



Paris: Presses Pocket, 1984



Mem Martins, Portugal: Publicações Europa-America, 1972

Image 2 (left) represent book covers which likely best depict themes of extinction, or threats thereof, in *The Word for World is Forest*. The cover

Image 2: *The Word for World is Forest*: "Extinction" Front Covers

of the 1980 American edition (left) depicts Davidson's return to the raided and burned Smith Camp: "Davidson's mind raced, clicked: reactions fast as always, he stood up, sudden, tall, easy, gun in his hand. 'You creechies. Stop. Stay put. No moving!'" (Le Guin, 27) Although Davidson is overpowered by the Athsheans in this particular scene in Le Guin's story, the depiction of the standoff- Davidson, tall with his gun held in a firing position, the Athsheans, short in stature, hiding behind trees and holding metal and wood weapons in defensive posture- asks the reader to recall their knowledge of extinction or genocide at the hands of white settler colonists wielding superior firepower and technology. The 1984 French cover (center) of *The Word for World is Forest* reinforces the idea of an Athshean population threatened with extinction. The entire cover image is dominated by a single Athshean, cowering in vain behind the slender trunk of a tree. The Athshean's battle axe is slung on his back, perhaps acknowledging the futility of using edged weapons against a Terran adversary who have command of interplanetary travel, flight, and milled weapons that fire projectiles. The Athshean's gaze is dually one of defiance, defending the trees, mountains, and other territories in the background, but also that of fear against the unseen Terran colonizing forces. Finally, the 1972 Portuguese cover (right) of *The Word for World is Forest* epitomizes the possibility of Athshean extinction. The two Athsheans at the center of the image cower and wail, possibly towards the Terran ship circling above. The forests behind and around the Athsheans glow red with what may be a fire, possibly started by an incendiary dropped from the Terran ship above, whose contrail cuts through what appears to be black smoke rising above the treeline. In each of these covers, the Athshean presence invites the reader to consider the indigenous, off-world other as the object of extinction at the hands of occasionally represented, but always present Terran colonizer.

The preceding covers of *The Word for World is Forest* aside, the vast majority of covers for Le Guin's text, both in variety and in circulation, as the book is written and primarily sold as an English edition, do not confront the themes of extinction or deforestation in their front matter.



Image 3: *The Word for World is Forest*: “Residual” Front Covers

Image 3 (left) shows fourteen extant covers of Le Guin's novel, ranging from the original American cover from 1972 (upper left) to the latest British cover (lower right) in 2015.

Athshean's make the cover in the 1975 German edition, the 1979 Italian edition, and the 2008 Spanish edition. The 1980 British edition features a hopper, a key Terran transport vehicle on New Tahiti. The forest-as-agent motif, present in the Norwegian and Polish editions, is also present in the 1984 Finnish cover of the text. Perhaps these respective publishers marketing plans or understanding of audience reception of the novel led them to direct cover art in this way, and more work could be done to explore this particular trope in the covers of *The Word for World is Forest* around the world. Forests, perhaps evoking pastoral notions for the reader, grace the cover of the British (2015), Turkish (2015), American (2006 and 2014), Japanese (1990), and Spanish (1989) versions of *The Word for World is Forest*. Perhaps most interestingly, the original American cover art (1972) depicts imagery that is not at all tied to scenes from the text. Athsheans exist as fairy-sized humanoids in the left foreground of the cover image, simultaneously hiding behind what is likely local flora and staring at a large, white, bare-breasted woman. While the woman is cloaked in green flora, or this is perhaps a part of her corporeal presence, its difficult for the reader to see

how the figuration of a ‘mother earth’ character ties to the events of the story given how the woman’s nakedness emerges from the forest. In other words, the image on the front cover of the original *The Word for World is Forest* may not have anything to do with deforestation, extinction, or any other plot point in the story, but rather reflects the long-standing sexist depiction of women on the covers of science fiction and fantasy novels; a publishing choice designed to draw the reader in and pick up the text amidst the crowded bookshelves of 1970s bookstores in the English speaking world.

The Publishing, Manufacturing, and Distribution of *The Word for World is Forest*

Tracing the history of any particular book is a daunting affair, and until the late 20th century, scholarship on the history of books were largely non-systematized affairs.⁶ Darton’s intervention into the field helped to establish a framework for unpacking the complex material and social process at work in the bound object humans have come to call the book. (1983, 12) Specifically, Darton imagines a circuit the author is not at the center, but part of a ring of interactions with publishers, printers and suppliers, shippers, booksellers, binders, and readers, which then orbit around intellectual, economic and social conjunctures, and political and legal affairs; all are variables which can affect how, if at all, a book is produced and consumed. (1983, 11-12) Adams and Barker build on Darton’s circuit of book history and identify five-part series of conjunctures that influence a book at any particular point in time. First, the decision to publish any particular book rests on a publisher’s intellectual or ideological preferences along with any political, legal, or religious contexts which enable or constrain the decision to publish a text.

⁶ For introductions to this vast field of scholarship, see: Lucien Lebre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450-1800*, (London: Verso: 1976); Scott E. Casper, Joanne D. Chaison, and Jeffery D. Groves, *Perspectives on American Book History*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002); David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, *The Book History Reader*, (London: Routledge, 2006).

Publishing, of course, is directly linked to a book's manufacture; again potentially affected by political, legal, and religious influences, as well commercial pressures facing a manufacturer at the time. The distribution of a book is also a function of commercial pressures and directly tethered to both the manufacturing conjuncture, as well as to the reception of the book. In turn, an audience's reception of any book reflects the influence of a complex of social behaviors and tastes; all of which vary across time, space, and culture. Finally, the survival of any book is dependent on audience taste as well as their intellectual or ideological preferences, the latter attributes linking a book's survival back to a publisher's decision to continue producing the book and thus completing Adams and Barker's circuit. (1993, 53-61)

It borders on the absurd to consider the deep archival dive necessary to offer a comprehensive history of Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest* in a seminar setting; yet Adams and Barker's perspective is useful to think about how Le Guin's novel works against Gosh's notion that science fiction lacks the presentism necessary to address climate change in any meaningful way. First, while a single futuristic science fiction book in one person's hands, or to stretch the example a million books in a million different people's hands, may indeed do work that is largely affective or rhetorical, the entire circuit of book production is a material and social affair. Publishers don't publish books unless they feel they can gain from the process, writers, artists, and laborers in all aspects of the manufacturing, the supply chain, and marketing of a book have social and material investments in books. Readers borrow, buy, share, and perhaps even steal books; they also talk about books quite a bit with their families and friends, coworkers, or on social media. Books of stories about climate change, ecological catastrophe, and other aspects of the Anthropocene that Gosh is advocating for come into existence via

complex processes, themselves embedded in a capitalist logic that may or may not incentivize the production, circulation, consumption or survival of these stories in the first place. In other words, we still have to engage in various acts of speculative imagination about these stories in the first place in order to materially produce and disseminate them as part cultural work of overturning capitalism. It should have come as no surprise to anyone that Amazon, arguably the world's largest purveyor of books, purchased the social media site Goodreads in 2013, primarily as a way of facilitating conversations about and the purchasing of books. While Gosh may feel that climate fiction set in the future detracts or is disconnected from the present, the circuit of book production is both a present phenomenon and one that requires speculative imagination, regardless of form or genre. As I will explain below, the ebb and flow of books about the environment, forests, extinction, ecology, and deforestation, as well as the specific movement of Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest*, speaks to the current concerns of environmental calamity, not simply a reader's desire to imagine a world without our present predicaments.

Published as a standalone novella in 1972, *The Word for World is Forest* remains in print, braille, and ebook versions some forty years after the novel first appeared. The long arc of *The Word for World is Forest's* publication is bolstered by nine different New York and London-based publishers who have been involved in the literary production of the novel. Beyond the English-reading world, translated editions of Le Guin's novel exist in thirteen languages other than English and published on four continents. Thus, the publication history of Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest* is that of a globally-circulated story, part of the explosion of both science fiction novels and books on environmental issues which emerged in the 1960s, whose thematic elements include the speculative consideration of an Earth and outer world in throughs

of various stages of terrestrial deforestation and extinction. Indeed both Priscila Coit Murphy (2007) and Streeby (2018, 14-18) point to the influence that Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) had on writers of science fiction in the decades that followed its serialized and then production in book form; influence that I speculate contributed to the publishing and distribution of *The Word for World is Forest*.

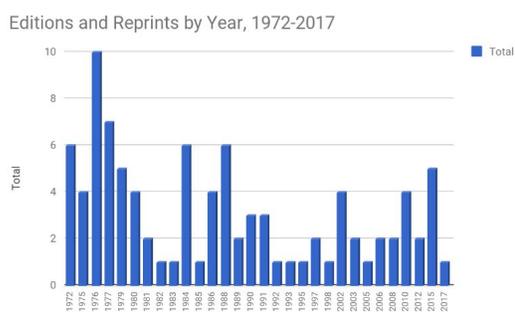


Figure 1: A bar chart tracing the longitudinal frequency of published editions of *The Word for World is Forest*, 1972-2017.

Figure 1 (left) shows the global distribution of all editions and reprints of *The Word for World is Forest* between the years 1972 and 2017.⁷ Even without running a regression analysis to solidify the relationship between

publishing frequency and the quantity of printed editions, the visual data in *Figure 1* points to a series of peaks and valleys in the frequency of published editions of Le Guin's work over the arc of more than forty years of continuous publication and printing. These fluctuations roughly correspond with global trends in science fiction publishing, although not identical fashion.⁸ Tallies of global book publication can reflect the overall shape of a book's distribution over time. Consequently, adding geographic elements to this analysis further clarifies the ways in which publishers chose to manufacture and distribute Le Guin's text.

⁷ All figures and images used in the following pages are at: Charlie Gleek, "Circulating Our Imaginary Extinction Slides," last modified 24 April 2018, <https://goo.gl/RLX2x2>.

⁸ See Figure 4 below.

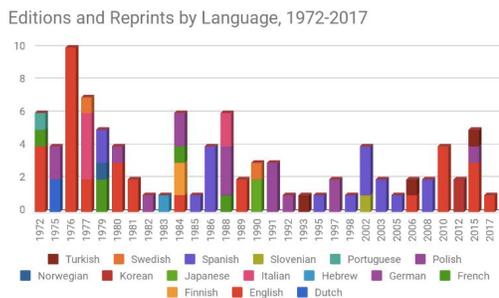


Figure 2: A stacked bar chart tracing the longitudinal frequency of published editions of *The Word for World is Forest*, 1972-2017, coded by language of publication.

Figure 2 (left) reproduces the same distribution of texts over time while adding the country and language of production. While English, as both the language itself and publishers in New York and London, account for

much of *The Word for World is Forest's* publication in 1972 and 1976, it would be another 15 years, 2010 and 2015, until English editions again reflected the majority of published editions of Le Guin's text. This may mean that New York publishers Berkeley Books, with or without their distribution partners at Putnam Books, as well as Tor Books made decisions about warehouse stock levels, the science fiction market and market for Le Guin's book, in particular, audience reception, or the global licensing of *The Word for World is Forest* that kept the book off of the presses and out of company warehouses, especially in the long period from 1989 to 2005 where no new editions were produced in English. Similar factors could also have been in play with Le Guin's British publishers Gollancz and Panther, who first published editions in 1977 and 1980 respectively, where only Gollancz returned to publishing *The Word for World is Forest* in 2015.

In contrast to the English editions, *Figure 2* articulates the global ebb and flow of publications in European and Asian countries, as well as both Turkey and Israel. The 1970s saw the proliferation of *The Word for World is Forest* on the European continent, with publishers producing versions as far west in Portugal, south in Italy, east in Sweden, and north in Norway. By the 1980s, publishers made decisions to translate and produce Le Guin's work for new

markets in Israel and Finland. In the latter case, this meant that markets in three of the five Nordic countries- cultures, peoples, and governments generally associated with pro-environmental and sustainable practices-⁹ were open to editions of Le Guin's novella translated into the local language. The 1990s saw the publication of *The Word for World is Forest* in Japanese, Turkish and a three-edition run in Poland, a market both newly open to Western literature after the end of the Cold War, but also one where publishers, booksellers, and readers may have already been familiar with English, German, and Swedish editions, and thus wanted one in their national language. The 2000s and 2010s saw translation expansions to both Korean and Slovenian, as well as a return of English editions on both sides of the Atlantic.

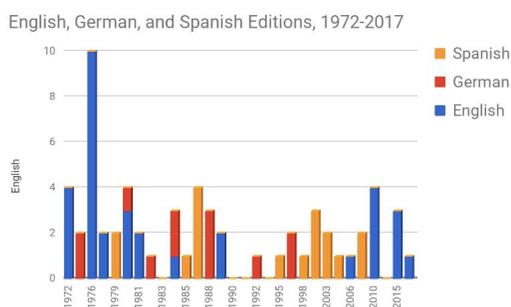


Figure 3: A stacked bar chart tracing the longitudinal frequency of English, German, and Spanish published editions of *The Word for World is Forest*, 1972-2017.

One of the most interesting comparisons that emerge from this analysis are the intertwining publishing histories of *The Word for World is Forest* in English, German, and Spanish. *Figure 3* (left)

summarizes the cycles of literary production in each country. Having already briefly considered English publication and manufacture, my analysis does not cover but does not ignore questions surrounding the distribution and supply chain coming from these Anglo-American publishers. Did *The Word for World is Forest* circulate to Canada, Australia, or the twenty-eight other Commonwealth countries? What was readership and survival of Le Guin's text like in those communities? Does the gap in English publishing between 1989 and 2006 reflect a defect in the

⁹ Not glossing over Norway's oil extraction and production, of course.

bibliographic archive or was Le Guin’s text simply circulated based on the existing editions? While the data is helpful to point out crude trends in this regard, more work clearly needs to be done. In parallel, German publication of Le Guin’s text seems to steady over the arc of nearly twenty years, although the last new edition of *Das Wort für die Welt ist Wald* was published in 1997. In contrast, Spanish publication of *El Nombre Del Mundo Es Bosque* experiences a period of takeoff starting in the mid-1990s, with several editions published annually for almost a consecutive decade. It is likely that Spanish publisher Minutaro had access to markets outside of Spain during this time. Consequently, its curious to think about how this publishing house assessed readers’ demands for Le Guin’s translated text, what social or economic factors played a role in this speculative expansion, or indeed what political changes or technological adaptations- the formation of the Eurozone and other post-Cold War free trade agreements come to mind- could have influenced Minutaro’s increased production of *El Nombre Del Mundo Es Bosque*.

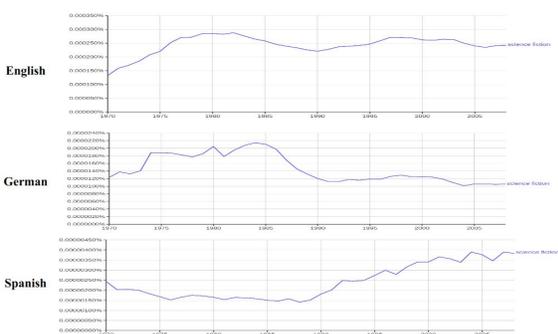


Figure 4: Google Ngram line charts tracing the longitudinal relative percentage of “science fiction” books, 1970-2008.

Outside of detailed archival work, one way of addressing the previous questions is to look at the global trend in book production since *The Word for World is Forest* was first published. Comparative Google Ngrams for “science fiction” books in *Figure 4* (left)

show variations in book production over time. The relative frequency on the Y-axis of each graph is not necessarily important for this analysis, but the plot of the line over time along the X-axis is. The production of science fiction books in English rises during the 1970s, plateaus in

the mid-1980s and declines around 1990, and then moderately fluctuates near a median percentage of books over the next two decades. Looking back at *Figure 3*, these trend lines in English science fiction publishing correspond, but do not correlate with the cycles of production of *The Word for World is Forest*. In contrast, the German production cycles of *Das Wort für die Welt ist Wald* align more closely with science fiction books published in German; rising and maintaining publishing levels in the 1970s and 1980s, and then declining and plateauing by 1990. Spanish publishing of *El Nombre Del Mundo Es Bosque* in *Figure 3* also mirror Spanish science fiction publishing in *Figure 4*, but in reverse to that of the German case. Here, Spanish publishing of Le Guin's text is steady in the 1970s and 1980s while the overall publishing situation fluctuates moderately. The take-off period for both *El Nombre Del Mundo Es Bosque* and science fiction published in Spanish both occur during the early 1990s and sustain higher production levels towards the end of the 2000s. While I make no claims that these statistics are in any way related in a statistically significant fashion, the Google Ngram data points to correspondence between ebbs and flows in book production cycles in each of these three languages, and the specific production trends of *The Word for World is Forest*. Further exploration of the relationship between the production of specific texts and the volume of genre production across time and boundaries appear to be warranted if one is to fully understand the material impact that speculative fiction on deforestation and extinction has on readership and print culture circuits as a whole.

Trends in Science Fiction, Climate, Extinction, and Deforestation Books

Adams and Barker's Book History circuit presupposes that each of its five elements will fluctuate as functions of cultural influences. Following this logic, it is reasonable to speculate

that the publication of books that address particular subjects also vary across temporal, cultural, and linguistic domains. Returning to Gosh's critique of science fiction for a moment, he asks whether science fiction is "better equipped to address the Anthropocene than mainstream literary fiction?" (2016, 72). In other words, are writers, publishers, booksellers, and readers better off selling and reading less specialized, less fantastical, and less future-oriented texts to appreciate our present ecological precarity? Gosh seems to suggest that the answer to this question is yes, although an answer may be more complicated than he lets on.

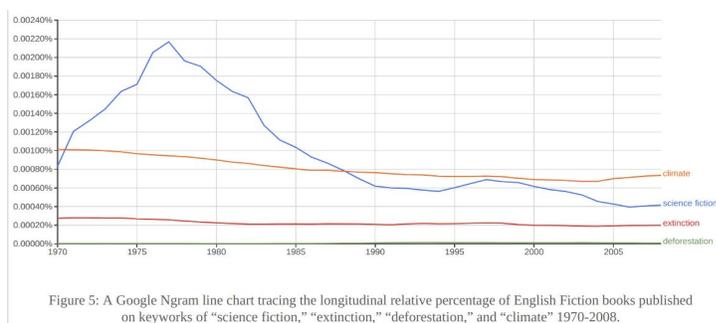


Figure 5 (left) is a Google Ngram which plots the relative frequency of all English fiction books published between 1970 and 2008 which address key terms such as deforestation,

extinction, climate, as well as the genre of science fiction. The relative number of fictional books published in English on deforestation is smaller than the other key terms, but relatively stable over time. Fictional extinction stories are also stable over time, while mainstream fictional texts which deal with climate are published at a slightly lower rate than they were in 1970. In contrast, the publication of science fiction books rise dramatically in the 1970s, only to decline, and in spite of one small rise in the 1990s, continue to decline as an overall share of fictional books published in English.

While Google Ngram is a powerful tool in many respects, its application in response to Gosh's question remains a somewhat crude measure¹⁰ for identifying thematic trends in book

¹⁰ For example; this analysis can't determine which science fiction texts also include a treatment of climate, extinction, or deforestation. That said, Google's Ngram documentation does provide a robust framework to conduct

production, *Figure 5* does provide some preliminary answers and further questions to explore. On the one hand, Gosh may be correct to suggest that mainstream literary fiction may be better equipped to address Anthropocenic ecological concerns around “climate” because such books, as a whole, are produced in greater numbers. However, Gosh’s frame of reference is a contemporary one, an analysis that ignores a period in time where science fiction books published in English dwarfed mainstream books that dealt with climate. While it is not the case that all science fiction books published in the 1970s dealt with ecological disasters, it is the case that the genre was a dominant form of publication forty years ago, and there is no reason why it could not be so again. Equally, developing a deep bibliography of speculative fiction, science fiction, climate fiction and other works- akin to what Streeby is doing in *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*- will render guesses about climate tropes in science fiction and their relevance to contemporary readers moot. In other words, Gosh’s analysis that the presentism in mainstream fiction is better situated to represent climate crises and initiate action on the part of readers ignores both the existing range of science fiction which addresses these concerns, as well as the bibliographic history of the science fiction genre which may do the very work he is hoping for. More importantly, and much closer to home as this analysis is solely about Le Guin’s *The Word for World is Forest*, the incorporation of a range of literary ways of knowing- visual rhetorical analysis, book history and print culture methods, and quantitative literary analysis- work to demonstrate that the representation of deforestation and extinction present in Le Guin’s novella may take place off-world in New Tahiti, but the material and social effects of publishing, manufacturing, distributing, and reading *The Word for World is Forest* very much work to

quantitative literary analysis, see: “What does the Ngram Viewer do?” *Google Ngram*, accessed 24 April 2018, <https://books.google.com/ngrams/info>.

communicate these representations across temporal, spatial, and linguistic boundaries here on present-day Earth.

Theorizing a Broader Imagination of Representational Extinction

What, if anything, can the reader take away from the previous analysis? First, I offer that solid research should be able to both inform the reader about particular subjects as well as speculate about new lines of inquiry to be furthered or critically appraised. As I have modestly attempted to show, analyzing *The Word for World is Forest*, or any text for that matter, requires a robust framework to unpack not only the thematic representation on the pages of the text itself but should also include an intentional and critical reading of paratextual elements so that the entire book as object comes into analytical consideration. Second, incorporating models, methods, and approaches from book history, print culture, and quantitative literary analysis expand any narrowly determined interpretation of a text derived from close reading or a hermeneutic perspective. Themes of extinction and deforestation may indeed be evident in Le Guin's novella, but interpretation of these tropes are complicated by visual rhetorical analysis as well as questions, most of which I speculate on or do not fully answer, about how these themes play with or are contextualized by publishers, booksellers, and readers around the world. On the one hand, it may very well be the case that Le Guin's imaginary deforestation of Earth pushes readers to contemporary actions, regardless of the language in which they are reading *The Word for World is Forest*. However, such interpretations are never universal, always historically contingent, and thus require in-depth examinations of the material production and circulation of texts, as well as the reception and response to Le Guin's message, in order to have a more robust picture of how *The Word for World is Forest* works across geographic, temporal, political, and

linguistic boundaries. If science fiction does the work that Le Guin says it does, then understanding how stories about the consequences of deforestation and extinction come into production, circulate, are received, and survive will serve as a durable counter to critics who see science fiction as an unnecessary distraction from working to solve our present ecological predicaments.

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