

Framing of Individual vs. Structural Responsibility for Environmental Harm

Amanda Lowry and Dr. Rebecca Ballard

Introduction

The manuscript *Genre Frictions* contributes to the academic conversation on the relationship between social movements and literature by demonstrating how speculative moves in fiction formed structural understandings of violence in the 1960s-70s. The chapter I did citational editing on investigates how speculative moves in New Wave science fiction contributed to an understanding of ecocide in the Vietnam War as a form of structural environmental harm.

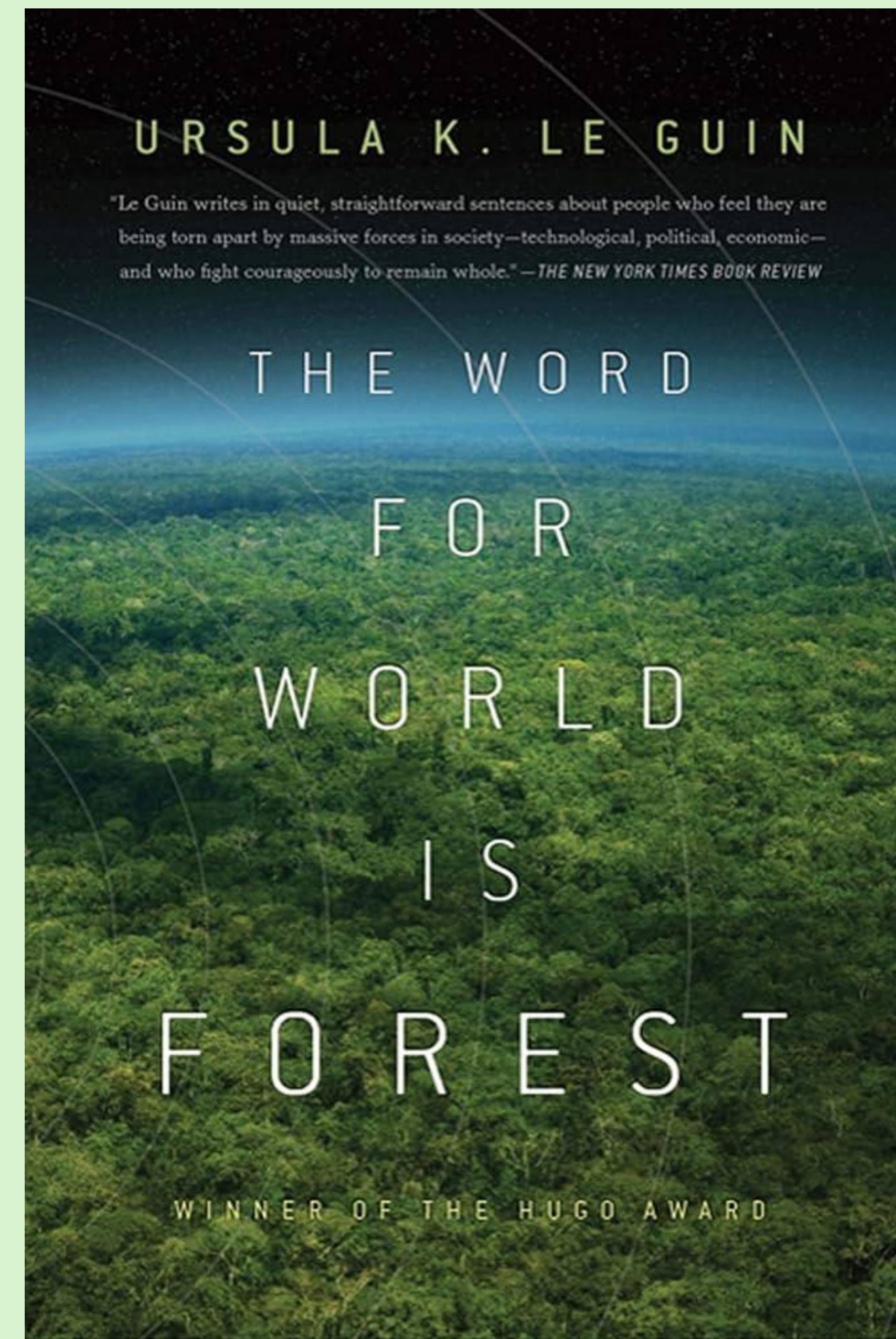
From citational editing, I developed an interest in **how individual vs. structural responsibility for environmental harm have been discussed by different stakeholders in environmental studies**. My following individual research examines the framing of responsibility of various primary sources, focusing on ecocritical literature and environmental journalism.

Preliminary Findings

Existing conversations identify individual responsibility as the primary framework of modern Western environmentalism. Responsible consumer choices are seen as a path to “bottom-up” community-led initiatives for sustainable futures. While encouragement of citizens to “do their part” promotes consumerism as the path to environmental repair, **conscious consumerism has been correlated with greater political action**. Others argue this individualism may restrict “environmental imagination,” making it difficult to organize community-based movements, and that **focus on individual acts is a direct result of the influence of existing structures**.

The Word for World is Forest uses an individual to represent environmentally destructive forces but **situates his actions as the result of the structures that formed and encourage his behavior**. Davidson’s character is not an outlier whose eradication would solve environmental harm, but a particularly potent representation of the systems promoting environmental destruction.

Bolivia Burning places the responsibility for causing and fixing environmental harm on the government and large corporations. Ecocide is identified as **the result of a larger strategic plan including laws and policies encouraging environmental destruction for profit**. The broader economic and social systems behind such policies are not explored.



Methods

1) Citational Editing

I located the sources used in sections of the first chapter of Dr. Ballard’s manuscript using FSU Library systems. I confirmed quote spelling & wording, and formatted endnote citations according to the University of Minnesota Press note-bibliography system.

2) Review of Sources

I reviewed select primary and secondary sources cited in the manuscript, searching for areas of interest and possible gaps in the academic conversation. Sources that had a large influence on my research question include Denis Hayes’ speech “The Beginning” and the primary text I worked with in the chapter, Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Word for World is Forest*.

3) Individual Research

I developed the research question “**How have different stakeholders in environmentalism and environmental studies framed individual vs. structural responsibility for environmental harm?**” To investigate this question, I reviewed the existing academic conversation surrounding individual vs. structural responsibility. I then reviewed how responsibility for environmental harm is presented by Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Word for World is Forest* and the 2025 documentary *Bolivia Burning: Inside a Latin American Ecocide*.

Possible Future Directions

Given the preliminary nature of the results, the stakeholders and existing conversation could be deeper analyzed in further research. The stakeholders I examined include a citizen frustrated with structural harm, and a nonprofit environmental journalism organization.

Other stakeholders for investigation include:

- Governments
- Corporations
- Environmentalist NGOs
- Directly impacted citizens

Identifying alternate narratives surrounding environmental harm and its causes is essential for creating sustainable realistic action plans for environmental recovery. Further research could also be done on the underlying reasons for each stakeholder to portray such narratives.



The forest fires that are the subject of *Bolivia Burning* are framed as a result of government policies

References

