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### Title

Not Your Conquest: Conceptions of Gender and Colonial Legacies in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Sylvia Moreno-Garcia's *Certain Dark Things*

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### Author

Cabral, Carolina

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Dr.  
Department of

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Dr. Richard Cardullo, Howard H Hays Jr. Chair, University Honors

## Abstract

In *Left Hand of Darkness*, Ursula K. Le Guin explores the interspecies relationship between a human named Ai and an alien named Estraven. The narrative is told from the perspective of Ai. Ai's mission is to convince the leaders of Gethen to join the Ekumen, a sort of U.N. between the planets. Throughout his stay in Gethen, Ai struggles to understand how the people of Gethen can live in androgyny, neither man nor woman. Ai cannot fully conceptualize the absence of gender. Through a series of events, Ai is ultimately politically persecuted by the leaders of Gethen. Estraven, a citizen of Gethen, aids Ai across the Gethen to seek refuge in another nation. Through this journey, Ai and Estraven develop one of the most heartfelt intimate bonds. *Certain Dark Things*, by Silvia Moreno-Garcia, also explores the intimacy between two different species. Atl, an Aztec vampire on the run, teams up with human trash picker Domingo in order to survive. Persecuted by the rival vampire clan, narcos, and the Mexico City Police department, Atl joins forces with Domingo. The two overcome a series of obstacles that allow them to find a space of intimacy in the middle of all the chaos.

Both novels explore relationships between two differentiating species. In both novels, each couple is compromised of a human and a minority species. This coupling between species supposes a hierarchal dynamic that naturally places the human entity at the top. This hierarchy is contingent upon the reader's own ideology. The narratives challenge the status of this ideology. In *Left Hand of Darkness*, Ai is presented as an ethnographer, a male social scientist who's findings in Gethen are to be trusted. However, the relationship that ensues between Ai and Estraven, not only challenges Ai's approach to gender and sexuality but the reader's ideologies as well. In *Certain Dark Things*, Domingo is portrayed as a human ignorant to vampire culture. Although Domingo's ignorance is quite apparent, his normative perspective of his relationship with Atl rules the narrative of romance. The reader is then challenged to reconsider romantic

notions. Analyzing these novels together and considering these interspecies relationships, will allow for an in-depth understanding of relationality and sociality. Analyzing these relationships and the surrounding discourses within each novel, prove that common approaches to intimacy, relationships, and gender follow a colonial strategy to create power structures and operationalize heteronormativity. This project will not only argue the colonial strategies present in current notions of sexual intimacy, but I will also argue the validity of *postcolonial asexual intimacies*. This term helps us establish moments of intimacy that exist outside of the structures of colonialism. It is *postcolonial* because it moves past colonial systems of signification. I also use the term *asexual*, not only to make explicit the absence of sexual intercourse but also to introduce nonconventional forms of intimacy that exist outside of these colonial paradigms.

Mark Rifkin's theories about heteronormativity will provide the basis for the methodology that will be applied in this study. In his book, *How Did Indians Become Straight: Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty*, Mark Rifkin contextualizes the United States' attempt to make Natives "straight" in order to incorporate them into "American conceptions of family, home, desire, and personal identity" (8). This western "rhetoric of kinship translates social formations by viewing them through a conceptual/ideological paradigm ordered around the biologically validated nuclear family" (15). Thus, by making biology the validating factor of the white heteronormative nuclear family, it consequently becomes the validating factor for all social formations. Family structures, sexual relationships, casual relationships, and personal identity are constantly filtered through this biological rubric. The possibilities of reproduction, the widely accepted notions of desire, the ideal of the nuclear family are all aspects of the heteronormative force that validates Western concepts of kinship.

Although Rifkin focuses his analysis on the effect heteronormativity has on indigenous populations, I am interested in exploring the effect of heteronormativity more broadly. Rifkin argues, "heteronormativity is not an internal set of distinctions within citizenship or among national subjects but a system that emerges in relation to the ongoing imperial project of reproducing the settler state as against competing indigenous formations" (26). In other words, heteronormativity is a tool of imperialism that arises in competition with other formations of sociality. Rifkin's imperial heteronormativity invokes discourses of post-colonialism as well as gender and sexuality.

Heteronormativity as an imperial strategy creates a system of signification that places straight men at the top of the hierarchy. To be part of the hegemon, one has to navigate the spheres of maleness, straightness, and imperial ideology. Heteronormativity can no longer be thought of as a distinctive individual trait. Rather, heteronormativity functions as a tool of imperialism to help create categories and hierarchies within society. These structures perpetuated by the settler state promote heterosexuality as the only viable way to integrate into society and properly navigate the spaces of home, family, and identity. But what happens when a being falls outside of these categories? What spheres do they navigate in order to survive? And is surviving the only path for these non-heteronormative beings? My project will explore the ways in which we can move past colonial understandings of gender and sexuality, displacing the heteronormative and finding other ways to relate to one another outside of the reductive structure of colonialism.

Considering that heteronormativity is part of an imperial process, we must also assume that gender dynamics and sexuality dynamics are part of this imperial project as well. I will be using these ideas to explore the relationships in both *Left Hand of Darkness* and *Certain Dark*

*Things*. Rifkin's ideas of post-colonialism, gender, race, and sexuality will help establish the colonial power at work within the novels in respect to the gender perspectives at work. I will also draw from Rifkin, along with the novels, to further help speculate the possibilities of dismantling heteronormativity.

Before analyzing the effects of dismantling heteronormativity, it is important that we establish how heteronormativity functions under the paradigm of colonialism. More importantly, we will establish how the two novels function around the heteronormative hegemony. In her book, *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction*, Jessica Langer explores postcolonial dynamics within science fiction. In the chapter titled "Race, Culture, Identity and Alien/Nation," Langer argues that science fiction's usage of the "alien" retells the story of dehumanization and alienation. These postcolonial issues seem to be reinscribed and subverted in science fiction. Langer states, "Race is a constructed concept, actualized through a pseudoscientific dialectic of knowledge production; colonialism has often worked in a similar way, with colonial powers constructing methods of governance, of communication and the creation of invented power structures in the colonies to inherently favor the colonizer" (83). Although Langer focuses mainly on how race and colonialism use Foucauldian differentials of knowledge, I will expand this analysis onto the discourse of gender.

According to Langer, colonialism creates systems of governance and communication which ultimately benefit the colonizer. Discourses surrounding gender and sexuality can further be perceived as part of a colonial structure. Heteronormativity functions as an ideology through which all knowledge of relationships are filtered. CJ DeLuzio Chasin, author of "Reconsidering Asexuality and Its Radical Potential," makes an argument to reconsider the popular definition of Asexuality. He focuses primarily on a critique of psychiatric and pharmaceutical attempts to

define Asexuality as "lack" of desire. Chasin states, "social pressures— compulsory heterosexuality, expectations within long-term monogamous relationships, and so on— govern sexual desires and prescriptions for sexual desires: desires are not only forbidden, but actively constructed as well, through mechanisms of social policing" (415). In this quotation, Chasin contends that society governs sexual desire through both interdiction and its construction, which together constitute policing. The expectations around sexual desires differ between the genders and if any of these fail to fulfill expectations, they are invalidated by society. Women who experience a 'lack' of sexual desire are considered pathological (214) and men who experience a lack of sexual desire are not considered real men (416). Through social pressures surrounding sexual desire, both men and women are subjected to their sexuality. I will apply these ideas to explore the subtle ways in which common notions and expectations of gender and sexuality correlate with colonial attitudes concerning bodies and sexual beings. By intersecting discourses of gender, sexuality, and colonialism, I will argue for the validity of *postcolonial asexual intimacies*.

Using both novels, it becomes evident that the perception of both gendered and sexualized bodies have been produced as part of a colonial strategy. In Ursula K. Le Guin, we see colonial systems of governance reinforced through gender and sexual discourses. In chapter seven of *Left Hand of Darkness*, titled "The Question of Sex," the investigators of Terra consider the possibilities of ambisexuality. The whole chapter is dedicated to the perception of the colonizer and how they conceptualize gender and sexuality. The narrator states,

there are aspects of ambisexuality that we have only glimpsed or guessed at, and which we may never grasp entirely. [...] What is very hard for us to understand, is that four-fifths of the time, these people are not sexually motivated at all. Room is



made for sex, plenty of room; but a room, as it were, apart. The society of Gethen, in its daily functioning and its continuity, is without sex" (99).

The investigator states that Gethen's notions of ambisexuality have only been "glimpsed or guessed at, and which we may never grasp entirely" (99). The word "glimpsed" indicates the disregard for Gethen's society. The investigators are observing Gethen but instead of fully observing the society, they take a brief look. The phrase "guessed at" indicates how the ethnographers are not fully understanding the society, but merely making assumptions about Gethen and their sexuality. Sexuality on Gethen is always out of reach for the citizens of Terra. Although they may speculate and observe, the investigators of Terra will never fully understand the constructs of ambisexuality. However, the issue runs deeper than the ethnographers' inability to understand the Gethenian sexuality. The detailed documentation and speculation demonstrates a deep desire to know the sexuality of another species. This desire aligns with the desire to categorize species and position them into a social hierarchy.

Gethen's culture is not fully engaged in the minds of the investigators, because they do not do enough work to confront this difference in any sustained way. This inability to understand these notions descends from the challenge to disconnect from and rethink their own ideologies. The people of Gethen are ambisexual, meaning they possess both male and female genitalia. However, this notion extends further than sex. The investigators have trouble understanding ambisexuality precisely because it blurs the lines between the genders of man and woman, "they do not see one another as men or women. This is almost impossible for our imagination to accept" (101). This quote allows the reader to see into the struggles of the investigators in their approach to challenge their ideologies. The investigators understand that the Gethenians do not categorize each other as men or woman, what they cannot accept are the implications of the

absence of gender. Accepting Gethen's agendered society would mean that Terra's constructions of gender and sexuality are not the only ones. This discomforts the investigators because they can no longer pigeonhole people into gender and sexuality categories. This society is still only perceived through an imaginative lens and is failed to be viewed as a reality.

In terms of sexuality, the investigators of Terra cannot fathom everyday life without the presence of sexual drive. Drawing from Rifkin's argument, the whole notion of human interaction is predicated on the possibility of sexual intercourse, or sexual exchange. He calls this notion the "biological rubric" (15). Without this possibility of sex, colonial minds find it impossible to comprehend the relationship one may have with another. Further, it becomes impossible to conceive of a society where sex and sexual attraction do not permeate the atmosphere. We can see this struggle when, in the quotation previously mentioned, the investigators of Terra state, "what is very hard for us to understand is that, four-fifths of the time, these people are not sexually motivated at all. [...] the society of Gethen, in its daily functioning and its continuity, is without sex" (99). What baffles the investigators is the mere fact that the people of Gethen are not sexually motivated. This lack of sexual motivation takes place at around "four-fifths of the time" (99). This precise calculation indicates the colonial attempt to fit other cultures into calculated parameters. This observation signifies that regular life in Terra is in fact motivated and advanced by the sexual drive. Although the investigators are baffled by this lack of sexual-drive, they recognize that the Gethenian society is fully functioning and continuous. Yet, they are still merely grasping at the reality and implications of an ambisexual society, it is an existing reality that is impossible to conceive. The investigator further states, "our entire pattern of socio-sexual interaction is non-existent here" (101). The term "socio-sexual" indicates that socializing is predicated and intertwined with notions of sex, and further

gender. The people of Terra are dependent on gender and sexual constructs to categorize each other. Without this categorization, it becomes impossible to conceive of an individual. The rhetoric of the sentence also signals that the investigators expected their own colonial understandings to be present in this alien world. This is important because it reveals that the investigators take their understandings of gender and sexuality to be self-evident truths. The fact that these ethnographers fail to even recognize and accept other epistemologies and cultures is poetically ironic.

The investigators further contend, "on Winter [Terrans] will not exist. One is judged only as a human being. It is an appalling experience" (101). Without hierarchies and standards set by the "socio-sexual" method of governance, it is believed that future envoys would lose a sense of identity and power. A society in which gender and sexual drive are practically non-existent, will restructure society and displace the hegemon. The investigators speculate that this displacement of the hegemon is "an appalling experience" (101), not only for the hegemon, but for society as a whole. What basis would a relationship or society have without the ever-looming presence of sexual tension/attraction? The governances at play in the Terran society assume sexual attractions between subjects. Men must be attracted to women and vice versa. These attractions constitute how and where a person is positioned within the hierarchy of that society. This hierarchy creates a system of signification through which identities are constructed. As Gethenians do not possess or a conventional sexuality, the Terrans find themselves confused as to how to approach this society. This analysis tells more of the culture and ideology of Terra than it does about Gethen. It tells of the colonial powers at play in regards to the approaches of sexuality. It is evident that rethinking notions of sexuality does not only include sexual

interactions, it requires the deconstruction of gender constructs as well as the deconstruction of the larger colonial apparatus that perpetuates such notions.

Whereas *Left Hand of Darkness* contextualizes colonial understandings through societal conventions, *Certain Dark Things* frames colonial understandings of sex and gender through the conventional understanding of romance. The novel places Atl and Domingo in a narrative that supposes romantic ties between the two. The basic plot follows the pattern of a romantic novel: boy meets girl, boy likes girl, boy woos girl, girl likes boy, boy and girl fall in love. Devices used to intensify romance novels often include misunderstandings and external conflicts keeping the lovers apart, as well as sexual tension. The reader is then rewarded with the union of the couple. At first glance, *Certain Dark Things* follows the plot of a typical romance novel. However, I am interested in exploring how the novel handles these romantic expectations. As established in my analysis of *Left Hand of Darkness*, the presence of sex permeates society and social interaction. *Certain Dark Things* showcases how romance is often conceptualized through the presence of sexual tension. I will be analyzing sections of the novel to show how colonial understandings of gender and sexuality are ever present in romantic ideals. I will be focusing specifically on sections where sexual motivation and sexual tension are extremely high.

The novel presents a normative perspective through Domingo. Domingo's perspective on the "boy-meets-girl" scene, misleads the reader into assuming that *Certain Dark Things* is a romance novel. However, I will highlight a latent perspective through an alternate reading of the novel. The "boy-meets-girl" scene in the beginning of the novel is a perfect example of the colonial understandings of sexuality and its implications. As a solitary trash picker, Domingo seems to be looking for a kind of connection with other people. It is revealed that "[Domingo] constructed lives for the passengers that shuffled in front of him as he listened to his music" (2).

The image of Domingo listening to his music while passengers pass by shows the disconnect he has with society. The fact that Domingo constructs lives for these passengers by observing them shows an attempt to connect with society. Involving himself in other people's lives, even through the imagination, signifies that Domingo craves intimacy with other people. The passengers "shuffling" past him, illustrates how Domingo's presence is often not recognized. Domingo decides to approach Atl. After some small talk, Atl makes it clear that she needs something from Domingo, and asks him if he wants to be her friend. The narrator reveals Domingo's immediate thoughts and expectations, "Domingo wasn't in the habit of prostituting himself, [...] He nodded. He'd never been a lucky guy, but maybe he was in luck today" (6). He deems himself "lucky" in a way that engages in sexual expectations, but also because Atl actually took an interest in him. It was Domingo's lucky chance to connect with someone. Domingo's desire for intimacy is immediately projected onto Atl in the form of sexual motivation. By linking intimacy and sexuality, the narration hints at a possibility of romance.

Domingo provides the reader with a colonial gaze that reinstates colonial approaches to gender and sexuality through the construct of romance. When Atl proposes that Domingo be her friend, Domingo recalls, "when he'd tried to talk to a girl on the subway the previous year, she'd recoil. Domingo couldn't blame her. He did look grubby. And now this pretty woman was chatting him up. Who was he to imagine a babe of that sort was gonna give him the time of day?" (6). Domingo invokes the concept of gender when he recalls his previous experiences with girls. Through the possibility of romance, colonial understandings of gender identity become more perceptible. Gender conceptions function as rubric to categorize men and women. This categorization dictates how men and women are approached in society. In Atl's case, she is cast as a "pretty woman" and "a babe of that sort" (6). Domingo provides us with a colonial gaze of

Atl. By being cast as a "pretty woman" and a "babe," Atl's persona, and purpose, becomes mystified to the reader and Atl is reduced to just another pretty woman. Atl is too pretty, in fact, that it becomes impossible to recognize her personhood. She is approached, first and foremost, through her gender. Furthermore, when Domingo sees Atl, he observes, "trying to build an imaginary biography for her and failing" (5). The romance tactic at play in this scene is Domingo's desire to *know* Atl. His fault is using his subjective imagination and desires to recreate his needs through a woman. Domingo's deep desire to connect with people, to get to know people, makes Domingo susceptible to imposing his imagination, and therefore, imposing expectation on people. This imposition of imagination is the colonial gaze. When applied to Atl, a woman, Domingo's desire for intimacy translates into sexual motivation. Let's recall the quote, "Domingo wasn't in the habit of prostituting himself, [...] He nodded. He'd never been a lucky guy, but maybe he was in luck today" (6). Domingo's mind immediately supposes that Atl wants sex from him. His supposition sexualizes Atl. When she asks for a friend, Domingo immediately links friendship to sex. As a result, Atl's needs become sexualized. Domingo agrees to Atl's proposition, revealing his own sexual desires. The colonial construct of gender and sexuality in the scene further considers the idea that when a man and a woman occupy the same space, there is always a sexual tension present. This sexual tension, indicates potential romance.

In *Certain Dark Things*, the bonds between Domingo and Atl congeal in the much awaited sexual encounter. From the beginning of the novel, Atl and Domingo have been placed in a seemingly romantic narrative. I have been using the phrase "potential romance" when discussing intimacy and sexuality in the novel to express that Domingo's and Atl's relationship is not yet romantic. Further, the phrase "potential romance" indicates the expectation for romance the reader has while reading the novel. The potential lives within the intimate and sexual realms

that Domingo navigates with Atl. Close readings of the *boy-meets-girl* scene have shown us that Domingo navigates these two realms. It is important to note that romantic element is only viewed through Domingo's perspective throughout the novel. Atl continuously makes it clear that the relationship she holds with Domingo is purely transactional. Although he is shut down by Atl throughout the novel, Domingo, for the most part, continues to perceive their relationship through the expectations of romance. Through Domingo's gaze, colonial understandings of gender and sexuality are instilled onto Atl. These understandings of gender and sexuality coalesce to create romantic tension. The tension then is actualized through the act of sex. The expectation is a deeper, more intimate bond. The idea is that through the sexual acts, intimacy is no longer a potential, but a reality. The abstract realm of intimacy and love is reached through this physical act. The scene leading up to Domingo's and Atl's sexual encounter reveal these theories. In the middle of an argument, the narrator states, "his eyes cut her, got under her skin like shards of glass" (265). Domingo's eyes are described as some kind of sharp weapon able to cut. This weapon is his colonial gaze. His perception and understanding of Atl, as well as his expectations of intimacy and sexual desire, "cut" into Atl. This is a conquering scene in which Domingo's gaze is finally able to lacerate deep into Atl's skin, into her protective organ. The laceration described is being cut by "shards of glass" (265). The shards of glass indicate several points of incisions that produce traumatic wounds in Atl. The first reading of the scene may indicate that Atl is finally becoming soft for Domingo. A closer reading reveals that Atl is being conquered by Domingo. Domingo tells Atl, "I don't want you getting hurt, [...] That's all. I'm sorry" (265). With this statement, Domingo casts himself as Atl's protector. Gender roles of men and women, and the hierarchies between them are reinstated through Domingo's statement. Domingo becomes the protector and guiding authority over Atl's well being. This dynamic

mirrors colonial strategies of power which place the colonial power as the protector of the colony.

Gloria Anzaldúa's ideas on feminism can further explain the power dynamics happening in this scene. In her book, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa argues, "As long as woman is put down, the Indian and the Black in all of us is put down [...] as long as men are taught they are superior and therefore culturally favored over *la mujer*, [...] there can be no real healing of our psyches" (106). Anzaldúa links colonial bodies, such as Indians and Blacks, to feminine bodies. This connection indicates the suppression that women experience with men as their colonizers. Women are put down through gender expectations that highly favor the colonial structure. Atl experiences this put down when Domingo casts himself as her protector, placing him above her. Although Domingo does care about Atl's well-being, the statement paired with the sexualized response from Atl encourages the reader to connect colonial understandings of gender to romance. Colonial and gender hierarchies become reinstated. This is important because at this point the roles of the characters are reversed and the romance of the novel is revitalized to its full potential. Through this scene, the novel comments on the dangers of romance ideals. It demonstrates the expectation that if women find their place in the colonial influenced gender hierarchy, they can find romance.

Throughout the novel, Atl has held the power over herself and her relationship status with Domingo. She has deflected all of Domingo's unwanted advances. Now, in her weakened state, Domingo is able to "cut into her skin, like shards of glass" (265), making Atl susceptible to his advances and his ideologies. Atl is now receptive to colonial understandings of gender and sexuality. After Domingo's states his desire to protect Atl, Atl reacts, "she nodded, found the buttons of his shirt, toying with the top one, undoing it and doing it again, her finger sliding to



touch the hollow of his throat" (265). She nods, agreeing to Domingo's colonial understandings of gender. He is now her protector. She toys with the top button of his shirt, a subtle but sexual action. The description of her finger sliding to his throat is a very sensual moment between the two. Domingo reintroduces intimacy in the form of gender hierarchies by caring about Atl's well being, Atl reacts with a hint of sexuality, and the reader is finally able to see them as a couple. By the end of the chapter, the couple engages in sexual intercourse solidifying their relationship as a romantic couple.

Although, the two novels are framed by colonial understandings of gender and sexuality, we must look past these reductive colonial paradigms of heterosexuality and gender constructs. Both novels have instances of *postcolonial asexual intimacies* that unravel these gender and asexual constructs. *Left Hand of Darkness* proves to be a story of love between a man and an alien. This love, however, is not the typical romantic love form through colonial understandings of gender and sexuality. *Left Hand of Darkness* is able to move past these colonial constructs and engage in a love influenced by *postcolonial asexual intimacies*. To illustrate this, I will analyze the section of the novel where Ai is finally able to understand the agender aspects that so greatly perplexed the investigators. At this point in the novel, Ai and Estraven are reaching the end of their journey into Karhide. Estraven begins his *kemmer* cycle, in which every twenty-eight days, hormones develop allowing the Gethenians to experience sexual attraction and desire. Ai states,

And I saw then again, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not to see in him: that he was a woman as well as a man. Any need to explain the sources of that fear vanished with the fear, what I was left with was, at last, acceptance of him as he was. Until then I had rejected him, refused him his

own reality. [...] I had not wanted to give my trust, my friendship to a man who was a woman, a woman who was a man" (267).

This passage shows an intimacy between the two characters in a way that does not subscribe to colonial conceptions of gender. Ai admits that he has been "afraid" to see Estraven in his reality. This fear stems from the discomfort of rejecting the ideologies that have established Ai's own reality. Letting go of the fear, and the reasons for that fear, means that Ai has shifted his ideology. He is able to perceive Estraven free from colonial constructs of gender. Ai admits that he had not only failed to see, but had "pretended not to see" (267). The phrase, "pretended not to see," indicates that Ai has had a blatant disregard for Estraven's gender. He was aware of the ambisexuality of Estraven, yet he chose to ignore it simply because he was afraid. He states, "until then I had rejected him, refused him his own reality" (367). The word "reject" is a dismissal of Estraven as inadequate. Ai believed that because Estraven was not fully a man, as per Ai's colonial understanding of gender, then he was not an adequate human. The word "refuse" indicates an unwillingness to do something. Ai is able to recognize his own unwillingness to allow someone else their reality. Ai recognizes that being unable to accept the implications of ambisexuality is not because ambisexuality is an inadequate gender, but because he was unwilling. The issue was not Estraven's gender, but Ai's colonial gaze of gender. Ai is finally able to realize his own fault. This allows him to restructure the colonial hierarchy that has ruled his relationship with Estraven. Ai, as a man, is not longer above Estraven, a manwoman.

Further, Ai states, "I had not wanted to give my trust, my friendship to a man who was a woman, a woman who was a man" (267). *Trust* and *Friendship* are the foundations for Ai's love towards Estraven. Ai confesses that he refused to share friendship and trust with someone who was both man and woman. This refusal, and fear, can be explained by Benjamin Kahan's theories

on asexuality. In his book, *Celebacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life*, Kahan contends, "asexuality, I would argue, baffles, dodges, and unthreads the hegemony of hetero- and homosexuality" (145). Asexuality has the ability to unthread the hegemony of heterosexuality. This unthreading means that the hierarchies at play within heterosexuality become obsolete when faced with a sexuality that refuses such hierarchies. Ai, who has been nurtured through these colonial ideologies of gender hierarchies, feels extremely discomforted and unraveled by Estraven, who as a manwoman unravels gender hierarchies. Thus, Ai has not been able to trust a person who so easily refuses, and dismantles all that Ai has been taught to believe. Ai did not want to give his friendship to a person who displaced him from the hegemony of heterosexuality. Despite all of his efforts to refuse Estraven, Ai is finally able to accept Estraven as a manwoman. This acceptance also indicates a rejection of colonial understandings of gender. Ai is able to move past colonial understandings and give way to a deeper, more intimate relationship with Estraven.

Not only is Ai able to move past gender constructs in his relationship with Estraven, but he is also able to move past the "socio-sexual" interactions that Terrans are so used to. In order to prove this development, I will analyze the following passage,

" For it seemed to me, and I think to him, that it was from that sexual tension between us, admitted now and understood, but not assuaged, that the great and sudden assurance of friendship between us rose: a friendship so much needed by us both in our exile, and already so well proved in the days and nights of our bitter journey, that it might as well be called, now as later, love. [...] For us to meet sexually would be for us to meet once more as aliens. We had touched, in the only way we could touch. We left it at that. I do not know if we were right" (267).

Now that Estraven is in *keemer*, sexual tension develops between the two characters. As we recall, the investigators were so concerned that four-fifths of the time, Gethenians were not motivated at all. This calculation indicates that one-fifth of the time they are sexually motivated. However, the previous passage illustrates that although sexual tension may be present, it is not to be interchanged with sexual motivation. Ai and Estraven feel a sexual tension between them, but they do not engage. Ai states, "it was from that sexual tension between us, admitted now and understood, but not assuaged, that the great and sudden assurance of friendship between us rose" (267). The characters admit that there is a sexual tension between them, but they choose to not to satisfy it. This rejects notions of the "biological rubric" (Rifkin, 15). Ai and Estraven are able to approach a relationship without being concerned with the possibility of sex. Although sexual tension is present, it does not mean that it dominates the interactions between Ai and Estraven. The characters, especially Ai, are able to move past colonial understandings of sexuality by realizing that they do not need to satisfy their sexual needs in order to meet intimately. The refusal to satisfy sexual tensions reified their friendship. Further, it established a love between them. This love was proven "in the days and nights of our bitter journey" (267). This quote proves that love is not solidified through sexual acts, but through shared experiences: through days, and nights, and bitter journeys. Love is established through intimate moments of vulnerability where sexuality and gender are absent. Ai's and Estraven's bitter journey through Winter revolved around their survival and co-dependency, regardless of their gender and sexuality. Ai continues, "we had touched, in the only way we could touch" (267). Ai is referring to an intimate touch between two humans: not a man and a woman, not two men, but two humans. Further, the physical sense of "touch" is invoked, but Ai moves past the notion of physical intimacy and focuses on an intimate touch of emotions, ideologies, and love. The

agender and asexual Love developed between Ai and Estraven is the *postcolonial asexual intimacy* that reconfigures colonial understandings of sexuality.

*Certain Dark Things* is more subtle in the ways it presents moments of *postcolonial asexual intimacies* between Atl and Domingo. The whole narrative is presented as a romance novel framed by colonial understandings of gender and sexuality. However, this colonial gaze is primarily understood through Domingo's perspective. Atl, has to constantly subvert any gender, sexual, and romantic expectations that Domingo imposes on her. As I have analyzed, the scene prior to their sexual encounter functions as a way to cut into Atl and make her susceptible to these colonial perspectives of romance. In this scene, the readers' own romantic ideologies cast Atl and Domingo as a romantic couple because they are about to have sex. However, I argue that this sexual encounter was not an intimate moment between the two characters.

Although Domingo represented the colonial gaze, the analysis of the pre-sexual encounter scene demonstrated that Atl became susceptible to colonial notions of gender and sexuality through the guise of romance. Now that Atl has subscribed to these colonial understandings of romance, it is important to analyze the aftermath of the sexual encounter to discern the effects of sexual intimacy versus *postcolonial asexual intimacies*. Atl reflects on the sexual encounter, "she thought that he was going to leave a mark on her, as idiotic as that sounded since he had no fangs or stinger. Yet she was sure of it, that it'd be on her skin" (285). Atl expected to feel touched by Domingo in a more visible way. In other words, she expected that the physical act of sex would impress something of substance upon her. Although Atl knew that no marks would be left on her skin, the colonial perspective that she was susceptible to made her believe that sex was going to give her the comfort and intimacy she desired. Atl further reflects, "bruises heal, marks fade from purple to blue to yellow, but what about the damn mark

he was making now? How do you get rid of that? Fingerprints that cannot be wiped and incisions that don't cut muscles or tissues. How? She had no idea?" (285). Atl feels troubled by the fact that she engaged in a sexual-romantic relationship with Domingo. She expresses that she has been touched, she has been marked by Domingo in ways that have not cut into her. The description "fingerprints that cannot be wiped and incisions that don't cut muscles of tissues" (285) uses the same sensory description as "His eyes cut her, got under her skin, like shards of glass" (265). The analysis of the latter sentence described how Atl became susceptible to the colonial understandings of intimacy and romance. The repetitive use of language in the narrative connects the two scenes. The "cut" was the marking that Domingo left on Atl. The mark of the colonizer. However, Atl recognizes that Domingo has left markings that have not "cut" into her, markings that have been devoid of colonial powers. The intimacies developed by Atl and Domingo have moved past colonial understandings of gender and sexuality into a *postcolonial asexual intimacy*.

These *postcolonial asexual intimate* moments are more visible in sections of the novel where Domingo's perspective is given. As the holder of the colonial gaze, Domingo's perspective allows for a clearer development of intimacy in the novel. For instance, one of the first moments Domingo begins to care for Atl without the expectation of sex is the beginning of chapter seventeen. The narrator reveals,

"In the morning, Domingo considered waking Atl up, but then he remembered it was daylight and maybe that wasn't a great idea. Instead he hung around the apartment, listening to music, until his belly grumbled. In the kitchen he found two cans of beans but no can opener. There was also a big bag of dog food in a

corner and a bowl next to it that served as the dog's feeding dish. He refilled the dog's dish, then grabbed Atl's keys and decided to have a meal outside" (148).

Up until this point, Domingo's main concern was to impress Atl and getting her attention one way or another. He was more concerned about his needs and his desire for intimacy than for Atl's needs. This morning, Domingo puts his desire to talk to Atl aside because he remembers that Atl, as a vampire, feels discomforted in the daylight. He has developed a sense of respect for her vampire needs, as well as her space and privacy. He refrains from conquering her space. Further, Domingo gets hungry and realizes that there is nothing to eat in the apartment. However, he takes time to feed Atl's dog before he steps out of the apartment. This action is important because it shows Domingo taking care of the things that Atl cares about. He does this without the expectation of a sexual or intimacy reward. This scene shows a subtle moment in which Domingo is able to navigate through Atl's world without colonial understanding of gender and sexuality motivating him. Domingo begins to approach Atl as a person/vampire and not a woman. In other words, Domingo begins to develop a relationship with Atl through a *postcolonial asexual intimate* moment precisely because he is able to familiarize himself with Atl's needs as a vampire regardless of her gender or sexuality.

Within both of these novels, there is an emphasis on the idea of Care. The characters are able to empathize and nurture relationships with one another and create these intimate relationships that revolve around a profound love and sense of Care. The novels contextualize these relationships as a form of friendship that has developed between the characters. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Ai conceptualizes his love for Estraven through friendship. I believe that the term "friendship" was used by Ai to describe this relationship precisely because a sexual relationship was absent. *Certain Dark Things* explores the same kind of intimacy and care.

However, through the metanarrative of the novel, Romance becomes the expected relationship between the two characters. The distinguishing factor between friendship and romantic relationships is often the manifestation of sex and sexual tension. This sexual tension is often what we as humans use to categorize and identify the people in our lives. Those to whom we feel no sexual attraction to become friends, and those to whom we feel sexual attraction to become potential romantic partners. Sexual tension, then, becomes a means to produce meaning and identities. *Postcolonial Asexual Intimacy* would allow Care to become the means through which we approach all relationships.

Navigating the novels through ideas of heteronormativity, colonialist perspectives, and gender and sexuality, has allowed for a reading that highlights colonial governances and allows for a reconsideration of intimacy. *Postcolonial Asexual Intimacies* would break the divide between friendships and romantic relationships. Removing sexual tension as a means to approach relationships would allow for a more relational approach to relationships. Sexual desire would cease to be the motivation for kind gestures and would be replaced with uncategorized Care. *Postcolonial Asexual Intimacies* attempts to decolonize social interactions, relationships, and concepts of love.



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