Postcolonialism/s, Gender/s, Sexuality/ies and the Legacy of 'The Left Hand of Darkness':
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Author(s): Wendy Gay Pearson
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Postcolonialism/s, Gender/s, Sexuality/ies and the Legacy of The Left Hand of Darkness: Gwyneth Jones’s Aleutians Talk Back

WENDY GAY PEARSON
University of Western Ontario

Folded within the scientific accounts of race, a central assumption and paranoid fantasy was endlessly repeated: the uncontrollable sexual drive of the non-white races and their limitless fertility. What was so clearly fascinating was not just the power of other sexuality as such, the ‘promiscuous,’ ‘illicit intercourse’ and ‘excessive debauchery’ of a licentious primitive sexuality. [...] Nineteenth-century theories of race did not just consist of essentializing differentiations between self and other; they were also about a fascination with people having sex — interminable, adulterating, aleatory, illicit, inter-racial sex.

Robert J. C. Young, Colonial Desire

An Outside Context Problem was the sort of thing most civilisations encountered just once, and which they tended to encounter rather in the same way a sentence encountered a full stop. The usual example given to illustrate an Outside Context Problem was imagining you were a tribe on a largish, fertile island; you’d tamed the land, invented the wheel or writing or whatever, the neighbours were cooperative or enslaved but at any rate peaceful and you were busy raising temples to yourself. . . . when suddenly this bristling lump of iron appears sailless and trailing steam in the bay and these guys carrying long funny-looking sticks come ashore and announce you’ve just been discovered, you’re all subjects of the Emperor now, he’s keen on presents called tax and these bright-eyed holy men would like a word with your priests.

Iain M. Banks, Excession

Racial categorization and subsequent discourses and institutions of racial differentiation and hierarchy as we know them today began in the colonial period, as did the immediate antecedents of those discourses of gender and sexuality that the contemporary Western/metropolitan world refers to as ‘traditional’.¹ They are, in a sense, inextricable from the very practices of colonialism they hypostasized. As Robert Young argues in Colonial Desire:

it is clear that the forms of sexual exchange brought about by colonialism were themselves both consequences and mirrors of the modes of economic exchange that constituted the basis of colonial relations; the extended exchange of property which began with small trading-posts and the visiting slave ships originated, indeed, as much in the

exchange of bodies as of goods, or rather of bodies as goods: as in that paradigm of respectability, marriage, economic and sexual exchange were intimately bound up, coupled with each other from the very first.2

Thus the indigenes confronted in Iain Banks’s hypothetical science-fictional scenario with an ‘Outside Context Problem’ have historically not merely been expected to pay taxes and adhere to imported religious beliefs, but also to participate in commerce, a word whose historical meanings include ‘the exchange both of merchandise and of bodies in sexual intercourse’.3 Colonialism’s ideological underpinnings require the discursive construction of the bodies of the other not only as abjected components in racialized and gendered hierarchies, but also as units of exchange in economic, sexual, and cultural intercourse.4 It is given that these bodies must in some way be marked by their difference — racial, gendered, and sexual — from the normative bodies of the colonizer. In each commercial exchange it is essential to be able to tell ‘Us’ from ‘Them’, even as ‘Our’ fantasies of difference expose the permeability of the very boundaries that create the self/other dialectic in the first place, always at risk of penetration through the very forms of contact that serve as mechanisms of exchange, particularly miscegenation, hybridity, and failures of racial classification. All three of these mechanisms of exchange play some role in the works I discuss in this article, works in which questions of gender, sexuality, and race (or human and alien species) intersect with the troubled history and imaginative reconstruction of the colonial encounter.

This article attempts to bring together science fiction, postcolonial theory, and contemporary approaches to sexuality and gender, predominantly queer theory, in an examination of two works that speak with great force to the relationship between racialized and gendered identities and the colonial/postcolonial condition: Ursula Le Guin’s The Left Hand of Darkness (1969), and Gwyneth Jones’s Aleutian trilogy, which consists of the novels White Queen (1991), North Wind (1994), and Phoenix Café (1997). Obviously a period of more than twenty years separates Jones’s trilogy from Le Guin’s groundbreaking interrogation of gender, a period during which both SF itself and the theoretical groundwork for understanding sex, gender, sexuality, and the colonial have changed dramatically. I argue, however, that just as Sherryl Vint suggests that ‘White Queen is a revision of the tropes of Childhood’s End’,5 Jones’s trilogy, and especially the

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3 Young, p. 182.
4 I use the word ‘racialize’ in the sense of being identified, usually pejoratively, as a member of a group identifiable by race. This is the sense in which the word is used, for example, in Roy Miki’s volume of essays Broken Entries: Race, Subjectivity, Writing (Toronto: Mercury, 1998), rather than in the potentially positive sense of creating a racial identity for oneself. Similarly, I use ‘sexualize’ to express the experience of being constructed as someone whose life is supposedly given meaning by a discursively identifiable sexual orientation.
first novel, *White Queen*, is even more a revision of the tropes of *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Jones’s Johnny Guglioli can be read as a rewriting of Le Guin’s Genly Ai, another naive human male locked in his own preconceptions about the aliens and their world; even their names resonate with ‘difference in repetition’, Johnny sounding not unlike Genly-with-a-soft-G, and Guglioli working variations on beginning with G and ending with I. Of course, ‘Johnny Guglioli’ does not repeat the specific play on selfhood and visibility that marks Le Guin’s narrator (Ai/I/eye). Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., however, in arguing that the Aleutians are essentially ‘comic creations’, points out that even their name is comical: the rationalization that they landed in the Aleutian Islands is eagerly believed by human characters and readers alike [...]. Nested in their name are the anagrams: Alien, ET, and U. Their name, like their role, is a trick and a joke.7

While no one has suggested that the Gethenians are comic creations (although they have their moments, and their role, in relation to the novel’s terrestrial readers, might well be regarded as a trick or a joke, particularly in the indigenous and androgynous sense of the Trickster or Coyote), the Aleutians still pose many of the same problems that the Gethenians do: both races are hermaphroditic, both have a culture that at first glance looks as if it should have either more or less in common with ours than it does, and both overtly refute the (Euramerican) human insistence on duality and binary thinking. Moreover, just as by the end of *The Left Hand of Darkness* the Gethenians have become Self and the humans Other/Alien to Genly, Jones plays variations on the Self/Other thematic even as her aliens, like Le Guin’s, debunk the very notion of binary division. Both works can thus be read as interrogations of our current sex/gender system and its implications for the relations between women and men,8 and, importantly, both consider the implications of ‘first contact’ with an ‘alien’ race in ways that could be considered anticolonial or postcolonial. Indeed, I argue that it is *The Left Hand of Darkness* that most effectively established within SF the possibility that the genre might produce works capable of powerfully critiquing colonial forms of economic exchange and their inherent underpinning in discourses that produce both cultural, or, as Michel Foucault would say, both statist and biologized and thus institutional forms of racism, sexism, and homophobia. While *The Left Hand of Darkness* was not the first SF novel to take reflections on colonialism as its ground, the novel can certainly be understood as central to any genealogy of works that link issues of gender and race to the history and legacy of colonialism. It is thus

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6 Not surprisingly, this similitude or imperfect repetition also links the genealogy of postcolonial SF to Stephen Neale’s definition of genre itself as ‘repetition in difference’, in *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), p. 50.


8 In saying this, I intend to imply not only a good deal more than sexual relations or than heterosexuality, but also the homosocial relations that exist within each gender as well as the various types of non-sexual relationships between genders.
possible to read the Aleutian trilogy not only as an intervention into the same issues and debates that underwrite Le Guin’s novel (including the issues of ‘betrayal and fidelity’\(^9\) that Le Guin claims are crucial to The Left Hand of Darkness), and as a way of thinking about and responding both to The Left Hand of Darkness and the critical history from which that novel can now scarcely be separated, but also as a response to that legacy.

If any further argument were needed to make the imbrication of gender, race (or species), and colonialism clear, Jones is explicit about the purpose and workings of her own narrative. In ‘Aliens in the Fourth Dimension’, Jones states that, ‘When I invented my alien invaders “The Aleutians” I was aware of the models that science fiction offered, and of the doubled purpose that they could serve. I wanted, like other writers before me, to tell a story about the colonisers and the colonised’.\(^10\) She adds not only that she ‘wanted to study the truly extraordinary imbalance of wealth, power, and \textit{per capita} human comfort [...] that came into being over three hundred years or so of European rule’, but also that she wanted ‘— the other doubled purpose — to describe and examine the relationship between men and women’.\(^11\) To do so, Jones says that she gave her aliens traits suggestively of another way [history] could have turned out. I planned to give my alien conquerors the characteristics, all the supposed deficiencies, that Europeans came to see in their subject races in darkest Africa and the mystic East — ‘animal’ nature, irrationality, intuition; mechanical incompetence, indifference to time, hapless aversion to theory and measurement: and I planned to have them win the territorial battle this time. It was no coincidence, for my purposes, that the same list of qualities or deficiencies [... ] were and still are routinely awarded to women, the defeated natives, supplanting rulers of men, in cultures north and south, west and east, white and non-white, the human world over.\(^12\)

Thus while the links between exploring gender, sexuality, alterity, and colonialism may not be as explicit in Le Guin’s writings about The Left Hand of Darkness, they remain part of the genealogy of postcolonial science fiction.\(^13\) All the things Genly dislikes about the Gethenians are precisely those qualities historically (and contemporarily) ascribed to women and native peoples and which Jones consciously and ironically attributes to those accidental conquerors, the Aleutians. In emphasizing characteristics associated with the female and the native, both authors call into question all the naturalized assumptions about what it means to be human and less than human, particularly when ‘human’ is


\(^11\) Jones, p. 109

\(^12\) Jones, p. 110.

\(^13\) So, of course, do Le Guin’s more overtly postcolonial fictions, such as The Word for World is Forest (1972/76) and Four Ways to Forgiveness (1995).
taken to mean white and male. Although much criticism of *The Left Hand of Darkness* has focused on Le Guin’s decision to use the masculine pronoun for the Gethenians, creating an apparent masculinization of her hermaphrodites, the Gethenians sexual/asexual nature makes them responsive to monthly cycles, thus linking their experience of sex and gender to human women’s experience of menstruation. In addition, the Gethenians are less organized, less aggressive, less technologically oriented, and less driven by teleological narratives than are contemporary human societies — all characteristics that Jones also has the Aleutians reflect. This is not to say that Aleutians are Gethenians, but rather that Le Guin’s most famous and influential novel provides an inevitable place to start to think about the ways in which gender works, and works as part of the colonial project. If, for Europeans, it was and perhaps still is, at its most base, all about the production of white babies who will increase the accumulation of wealth through the acquisition of more goods and the generation of more babies, the question the Gethenians and the Aleutians raise is not whether a different social construction of biological sex could produce different babies, but rather whether it is about something else entirely, including whether or not the economics of trade in goods can be separated from commerce in bodies, and whether bodies themselves can cease to be comprehensible as alienated objects capable of being subsumed into trade goods through fantasies of alterity, desire, and consumption. Such trade is inexplicable both to the Aleutians and the Gethenians.

Thus I argue that Le Guin’s legacy of thought experiment in anticolonial gender construction underlies, consciously or otherwise, in admiration or in dissatisfaction, contemporary work, particularly by writers of feminist SF. That legacy provokes subsequent generations of SF writers to call into question the production of gender in colonial conditions. These are the conditions which often invisibly underwrite one of SF’s most common subgenres, the first contact story, and which remain indubitably the most powerful historical force shaping the contemporary world and reaching into every aspect of human lives, including the ways in which we can live our genders, perform our sexual preferences, and experience our being in the world as people of colour (or pallor).  

Postcolonial theory and SF seem as if they should be two sides of the same coin — or *yin* and *yang*. Both, after all, rest upon and are to some sense consumed by the idea of the alien, the other, the Other. The ability of SF to reflect directly, as opposed to metaphorically (as with *Frankenstein’s* monster-as-alien), on the colonial

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14 In saying this, I do not at all mean to imply that all of these writers are women, or that all women SF writers produce feminist SF. Indeed, I would include Samuel Delany as one of the most important feminist voices in the genre.

15 The irony always being that white people are produced as ‘colour-less’ only through normative racializing discourses that naturalize Us at the expense of Them.
creation of racialized, gendered, and sexualized alterity underwrites one of SF’s most important first works. H. G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* actually starts off with the observation that colonialism is not all that wonderful for the colonized: Wells’s explicit examples are the aboriginal Tasmanians, presumed to have been ‘entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants’. Indeed, Wells sets the reader up for the shock of invasion by a superior race of aliens by noting that such an event is unimaginable in what he describes as the utterly complacent world of late nineteenth-century Europe. If life on Mars had been imagined at all, it was only as a specifically colonial fantasy in which Mars would be no different from Tasmania or the Congo: ‘At most terrestrial men fancied there might be other men upon Mars, perhaps inferior to themselves and ready to welcome a missionary enterprise’.17

The Martian invasion and the discovery that we are to them as ‘our own inferior races’ have been to us, Wells calls ‘the great disillusionment’.18 The English experience the Martian invasion from the position of the colonized, yet,ironically, without entirely losing the inescapable smugness of having believed themselves to belong culturally and historically to a naturally superior category of invaders and colonialists. Tit for tat, to put it bluntly, although it is not entirely clear whether Wells intends this depiction of the similitude — even identity — between colonizer and colonized as an ‘awful warning’, a disavowal of the colonial pretensions of the past; or whether he regards it as an inevitable function of evolutionary ‘progress’ and ‘civilized’ life, and thus as inevitable that humanity will be colonized, should we meet with those much-vaunted, technologically superior aliens when they come calling, and that we will undoubtedly colonize them, should they prove capable of defeat. Indeed, Patrick Parrinder, for one, has espoused the latter interpretation, arguing that ‘[e]ven the “conception of the commonweal of mankind” seems intended, in this context, only to turn the human race into a more efficient military unit’.19 This is a familiar enough concept to the contemporary audience for SF, particularly cinematic SF, where it is espoused in film after film. Think, for example, of *Independence Day*, where human bravado and technological ability defeat an invasion of only apparently superior aliens.20

17 Wells, p. 111.
18 Wells, pp. 113, 111.
20 Any postcolonial reading of *ID4* could only be a critique, as the film reproduces a very familiar trope of American war films: the racially stereotyped triumvirate of Black body (Steven, played by Will Smith) and Jewish brain (David, played by Jeff Goldblum) saving the day under the triumphant leadership of a WASP commander (President Whitmore, played by Bill Pullman), who is portrayed as both physically and intellectually capable. For a further analysis of racial and ethnic issues in *ID4* see Susan Knabe’s ‘“Such a Nice Smart Boy”: Cinematic Representations of Ethnicity, Race and Intelligence in *Independence Day’*, in *Closely-Watched Brains*, ed. by Murray Pomerance and John Sakeris (Boston, MA: Pearson Education, 2001), pp. 93–106.
Postcolonial theory did not exist either as an interpretative tool or as a field of study when Le Guin wrote *The Left Hand of Darkness*, although critiques of colonialism certainly did (consider both the work of Frantz Fanon and the criticism of the US’s involvement in Vietnam, very much at the forefront of political consciousness in the USA when Le Guin was writing). Le Guin explicitly positions *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a thought experiment in gender (both in her introduction and in her later essays ‘Is Gender Necessary?’ and ‘Is Gender Necessary? Redux’) and as primarily a novel of ‘betrayal and fidelity’, in which her experimentation with gender is reduced to being ‘the lesser half’ of the book.21 Not surprisingly, critics and readers have taken Le Guin’s invention of the hermaphroditic Gethenians as being anything but the ‘lesser half’. Genly’s attempt to come to terms with a world without permanent or essential gender roles is the true centre of the novel, illuminated primarily through his relationship with a single Gethenian, Estraven. The postcolonial or anticolonial nature of the work resides in Genly’s role as the Ekumen’s Envoy, sent alone into a strange new world precisely in order to avoid the dangers of colonization and deculturation. Early in the novel Genly describes his role as ‘a one-man job’, adding that ‘the first news from the Ekumen on any world is spoken by one voice, one man present in the flesh, present and alone [. . .]. One voice speaking truth is a greater force than fleets and armies, given time; plenty of time’.22 Genly is not the brightest or most insightful of narrators; indeed, it is his very slowness to understand that makes him a useful lens through which to view life on Gethen. In time, he realizes not only that he is mistaken about the nature of Gethenians and particularly about the ways in which they experience life without gender, but also that he has misunderstood his own role. Late in the journey across the Ice, Genly answers Estraven’s question, ‘Why were you sent alone?’, saying,

I thought it was for your sake that I came alone, so obviously alone, so vulnerable, that I could in myself pose no threat, change no balance: not an invasion, but a mere messenger-boy. But there’s more to it than that. Alone, I cannot change your world. But I can be changed by it. Alone, I must listen, as well as speak. Alone, the relationship I finally make, if I make one, is not impersonal and not only political: it is individual, it is personal, it is both more and less than political. Not We and They; not I and It; but I and Thou.23

Of course, he is wrong even at this stage. It is clear both in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and in *The Word for World is Forest* (1972) that Le Guin does indeed posit that one person can change a world, and that change, once begun, cannot be undone. In the later novel, Selver, the Athshean who has led the fight against human colonization and exploitation, responds as follows to the Hainish promise

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that the departure of all members of the Ekumen means that ‘the forests of Athshe will be as they were before’: ‘Maybe after I die people will be as they were before I was born, and before you came. But I do not think they will’. The cultures of Gethen, like the cultures of the Athsheans, will inevitably be altered by the encounter with the other, whether the intentions of the other be colonization or alliance and trade. Athsheans will know how to kill each other, and their future cultures will be hybridized because of that knowledge, just as Gethenian understandings of themselves are permanently altered by the consequences of Genly’s arrival.

Thus, although *The Left Hand of Darkness* is not directly informed by postcolonial theory, it is informed by the very conditions and historical circumstances that created both the postcolonial condition and the theory that attempts to explain and understand it. The question of alterity is at the heart of *The Left Hand of Darkness*: the alterity that the sex/gender system creates for us as a society (and, perhaps, though differently expressed and understood in different times and places, as a species) and the alterity that allows the construction of Us and Them, of a binary that is automatically hierarchical, so that They are always less (human) than We. Genly Ai does change Gethen, in ways that he cannot avoid. The very fact of his existence represents an epistemological break for those Gethenians willing to believe — unlike the King of Karhide — that Genly is what he says he is: a person from another planet. Even more confoundingly, Genly Ai brings the Gethenians the news that they are the other, the oddity, and not the norm, in a universe where everyone else has two permanent sexes. In the terms that Iain Banks invents for his own contact novel, *Excession*, Genly is for the Gethenians an ‘Outside Context Problem’. This, like Wells’s description of the fate of the Tasmanians, is a classically science-fictional example of the problem which created both the colonial and postcolonial world and which Le Guin tries very hard, in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, to have the Ekumen avoid. Favoured trade without physical or political subjugation, and shunning entirely the trade in bodies as goods, the Ekumen is an Outside Context Problem of a somewhat different order, but a problem nevertheless. In Le Guin’s more recent fictional return to Gethen in ‘Coming of Age in Karhide’ (2003), the story’s first person narrator, Sov, tells of his/hers first experience of ‘kemmer’ (akin to oestrus in many mammalian species, but without biological gender differentiation at

25 If the alien is always a floating signifier, then the Gethenians can represent any group considered as outside the norm. However, because the Gethenians are explicitly positioned as outside the norm sexually, it is hard not to read them as being metaphorically queer despite the novel’s disavowal of what some (see Lamb and Veith especially) have seen as its homoerotic surface tension. Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diane L. Veith, ‘Again, The Left Hand of Darkness: Androgyny or Homophobia’, in *Erotic Universe: Sexuality and Fantastic Literature*, ed. by Donald Palumbo (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986), pp. 221–31.
other times). Sov’s first kemmer took place in the ‘quiet years, before Argaven, the first Gethenian who ever left our planet, brought us at last fully into the Ekumen; before we, not they, became the Aliens’.27 Although the Ekumen is not remotely as predatory as the colonialists of human history, the Gethenians cannot escape having their world view permanently changed. This again links them with the human experience of the arrival (invasion?) of the Aleutians. As Brian Attebery argues, just as Genly Ai’s arrival eventually transforms the relatively stable cultures of Gethen, the ‘landing of the Aleutians unsettling every aspect of human culture. Like an invasion of French theorists landing on the American shore, they call into question the most commonplace assumptions about both social relations and physical being’.28 Unlike the Aleutians, however (and perhaps the French theorists), the Ekumen consciously rejects a colonizing role, even for commercial profit; but the mere knowledge that other peoples exist and that they all have a different, dimorphic biological structure poses a significant epistemological problem for the people of Gethen.

Genly’s mission as ambassador, however, means that he must be prepared to give a reasonable accounting of the Ekumen even to people who have never before considered the possibility of life beyond their planet. Gethen’s king, Argaven, concerned with consolidating his own power, sees the Ekumen as a half-mythological threat and its members as ‘nations of monsters living out in the Void’.29 S/he is not much reassured by Genly’s explanation of why the Ekumen wants to make ‘an alliance with the nations of Gethen’. Asked what is in it for the Ekumen, Genly replies that the Ekumen will gain ‘material profit. Increase of knowledge. The augmentation of the complexity and intensity of the field of intelligent life. The enrichment of harmony and the greater glory of God. Curiosity. Adventure. Delight’.30 The Ekumen, then, is intended as the opposite of a colonial power, apparently made so both by the wisdom of its elder members, the Hainish and the Cetians, and by the physical constraints of galactic space travel. Genly says, ‘The Ekumen is not a kingdom, but a co-ordinator, a clearinghouse for trade and knowledge; without it communication between the worlds of men would be haphazard, and trade very risky.’31

The risks (and rewards) of trade are what bring the Aleutians to Earth. While the Gethenians and the Aleutians have in common their metaphorical femininity, their allegorical indigeneity, the worlds they come from are to some extent inverted. The contact motif in *The Left Hand of Darkness* places a lone human among a planet of aliens, revealing inevitably that alienness is a social

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29 Le Guin, *Left Hand*, p. 34.
30 Le Guin, *Left Hand*, p. 34.
31 Le Guin, *Left Hand*, p. 35.
construction: the Gethenians see themselves as normal and read Genly’s alien sexual biology as perversion. In White Queen, the Aleutians who stumble upon Earth are a small band of traders whose subsequent conquest of the planet is somewhere between an accident and a joke; in this case, it is the ‘alien’ who comes visiting and the humans who are ‘at home’. Except, of course, that that is really the paradigm for both books in a neat twist that reveals the identity concealed beneath the apparent difference of contact scenarios. It is always the ‘aliens’ who arrive and the ‘humans’ who are at home but whose experience of being becomes increasingly unheimlich in the presence of the newcomers. In addition, while both the Ekumen and the Aleutians have trade as their goal, there is nothing particularly uplifting about the trading party that stumbles across Earth. Indeed, its members are a mixture of the available genetic types (each Aleutian holds in posse all the genetic information for every member of her/his species), with characters both dignified and ignoble, generous and grasping, mature and childlike. These characterizations are not unlike the clumsy attempts Genly makes to typecast — and, of course, to gender — the Gethenians he meets. And just as Genly is wrong about Gethenians and Gethenians (with the exception of Estraven) wrong about Genly, the humans in White Queen are wrong about Aleutian nature and the Aleutians wrong about human nature.

To sum up, Jones creates for Earth-bound humanity a perhaps even more comprehensive encounter with a classic Outside Context Problem: the arrival of aliens with (apparently) superior technology. In Jones’s work this is all very ironic. The aliens find us by accident, they intend trade, rather like the Ekumen, not conquest, but they end up trapped, as we ourselves are, in our binary worldview (Us versus Them) and our historically based expectation ‘that the aliens who landed, whoever they were, had to be superior. Or we’d be visiting them’: in other words, that They will always behave as We would behave if the situation were reversed. In yet another irony, not only are Jones’s Aleutians not significantly technologically superior, they also do not see themselves as fundamentally different from humans. Indeed, the Aleutians understand the world as self, which Clavel calls the WorldSelf and which is all that there is. The reader’s first and last encounters with the Aleutians in White Queen reiterate the difference between Aleutian and Human epistemologies: first, Agnés/Clavel, the poet, composing ‘the shape and texture of loneliness […] and in loneliness a bodily unity: the unity inescapable of the WorldSelf’; last, in Clavel’s interpretation of Marx to Ellen Kershaw, at the very end of the novel, where he

32 It is clear, however, that the Aleutians have a rather less benign view of trade than the Ekumen. In White Queen, Clavel explains to the child Lugha that the human request for biological samples results from a desire to make weapons; Clavel seems to see this as an exchange of hostages, a slight variation on the commonplace that ‘all trade is war’. Gwyneth Jones, White Queen (London: Gollancz, 1991), p. 82.
33 Jones, White Queen, p. 69 (italics in original).
(mis)reads *Das Kapital* to say that ‘Self’ is both tool and hand. Division of one from the other is one of the *basic* lies which allows us to function’.  

Brian Attebery has usefully summarized the conceptual difference between Aleutian and human worldviews: ‘The two rival metaphoric schemata in Jones’s novels might be expressed [...] as “THE WORLD IS AN EXTENSION OF MYSELF” versus “DIFFERENT IS ALIEN”’.  

This division between the way in which Aleutians think about the relation of self to world and the way humans, at least in the Western tradition, think about the problem of self and other returns Jones’s postcolonial narrative to the question of gender, if only because, as Attebery also notes, the metaphoric system that insists that different is alien has gender as its ‘source domain’. The Gethenians are not quite as radically removed from binary thinking as the Aleutians, yet it remains also one of the central issues dividing humans and Gethenians in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, where it is also constituted as an effect of sex/gender systems: when they are on the Ice, Estraven recites Tormer’s Lay (‘Light is the left hand of darkness’), which causes Genly to ruminate that the Gethenians ‘are isolated, and undivided. Perhaps you are as obsessed with wholeness as we are with dualism’. Estraven replies that Gethenians are dualists too, that ‘Duality is an essential, isn’t it? So long as there is *myself* and *the other*’. This discussion leads into Estraven’s much-cited question about the difference between human sexes and the nature of women, indicating the extent to which gender remains, in both authors’ works and in our contemporary social context, the root of difference.  

In both Œuvres, then, the questions raised by first contact, the (at least potentially) colonial situation, and the construction of a hermaphroditic race work to illuminate the relationship between binary sex/gender systems, metaphorical schemata based on Cartesian logic, and the treatment (and, indeed, the identification) of the Other.

Perhaps the most revealing moments in each novel are the sex scenes, both present and absent. The most crucial of these scenes involve sex across the racial/species divide. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, although Genly has come to love Estraven and Estraven Genly, the two refrain from a sexual encounter at the precise moment when it becomes most possible. Alone on the Ice, fleeing Orgota across the top of the world, Estraven goes into kemmer, a state in which it is very difficult for a Gethenian not to have sex. This moment is described from Genly’s point of view, although in the previous chapter Estraven has recorded in his diary Genly’s attempt to explain how women are different from men. At that point, Genly admits to Estraven that he ‘can’t tell [him] what women are like [...]’. In a sense, women are more alien to me than you are.

34 Jones, *White Queen*, pp. 18, 306.  
36 British and Australian readers may take this as a bad pun, but it is not an irrelevant one.
With you, I share one sex, anyhow'. 37 When Estraven admits to Genly that s/he is in kemmer, Genly says:
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 both of us in our exile [...] that it might as well be called, now as later, love. But it was from the difference between us, not from the affinities and likenesses, but from the difference, that that love came: and it was the bridge, the only bridge, across what divided us. For us to meet sexually would be for us to meet once more as aliens. 38

This encounter works as a reversal of the cultural expectation that sex reveals the truth of the self, a cultural position most trenchantly critiqued by Michel Foucault in his discussion of the French hermaphrodite Hercule Barbin. Rather than a sexual encounter revealing their true natures, Genly argues that it would only have made them alien to each other. This is, perforce, a matter of the rigidly heterosexual biology Le Guin attributed to Gethenians in The Left Hand of Darkness (and recanted both in ‘Is Gender Necessary?’ and in ‘Coming of Age in Karhide’). Moreover, the locking of Gethenians into a heterosexual model not only means that Estraven can ‘become’ female only in kemmer in reaction to Genly’s permanent (and, to Gethenians, perverted) maleness, it also repeats the cultural assumption later expressed in pop culture through the formulation ‘women are from Venus, men are from Mars’. In other words, a sexual encounter between Genly and Estraven would make them aliens again to each other because, in the terms of the novel, Genly can only be male and Estraven can only become female; thus neither can know the other because, as Genly has already stated, ‘women are more alien’ to human men than are Gethenians.

There are a number of critical readings of this scene, ranging from Lamb and Veith’s accusation that the novel is homophobic, because Estraven seems to them male and the sexual encounter would thus have been the encounter of two men, to John Pennington’s argument that ‘the novel requires readers to resist a gendered reading of the narrative’ 39 and to participate imaginatively in the androgynous world Le Guin creates. Recent criticism by Pennington and Christine Cornell, among others, emphasizes the reader’s ability to enter imaginatively into the narrative and thus to resist the very construction of gender implied by Le Guin’s use of masculine pronouns but diegetically denied by the very existence of the Gethenians. Indeed, despite many years of criticism focused on Le Guin’s use of ‘he’ and ‘him’ for the Gethenians (and Le Guin’s own eventual admission that she should have used a neutral pronoun), Cornell makes a strong argument that to have done otherwise would have been a mistake:

37 Le Guin, Left Hand, p. 293.
38 Le Guin, Left Hand, p. 249.
I would argue that the gender-neutral pronouns that [Le Guin] proposes would fundamentally alter the experience of reading the novel. Genly knows on some basic level that he is being inaccurate; we know he is being inaccurate, but both Genly and many readers quickly succumb to the misleading perceptions and misconceptions created by our language [...]. Nevertheless, signs of the trap are evident: Genly’s selection of pronouns is consistent with his tendency to masculinize the world around him [...]. There is no doubt that the pronouns are an additional burden on the reader, but they are a valuable part of our education.40

Le Guin’s valuation of Taoism and other process-oriented approaches to the world mean that both Cornell and Pennington can draw on the way in which the reader can participate in the process of the novel, the interpretative journey, to borrow Cornell’s phrase, which both Genly and the reader take throughout the narrative. Indeed, this emphasis in Le Guin’s work on process means that there can be no end point at which Genly finally gets the Gethenians and his relationship to them ‘right’. The inability to reach a conclusion is valorized in the novel, as reaching a final interpretation means that the journey has stopped; no further learning can take place. Taking the near sexual encounter in this light, it becomes part of the process by which Genly and Estraven come to know each other, a process that Genly theorizes as avoiding a return to the alienation between the two of them. At the same time, it is difficult to see how Le Guin could have manoeuvred past the interpretative trap the novel itself sets up: if Genly has sex with an Estraven who is feminized, their coupling can only partake of populist notions of sexual encounters across the divide of genders alien to each other. Genly remains a man, Estraven becomes a woman, and neither can know the other, save carnally. If, however, the sexual encounter takes place within the framework of Genly’s tendency to masculinize everything, including Estraven, then Estraven, despite biology, remains discursively male. While this encounter might be more satisfying to those who see the relationship as essentially homoerotic, both possibilities end up reifying gender: we can have only an encounter between a man and a woman or between two men. The third possibility, the encounter outside of gender, is unimaginable to Genly, even though he admits to the expectation that ‘it will turn out that sexual intercourse is possible between Gethenian double-sexed and Hainish norm one-sexed human beings’.41 At least Genly has advanced far enough along the path to understanding both himself and the Gethenians that he has the grace to admit that the decision not to have sex may not have been right. At the point of writing, there is no possibility for Le Guin to imagine the sexual life of Gethenians with the explicit detail in which she describes Sov’s first kemmering in ‘Coming of

41 Le Guin, Left Hand, p. 247.
Age in Karhide’, simply because there is no way in which Genly, still locked in his assumptions about binary gender, can imagine such a thing without reifying the performance of gender by the temporarily sexed bodies of the participants. Moreover, Genly’s relationship with Estraven is a relationship of equals, something he does not quite believe possible with women. Were a sexual encounter to take place, then sex across species/races can only revive the spectre of inter-racial sex and miscegenation that has so occupied the anxieties of colonizer and colonized alike. Would sex with a feminized Estraven not mark Genly as a conquistador in his own right, a descendant in a long tradition of feminizing the natives whose exotic bodies the colonizer haplessly desires? Such an encounter risks undoing Le Guin’s imaginative creation of the Ekumen as an actively and decisively anticolonial body.

A similar set of problems lurks behind Jones’s description of the sexual encounter between Johnny Guglioli and Agnès/Clavel. Where Genly and Estraven avoid sex in an attempt to prevent further misunderstandings between them, sex between Johnny and Clavel is precisely a product of their own misunderstandings. Johnny thinks Clavel is a harmless girl, despite her musculature. When Clavel says ‘I’m the one who can give you what you most desire in this world’, Johnny thinks she means that she can cure his QV, the vaguely AIDS-like virus that prevents him from practising as a journalist. So when Clavel pulls him down and starts to have sex with him, it is quite a shock to Johnny to discover that ‘it wasn’t female after all, but a kind of hermaphrodite’. Johnny interprets what Clavel tried to do as an attempted rape. Clavel, however, is equally shocked by Johnny’s reactions, assuming that what he wants most in the world is also what Johnny wants, that is, to find his ‘true’ parent or ‘true’ child, the genetically identical person born a generation before or a generation later. Clavel is infatuated with the idea of being in love, of wanting to make love with himself, ‘Now and here, myself and I.’ He studies love poems and sees those instead of the “real” Johnny. Brian Attebery suggests that, TheJohnny [Clavel] is in love with is sign, not referent, not the complex and conflicted human being. The gap between referent and sign turns Clavel’s lovemaking into an act of rape. Afterward, he is baffled by Johnny’s rage and revulsion, which are tied into Johnny’s sense of his own signification as Johnny, as human being, and especially as man. He asks Johnny’s human lover Braemar Wilson, ‘Are you a woman?’ I thought I knew what that meant, so far as it matters. But the worst thing I did was I tried to treat him like a woman. What does that mean?”

The Aleutians arrive during a period of cultural chaos, in the middle of the gender wars and the Eve riots, when the planet is deeply divided into the haves,
mostly white and male, and the have-nots, the ‘brown mice’, inevitably female, who form part of what Ellen Kershaw, the British delegate to the World Conference on Women’s Affairs, labels the ‘mouse army’: ‘Even an army of mice can be alarming, because it seems so unnatural’. The Aleutians mistake WOCWOM for the government of the world, inadvertently moving ‘women’s affairs’ from its abject position as a disregarded and apparently endless backwater to the centre of the world stage. Such positioning serves, however slyly, to locate gender itself at the heart of the novel. It matters that Clavel has treated Johnny ‘like a woman’. Its meaning, incomprehensible to the Aleutians, whose ideas of masculinity and femininity are unattached to issues of biology, reproduction, social roles, or hierarchy, is simple enough: to be treated like a woman is the ultimate insult. Johnny may be an ineffectual, obsessive, overgrown adolescent, but his ‘manhood’ must be respected. Clavel’s attempt to penetrate him, no matter how alien the organ, can only be understood by Johnny as an attempt to abject him, to turn him into something less than himself. Once again, as with The Left Hand of Darkness, the presence of sex between human and alien has the effect of reifying gender despite the alien’s androgyny. Where Genly feels he has come to understand Estraven once he learns to accept that Estraven was ‘a man who was a woman, a woman who was a man’, Johnny feels betrayed by the discovery that the shy girl he has enshrined as his personal saviour is not a woman at all. Johnny, like Genly, cannot understand sexuality outside of a gendered model: if Clavel is capable of penetration, he must be gendered male in Johnny’s ontology; if Johnny is capable of being penetrated, he can only be re-gendered as female. The conquistador is the ultimate in masculinity; the conquered and colonized, equally feminized. The politics of gender and the politics of colonialism are one and the same: the penetrator triumphs and the penetrated is defeated, sealed permanently in the netherworld of insufficiency, abjection, and femaleness.

Both Le Guin and Jones attempt to imagine futures in which gender ceases to be a meaningful category for understanding the place, function, and status of two divided camps of humans. Neither author positions the world she invents as a utopian solution to the problem of gender in a postcolonial world; each, rather, sets up a thought experiment that encourages the reader to think about how gender works in the world and how its workings might be changed or even eliminated. The very act of imagining hermaphroditic, androgynous people with no comprehension of gender as a hypostasized ontological category is an act of asserting that the world might be different. Truth, as Genly says at the start of The Left Hand of Darkness, is a matter of the imagination. Le Guin and Jones both imagine worlds in which gender is not truth.

46 Jones, White Queen, p. 62.