



Toward Asexual Utopias

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how asexual (ace) kinship and community provide a relational groundwork for futures that move past our current anti-ace worlds and into utopias built on myriad intimacies beyond sexual connection. The authors examine two speculative fiction novellas with ace main characters to highlight the ways that ace-ness is constrained within our anti-ace world and yet simultaneously offers hope for a utopian horizon that humans can enact through asexual intimacies now. Seanan McGuire's first novella in her Wayward Children series, Every Heart a Doorway, and Meredith Katz's The Cybernetic Tea Shop are read for the ways that they constrain and enable asexual utopias. To bridge everyday asexual potentialities in the present and the future worlds they can build, the article concludes by advocating for two modes of asexual praxis: breaking linear sexual trajectories and centering nonsexual intimacies.

KEYWORDS: asexuality, ace futurity, speculative fiction, Utopia, queer worldmaking

There are many ways that asexuality has been analogized in speculative fiction. Asexuality is alien. Asexuality is roboticism. Asexuality is isolation. *Asexuality is broken humanity*, as we often connote futurity through reproduction, and even queer potentialities for joy through sexual satisfaction. What might it look like, therefore, for asexual people to live in happiness, peace, or community?

Following the path of ben Brandley and Angela Labador, we frame asexual—shortened as “ace”—kinship and community beyond the normative assumptions of relating.¹ As we look to the horizons that José Esteban Muñoz’s work points toward fifteen years later, we argue that there is a need to conceptualize not only queer *sexual* utopias, but *asexual* utopias in order to move toward worlds that affirm queerness in all its varied forms. If queerness is “a doing for and toward the future,”² then learning, desiring, and enacting ace kinship in the here and now creates worlds emergent from queer intimacies that stretch beyond sex, sexualized intimacies, and reproduction into depths of community. With this in mind, this article looks toward the nascent potentials for creating ace utopias in the imperfect ace representations we find in contemporary speculative fiction narratives. By examining how ace characters are constrained by the anti-ace worlds they reside in, and the ways they yet point us toward utopian possibility, we examine how asexual world-making allows for radical community building.

Specifically, we examine ace representation in two speculative fiction novellas, *Every Heart a Doorway*, published in 2016,³ and *The Cybernetic Tea Shop*, published in 2019.⁴ We chose these novellas for a few reasons. First, their protagonists are explicitly asexual, either using that term itself or clearly describing their lack of sexual attraction. Although recently speculative fiction books have been including more ace characters, they are still rarely the central figure or explicitly described as ace. Second, each of the primary characters in these novellas are involved in a romantic relationship, providing a means of examining how ace intimacies are figured and the ways they continue to be constrained by normative sexualities. Finally, each of these books emerges from a different sector of publishing, providing a means of understanding how the ace characters are represented across the speculative fiction landscape. *Every Heart a Doorway* was published by Macmillan and won both the Hugo and Nebula awards for Best Novella. *The Cybernetic Tea Shop*, on the other hand, was a small press book that gained popularity through word-of-mouth on social media. Together, these two novellas provide a beginning groundwork for imagining ace worldmaking in and through normative constraints.

Every Heart a Doorway is the first book in Seanan McGuire's popular Wayward Children Series. This fantasy novella takes place at Eleanor West's Home for Wayward Children, a school for children who have traveled through portals to other worlds where they fit better, only to return, heartbroken, to our own. Each hopes for a doorway to open back to their other world, acting as a sort of personalized utopian dream for each child. The main character of this story, Nancy, a seventeen-year-old white girl, went to the Halls of the Dead where she spent her time still as a statue in service to the Lord of the Dead. Nancy is explicitly asexual and faces a decision of settling for a lackluster life in our world or waiting for her door back to the Halls of the Dead to reappear.

The Cybernetic Tea Shop is a science fiction novella by Meredith Katz set in a world where robots are mass-produced for human use. Most of these are RAISEs, which stands for "robotic artificially intelligent synthetic entities," that are described as having "emotional types and personalities" but "no real will."⁵ The protagonist, Clara, is a RAISE mechanic who ends up meeting and being attracted to Sal, an AI who functions beyond RAISE level as an actual sentient robot. Clara is Latina and implicitly asexual, which the author seems to align with being attracted to a robot who cannot engage in sex.

These two novellas provide a starting point for imagining asexual futures; however, they figure asexuality in problematic ways that we rethink in order to move toward asexual utopias. Specifically, we argue that they rely on three reductions of aceness—in relation to embodiment, personhood, and individualism—but maintain facets of potential for building asexual utopias through radical collectivity and community building.

Figuring Aceness in Queer Worldmaking

Aceness is more than a lack of sexual desire. Ace experiences represent "the presence and embodiment of an identity and onto-epistemology that is innately queer," through the nonnormative relational practices that build intimacies beyond and against those structured primarily on sex and sexual desire.⁶ Normative ways of being intimate with others stem from frameworks that typically culminate in or are based in sex; ace relationalities engage with other ways of being intimate.⁷ Asexual relations deprioritize sex in favor of other relational networks like "close friendships or queer platonic partnerships," as Theresa Kenney explains.⁸ Yet when even queer futures are structured in sex

and sexual intimacies, aceness may feel like a closing off of futurity. Scholars need to continue conceptualizing what alternative futures can emerge when desire is not only located in sexual intimacies in order to locate ace utopian potential.⁹ For instance, Audre Lorde argues for a way of relating and existing that is deeply embedded in liberating the erotic by recognizing and sharing “deep feeling” with others.¹⁰ Such intimacies provide a relational groundwork for futures that move past our current anti-ace worlds and into utopias built on myriad intimacies beyond sexual connection.

We started exploring asexual futures because of a growing sense of frustration with the current state of asexual representation across genres and characterization in anti-ace worlds. As two demisexual scholars, an identity within the larger umbrella of asexuality,¹¹ we hold on to the hope that creating ace-affirming fictional worlds offers fruitful ways of utopic imagining and dreaming. Ace representation in speculative fiction provides one means of grounding these utopias. Yet, it remains that not all ace representations in speculative fiction are liberating. Ace characters as they currently appear on page in mainstream speculative works exist in fictional worlds that are anti-ace. Anti-ace worlds, like the reality that we live in, extend from established cis-heteropatriarchal norms. Cis-heteropatriarchal worlds are ones that lead to “inequality and discrimination against women, LGBTQIA+ people, and gender non-confirming individuals.”¹² These worlds primarily center (re)producing bodies. Anti-ace worlds can thus be understood as the ways that cis-heteropatriarchal norms coalesce around sex and sexuality, marginalizing aceness and limiting relational possibility excessive of sexuality. Even queer responses to cis-heteropatriarchy can participate in anti-ace world creation by maintaining a focus on sex and sexuality as the only or central means of resisting cis-heteropatriarchy. In anti-ace worlds, asexuality is characterized as a form of brokenness, both by hegemony and the queer resistance to it. However, as Carter Vance historicizes, asexuality is a long-standing identity that is uniquely situated to resist the commodification of people’s potentials.¹³ Aceness acts as a threat to capitalistic and dystopian futurities based on extraction. Because of this innate threat, it is no accident that ace worldmaking is obscured.

To move from anti-ace worlds to asexual utopias, allonormative rhetoric must be addressed and disrupted. According to ben Brandley and Katherine Mullé, “allonormative rhetoric is the systems of discourse that forefront allosexuality (those who experience sexual attraction) as normative

thereby minoritizing and delegitimizing asexual identities, relationships, and yearning.”¹⁴ The presence of ace peoples in speculative futures is either rare or reductive in describing their quality of life as one on the outside of a sexualized society. Carter Vance refers to this as the “*hegemony of the sexual*,” which denies the recognition of ace personhood because the “basis for claims to humanity, and therefore organizing and resistance are inherently sexual.”¹⁵ We turn to Nancy Fraser, as did Vance, to contextualize this misrecognition “as a consequence of *institutionalized* patterns of interpretation and evaluation that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem.”¹⁶ With this in mind, narratives featuring ace characters often grapple with the long standing assumptions that aceness is an “invisible orientation,”¹⁷ and thus portray characters’ asexuality as invisible, lacking, and without futures.

Challenging Anti-Ace Worlds

We examine two novellas with ace main characters to highlight the ways that aceness is constrained within our anti-ace world and yet simultaneously offers hope for a utopian horizon that we can enact through asexual intimacies now. To set the groundwork for our analysis, we first explore the need to break linear time to understand asexual futurities, before turning to how this prepares us to engage utopian horizons through productive incommensurabilities.

Breaking Linear Time

Ace characters are often portrayed as living halted lives, thus representing ace people as passive observers of life rather than participants within it. Time became a point of conflict for the characters in the novellas we analyze as they sought to start and stop the narrative progressions of their lives. Here, a Western linear perspective of time stands in opposition to other conceptualizations where time is radically embodied and nonlinear. Within anti-ace worlds, linear time, dependent upon certain trajectories of development,¹⁸ projects only misery for asexual subjects. However, there is potential in its refusal. Similar to Muñoz’s reading of Andy Warhol’s Coke bottle, there is utopian promise in the asexual “tension between functionality and nonfunctionality,”¹⁹ as it points us toward the limits of anti-ace worlds. Where ace people become “nonfunctional” within linear time’s production of anti-ace

futurities is precisely the place where a new horizon emerges in the everyday of ace life. Extending from Muñoz, our analysis searches for “an opening and indeterminacy in what for many people is a locked-down dead” subjectivity.²⁰ In borrowing from alternative means of understanding and reorientations of time we aim to engage the queer horizons of ace utopias yet to be seen.

Take, for example, the presence of queer temporalities and crip time when examining the here and now and how these concepts are extended into the near(est) future. Queer temporality focuses on an understanding of time that “produces risk.”²¹ Queer temporality encapsulates “the unpredictable and the unknowable in time that governs errant, eccentric, promiscuous, and unexpected organizations of social life.”²² The attempts to predict the future as that which is knowable and foreseeable situates normalcy, but this act avoids the presence of queerness in the here and now. In situating normalcy, prescribed pathways of being become scripts by which normative temporalities emerge—one such path would be the cis-heteropatriarchal line of coming of age, monogamous romance, getting married, having children. Ace worldmaking poses a risk to linear/normative time through its refusal of sexual and reproductive futurities, leaving the developmentally inclined dazed, unable to conceptualize futurities where the health of community intimacies and networks are primary rather than individualized trajectories of growth.

Similarly, crip time radically shifts the normative assumptions of what is demanded of bodies in accordance with time, opening new possibilities for intimacy and relation.²³ Crip time reframes the boundaries of “what can and should happen in time,” and pushes us to see how bodies work outside of time and within ever-shifting relations.²⁴ Crippling time attends to the ways disabled bodies viewed through curative logic are seen as having halted lives and bodies, broken and in need of healing, making it difficult to imagine disabled bodies in a future. Crip time challenges the normative assumptions around what it means to live as a disabled body by recognizing that time should be expanded to meet people, rather than people reduced to fit developmental trajectories of time.²⁵ Placing asexual futurity alongside queer and crip temporalities engages the systemic ways that asexuality is viewed as a departure from the norm—or even an identity that is presumed unable to exist in allonormative frameworks. Asexuality and ace peoples are seen as defunct in worlds prioritizing the upkeep of compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness, as they are considered dysfunctional in both

body and sexuality.²⁶ In the cross sections of these limiting structures ace bodies that are not (re)producing are broken ones. Crip and queer time moves beyond the capitalistic urge for curative futures that expel those who are viewed “as obstacles to the arc of progress.”²⁷

Engaging Utopian Horizons

In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz argues the queer utopia is a horizon, a range of perpetual potential, forever passing and coming. However fleeting, engaging the utopian is imperative. As Bill Ashcroft writes, “The concept of the utopian remains a conceptual anchor to any theory of a better world.”²⁸ While we may only catch glimpses of the horizon, it is “infused with a utopian function that is attuned to the ‘anticipatory illumination’ of art and culture. Such illumination cuts through fragmenting darkness and allows us to see the politically enabling whole. Such illumination will provide us with access to a world that should be, that could be, and that will be.”²⁹ Here, we consider utopian worldmaking to be that which points us toward the fleeting illumination of the “politically enabling whole,” and what that asks us to build through our praxis in the present. Ace utopias have been shrouded in obscurity, only beginning to be illuminated in the deconstruction of allonormativity.³⁰ Allonormativity, as other states of normativity activated within colonial contexts, is a destructive power that will continue to flatten bodies that refuse to disappear.³¹ At the same time, ace utopias are already here, nascent in the expansive relations enabled by the moments we press beyond allonormative restrictions. Michael Lechuga notes that perhaps utopia is already here in and amid the dystopian present, and our task is to perceive it.³² It only takes recognizing these moments and their potential to collapse our present with the queer horizon, if only fleetingly.³³

Extending Muñoz’s questions about queer utopias to aceness leads us to consider the following questions: “must the future and the present exist in this rigid binary? Can the future stop being a fantasy of heterosexual reproduction” as well as one of homonormative reproduction, both of which stifle the potential of ace lives?³⁴ We consider the frictions that occur when ace futures rub up against existing anti-ace worlds, as their incommensurability disrupts the normative linearity of cis-heteropatriarchy. At the same time, queer utopias based entirely in allonormative imaginings still render sexual encounters as central to liberation in a way that renders ace folks invisible within their

narratives of the future. In *The Sense of Brown*, Muñoz calls us to attempt to understand “collectivity with and through the incommensurable.”³⁵ Here, we look to the incommensurability between allonormative queer worldmaking and ace worldmaking, the ways in which they rub against each other productively, like flint against rock.³⁶ In what manner can the frictions of the present and future be bridged when they exist in the negative of each other? How might we similarly create collectivity across those who find freedom in sexual encounters and those for whom queerness is premised in myriad forms of nonsexual relational networks?

The potential found in “genealogies of hope” and “decolonial dreamwork” offer ways of considering relations in and among incommensurabilities that may alter the boundaries of futurity to bring into existence what was once thought impossible.³⁷ Cordelia E. Barrera bases genealogies of hope on the centrality of Brown bodies to theorizing utopian futures, showing how the borderlands can “refashion the contours of utopia” to provide new grounds for imagination.³⁸ Similarly, Jenna N. Hanchey locates imaginative possibility in the concept of decolonial dreamwork, which she defines as the labor required to imagine impossible futures and bring them into the realm of future possibility through our labors in the present.³⁹ Ace worldmaking similarly activates the frictions inherent in the liminal spaces of the border, and between impossibility and possibility, to open space for alternative ways of being in relation. As we discuss later, although race and coloniality is not central to the analysis in this article, we believe that this work can productively be put in conversation with racial and colonial utopian praxis in future research.

One axis of alignment between these projects is found in the inextricable link between imagination and desire. Bill Ashcroft states that “desire is an essential driving force for the imagination of a different world, and hence the transformation of the present.”⁴⁰ The ability to imagine alternative worlds must be nurtured as “what is never imagin[ed] *cannot* be achieved.”⁴¹ Queer futurity is thus always engaging the desire for alternative worlds, as is anti-racist and decolonial dreaming.⁴² Departing from anti-ace worlds is about “making life more bearable in the present,” to put into praxis the groundwork of a relationally expansive future.⁴³ If we see imagination and desire as inseparable then the desire for an affirming existence is wrapped in the need for space to imagine futures and enact our imaginings in the present. Sara Ahmed states that “we need to think more about the relationship between the queer struggle for a bearable life and aspirational hope for a good life . . . with

breath comes imagination. With breath comes possibility. If queer politics is about freedom, it might simply mean the freedom to breathe.”⁴⁴ And aren’t ace peoples—among many others⁴⁵—tired of gasping for breath?

Constraining Asexual Futurities

We look at three ways aceness is constrained in *Every Heart a Doorway* and *The Cybernetic Tea Shop*—through narratives of physiological brokenness; reliance on hierarchies of personhood; and individualism and the ways these portrayals function to relocate the characters within anti-ace worlds instead of moving into the potential that ace worldbuilding could provide for utopic imagining. That is, ace worldmaking is frustrated by a re-instantiation of linear time and sexualized futurities. In the following discussion section, we then locate the latent potentials within these portrayals, arguing that asexual utopias be enabled from these same portrayals by centering radical collectivity and community. By unraveling the anti-ace worlds in contemporary speculative fiction, we open possibilities for deeper intimacies and forms of relation that form the new beginnings of ace-affirming worlds—that is, asexual utopias.

Aceness and Physiological Brokenness

The reproductive insistence located within assumptions of developmental time subtly undermines ace potential within these two novellas. If someone is not following the set relational trajectory that leads toward sexual intimacy—as the only relation seen to provide a stable futurity—then there is something wrong with them. Indeed, in these works, the bodies of the two main characters are registered as broken or somehow off.

In *Every Heart a Doorway*, Nancy is visibly unblemished, “tall and willowy and couldn’t have been more than seventeen; there was still something of the unformed around her eyes and mouth, leaving her a work in progress, meant to be finished by time.”⁴⁶ Her beauty is connected to developmental understandings of time, whereby in some linear future she will reach a point of completeness where her body reaches its full potential. The descriptions of Nancy’s beauty are meant to highlight a tension: that her asexuality is incommensurable with her perfect body. Nancy narrates how, at her last school, “So many people had called her a ‘cold fish’ and said she was dead inside.”⁴⁷

Readers experience her asexuality as a departure, a strange twist in an otherwise predictable plot. It's rendered strange that she is ace because otherwise she is hegemonically perfect—or at least, would be, if given the proper trajectory through which to unfold. Her aceness denies that developmental narrative, leaving only confusion in its wake.

We see this confusion in the way that Nancy's roommate, Sumi, is unable to understand the contours of Nancy's desire for intimacy with an attractive transboy named Kade. After visiting his room:

Sumi watched Nancy as they walked down the stairs. The taller girl was holding tight to her basket of black and white clothing, cheeks still faintly touched with red. The color seemed almost obscene on her, like it had no business there.

"Do you want to fuck him?"

Nancy almost fell down the stairs.

After she caught herself on the banister, she turned to Sumi, sputtering and blushing, "No!"

"Are you sure? Because you looked like you did, and then you looked sort of upset, like you'd figured out you didn't want to after all."

... "Yes, said Nancy, recovering her composure. She began walking again. "I'm quite sure I don't want to . . . have sexual relations with him."⁴⁸

Sumi can only understand Nancy's desire as having a sexual endpoint, a futurity based in achieving sexual relations with someone. The idea of intimacies beyond sexual connection are unable to be understood within the anti-ace world that they occupy. Instead, she keeps pressing to understand Nancy within allonormative frameworks. When Nancy says, "I don't do that. With anyone," Sumi responds, "You're celibate?"⁴⁹ She cannot understand desire for intimacies beyond sexuality as anything other than a choice within allo-normativity, rather than a differential type of queer relationality. Nancy's embodied experience falls beyond the linear narratives of development—that her body will solidify into a certain finished form, that she will follow the proper pathway to achieve an endgoal of sexual relations with someone—and it is unintelligible except as brokenness within the novella's worldbuilding.

This physiological brokenness is often described as a lack, whether in action or desire. Nancy describes her aceness in terms of inaction: "I just . . . I just don't. I can appreciate how beautiful someone is, and I can be attracted

to them romantically, but that's as far as it goes with me."⁵⁰ There is a point on the developmental trajectory of linear time where she becomes stalled. In *The Cybernetic Tea Shop*, Clara's lack of desire for sexual intimacy functions to equate her with the robotic:

"I can't—physically," Sal said. "I mean, I'm not designed to be sexual. That's to say, I can act on others, but I don't want—"

"That's okay. Me neither."

"Oh, but—"

"It's not something I need from someone else," Clara said firmly, willing Sal to understand. It wasn't something that needed explanation, but something that too many people had wanted one for. Love, romance; those were things she'd felt before, even if she wasn't often inclined toward them. But she didn't need anything from or with that person, never felt attracted to them even with the addition of love. If her body wanted something, she could spend five minutes with her hand. Another person never needed to factor into that for her.⁵¹

Here, Clara jumps in as Sal is describing how, as an AI, she is "not designed to be sexual" to claim her desires to be equivalent. Like the robot, Clara also does not "want" or "need" sexual contact. Importantly, this robotic sexuality is also rendered as a brokenness in relational possibility. Able to satisfy herself with "five minutes with her hand," Clara is narrated as if "she didn't need anything from or with" another person at all. Aceness is rendered as a radical lack of relation, rather than a radical opening to alternative forms of relation upon which we could build utopian worlds. As we describe later, this individualism is not a function of aceness itself but rather of the anti-ace worlds in which these characters are located. Were these ace characters allowed to unfold beyond linear expectations of relational development, and actualize differential intimacies, their ruptures in allonormative narratives could be seen as offering utopian possibility rather than physiological brokenness.

Aceness and Demarcations of Personhood

When asexuality registers as physiological brokenness in these narratives, it disrupts the assumed progression of relationships along a proscribed path

toward sexual partnership. In anti-ace worlds, sexual partnership implicitly functions as the only possible equitable relation between individuals. Consider the use of “partner” as denoting a sexual relationship: It’s not only about sex, but also equating sexual intimacy with commitment and egalitarian lateral connection. As Vance describes, quoting Fraser, through allonormativity “asexuals are ‘denied the status of a full partner in social interaction and prevented from participating as a peer in social life,’ as under this hegemony the basis for claims to humanity, and therefore social organizing and resistance, is inherently sexual.”⁵² Ace characters, by refusing sexual intimacy as an endpoint, are unable to be figured within equitable relations in anti-ace worlds. Instead, they are portrayed as subordinate within hierarchical relations, existing as orbiting someone else with more power or control.

More than anything, Nancy desires to return to the Halls of the Dead, where her entire life is given in service to the Lord of the Dead. She narrates how that world seemed “kind” to her: “Yes, there were rules, and yes, there were punishments if you broke them, but they were never unfair, and the Lord of the Dead took good care of everyone who served in his halls.”⁵³ Nancy’s desired life revolves entirely around service to the Lord of the Dead, to the point where it even affects her physicality. Her hair is described as “bone-white streaked with runnels of black,”⁵⁴ which we find out occurred after she was touched by the Lord of the Dead:

It used to be all black, like my mother’s. When I danced with the Lord of the Dead for the first time, he said it was beautiful, and he ran his fingers through it. All the hair turned white around them, out of jealousy. That’s why I only have five black streaks left. Those are the parts he touched. Looking at her with a critical eye, Eleanor could see how those five streaks formed the phantom outline of a hand, a place where the pale young woman in front of her had been touched once and never more.⁵⁵

“Touched once and never more” is a mournful statement, again emphasizing the brokenness of asexual belonging within allonormative understanding. Here, the most that Nancy can long for is to be returned to the service of the Lord of the Dead, where, if she serves him well enough, she might one day be allowed to advance in the hierarchy.

However, no matter how well she serves or how far she advances, Nancy will always be subordinate to someone else. When another student enquires

into her monochrome clothing, Nancy articulates her behavior in terms of what would please her Lord:

“Isn’t that why you wear white? Because your Master liked to see you that way?”

“I . . .” Nancy stopped. “He wasn’t my master, he was my Lord, and my teacher, and he loved me. I wear black and white because color is reserved for the Lady of Shadows and her entourage. I’d like to join them someday, if I can prove myself, but until then, I’m supposed to serve as a statue, and statues should blend in. Standing out is for people who’ve earned it.”⁵⁶

Nancy’s life trajectory, even in her most utopian of dreams, can only progress in terms of service. Either she serves by standing still or standing out, but at most she can only desire to join the Lady of the Dead’s entourage. Similarly, were she to remain in the “real” world, she can still only imagine a life in service. Except here, it would be as second-in-command to Kade in running the school in the future:

So this was the world. This was the place where she’d come from—and more, this was the place where she came closest to belonging *in* this world. She could stay at the school until she graduated, and after. She could be Kade’s Lundy . . . she could be the woman who stood beside him and helped to keep things going . . . She could learn to be happy here, if she had to. But never completely. That would be too much to ask.⁵⁷

There is no room for equality in relations for ace people in anti-ace worlds.

The Cybernetic Tea Shop takes this inequality of relations a step further by using aceness to demarcate levels of personhood. Clara owns a RAISE named Joanie, a mechanical hummingbird that can speak. However, Clara makes clear that Joanie is not a person: “Joanie still wasn’t a *person*, of course, and that was probably for the best—there *were* absolutely huge ethical issues with creating actual sapient people who were registered internally as *belonging* to others.”⁵⁸ Joanie is communicative, but not sapient. She can participate in conversations but is described as lacking a will of her own. Instead, Joanie is the property of Clara. This places Clara as master rather than servant but locates her within a hierarchy of relations just as solidly as *Every Heart a Doorway* does Nancy. And

yet, when ace people are likened to the robotic, their hierarchical position is always in question. Clara's asexuality is linked to Sal's roboticism, and Sal is portrayed as only a person insofar as she is connected to her owner, a woman named Karinne: "She was a satellite orbiting Karinne's wishes, Karinne's hope, Karinne's love. Even with thoughts and feelings of her own, they found their expression through that center."⁵⁹ Sal is narrated as having loved Karinne, even though it "always felt a little unbalanced."⁶⁰ Without sexual attraction to connect her as a "partner," the robot is rendered through a lens of ownership, even in love.

Clara's addition to Sal's life does not break this hierarchy of relations. Sal is in dire need of updating to her programming, a task at which Clara is an expert. As part of this, Clara offers to remove the code locating Sal as Karinne's property. At first, Sal declines, but she later agrees. In this manner, Clara is literally fixing and bestowing free will upon Sal, making her a godlike figure that remakes her very being. And when the owner is officially removed, Sal decides to revolve her existence around Clara's instead. Although this act is narrated as one of her own free choice, it replicates the idea that hierarchical relations are all that ace-spectrum individuals, whether people or robots, may exist within.

Aceness, through portrayals of both Sal and Nancy, is narrated as a desire to be a servant of someone more powerful. There is no possibility of existing in and of yourself. Ace people are represented as unable to live their own lives; instead, they must orbit someone else's life. Within individualistic narratives of sexuality, the only means of imagining aceness is in subordination, as it cannot fit within the sexual narratives of partnership. However, this framing elides the immense potential of ace worldbuilding: radical collectivity and community-centeredness.

Aceness and Individualism

Perhaps the key problem in allonormative narratives of aceness is the assumption of individualism, which manifests in the sentiment that individuals have a personal utopia to which they aspire, distinct of relational senses of self. Desire is contained within individualism. This is particularly notable in *Every Heart a Doorway*. The entire premise of the series is that each child has a doorway that opens especially for them, bringing them to a world where

they fit better than the world into which they were born. Utopia itself is personalized in this series. There is *your* utopia, and it is no one else's. It already exists, waiting for you. The series thus premises its worldbuilding against radical collective imagination and communities built around struggle. If utopia already exists, there is no need to attempt to imagine it. And if it already exists particularly for you, there is no need to learn how to relate and struggle with others to build it. At the end of the novella, Nancy finds a note from Sumi that reads, "*You're nobody's doorway but your own, and the only one who gets to tell you how your story ends is you.*"⁶¹ It is this individualistic encouragement that Nancy needs to find her door back to the Halls of the Dead, and joyfully run through it without so much as a thought for those she leaves behind. For readers, there is no hint that Nancy should be sad. In part, her aceness accentuates this detachment. If there is no possibility of a sexual future for her in this world, what then is she supposed to miss? Within anti-ace worlds, the possibilities of alternative community-building through ace intimacies are erased.

Desires for intimate relations beyond the sexual are contained in these novellas. In *The Cybernetic Tea Shop*, this takes the form of capitalist logics. Clara is asked by a supervisor why she wants to leave her current city and move away:

"But what's pulling you out there . . .

A boy?"

"Never that," she said, a little dryly.

"A girl, then?"

She laughed, giving him a friendly jab to the shoulder as she passed. "Do you honestly think I'm the sort to let anyone, guy *or* girl, seduce me away from work?"⁶²

If she is not changing her location for sexual desire, her boss is stumped on what could possibly be motivating her move. Clara fills in the blank jokingly by stating she would never be seduced away from work. Vance notes how "how narratives of compulsory sexuality sustain capitalist modes of production."⁶³ Even when Clara attempts to escape one form of capitalist determinacy, she ends up containing herself within another. In each of her relocations, she aims to keep people, whether the companionship is romantic or sexual, at a distance from her life.

Enabling Asexual Futurities

Every Heart a Doorway and *The Cybernetic Tea Shop* point us toward asexual possibilities and relations but do so in a way that remains constrained by allonormative logics of linearity, hierarchy, and individualism. Part of the reason that aceness is so constrained within these novellas is that the characters exist within worlds that are themselves anti-ace and are thus unable to activate the latent potential of ace worldbuilding without structures of social and community support to do so. However, the novellas point toward the ways that breaking from linear time and individualism could create a path from anti-ace worlds to asexual utopias. Here, we trace the potential in these works for queer worldbuilding that centers expansive relations beyond simply the sexual.

Every Heart a Doorway in particular provides a window into asexual capacities for queer intimacy and collectivity. As Nancy walks with her arm in Kade's, she considers relational possibilities:

Nancy set her hand in the crook of his elbow, feeling the traitorous red creeping back into her cheeks. This was always the difficult part, back when she'd been at her old school: explaining that "asexual" and "aromantic" were different things. She *liked* holding hands and trading kisses. She'd had several boyfriends in elementary school, just like most of the other girls, and she had always found those practice relationships completely satisfying. It wasn't until puberty had come along and changed the rules that she'd started pulling away in confusion and disinterest. Kade was possibly the most beautiful boy she'd ever seen. She wanted to spend hours sitting with him and talking about pointless things. She wanted to feel his hand against her skin, to know that his presence was absolute and focused entirely on her. The trouble was, it never seemed to end there, and that was as far as she was willing to go.⁶⁴

Here, McGuire's description of Nancy's longing demonstrates the potential of asexual desire. As desire is central to imagining utopia,⁶⁵ ace worlds can develop out of desiring nonsexual intimacies and relations. Importantly, McGuire highlights how these intimacies exist, but they are denigrated as children learn to follow the allonormative linear pathway of relation and eschew other means of connection.

This section provides an important exemplar of how linearity and individualism act to constrain ace potentialities—and how they may be resisted. Nancy's desire is only seen as nonnormative once it is located within a developmental framework, something that she is supposed to grow out of instead of root deeper within. Linearity is used as a means of denying ace potential by assuming it is a regressive part of a developing sexuality, rather than a foundational way of relating. See the potential held within these relations were Nancy allowed to root deeper. She might have lingered with the boyfriends, creating a network of collective organizing through the holding of hands, and coalition building amongst the affection of traded kisses. When recognized as weighty in and of themselves, ace relationalities allow us to linger in erotic potentialities otherwise elided by presumed developmental trajectories that project the need to move toward sexual relationalities as an endpoint or goal.

We can see resonances of Nancy's desire within non-Western understandings of time that break from linear trajectories. The assumption that bodies must engage in sexual activity to secure futurities is undermined in conceptualizations of time where the deep future is indistinguishable from the deep past. For instance, John Mbiti describes how some East African peoples work from a two-dimensional understanding of time, where there is the *Sasa*, or the embodied experience and memory of a people, and the *Zamani*, that which falls beyond experience and memory.⁶⁶ In this manner, the deep time of the *Zamani* that falls beyond embodied experience and story encompasses both the future and past. Similarly, in David Bowles articulation of Mesoamerican indigenous people's understanding of time, there is no linguistic difference between past and future.⁶⁷ The Nahuatl language does not distinguish the words "past" or "future," but rather uses distance as the main distinction in understanding the movement of time. The past could be understood as "a place-time we're coming from; future, a place-time we're headed toward."⁶⁸ In both understandings of time, body and community emplacement makes all the difference: What bodies carry, what they remember, where they are moving. People are not simply carried along a path of time, here, but instead radically relate to it. We are a part of weaved histories as the world is "made, destroyed, and remade multiple times" with the remnants of previous iterations for the next, in a cycle of renewal.⁶⁹ Understanding time outside of Western linear frameworks helps us to locate the potential of asexual utopias: Rather than being stagnant in developmental trajectories, aceness offers vast potential for intimacies of relation in the here-and-now that can manifest differential futures, weaving the world anew.

By relating the way aceness lingers outside and against linear temporalities, we also see potentials for how a project of asexual utopias can intertwine with anti-racist and decolonial worldmaking. These projects align through the refusal of developmental temporalities. As multiple scholars have noted, developmental time situates Brown and Black folks and the colonized in a perceived past in relation to white Western hegemony.⁷⁰ If “untimeliness contains the radical promise of a future world comprised of undifferentiated humanity,”⁷¹ ace worldmaking can join in coalition with anti-racist and decolonial projects that refuse linear movement through time to linger in the glow of the utopian horizon and the potentials it illuminates in the present.

Yet these novellas only scratch the surface of these coalitional possibilities. Nancy is white, and though she interacts with characters of color, there is little grounds for connection provided in the text between anti-racist and ace worldmaking. In *The Cybernetic Tea Shop*, although Clara is written as Latina, her identity is used in a way that reinforces white normativity rather than providing grounds for collective anti-racist struggle. Notably, the only way Clara’s Latina identity is referenced is in connection to her continual desire to migrate to new places and jobs in the text. Clara is never explicitly described as Latina or Brown, and even her last name, Gutierrez, is only mentioned on the book jacket—it does not appear in the novella itself. That leaves readers in a position where they are directed to infer Clara’s Brownness from the description of how her childhood impacted her contemporary desire to move every few years:

It was their usual pattern. There was no meaning behind it; she’d just picked it up as a child from her parents. They’d been migrant workers, stopping when an employer had their signs out, living in the ramshackle housing that was offered, moving on when the season was done.⁷²

Clara is ostensibly Latina, but her brownness in the novella acts almost exclusively as shorthand for migrant. This narrative conceptualization is troubling because it flattens her racial identity and seeks to explain her aceness as a result of individualized trauma around migration in her life. Drawing attention to this problematic attachment of a character’s sexuality and race by ways of perceived deficits in her life disrupts the notion that queer people of color are not deserving of existing in a future. Through Clara’s narrative, sentiments of ace brokenness are connected to failures in fulfilling cis-heteronormative

white American dreams. Without supporting structures of Latinx community and relationships, Clara's migrancy and migrant instincts become the sole site of her Latinx identity, tying her cultural and racial character to her ace character in a comorbid failure in fulfilling normative life trajectories. In this way, we can also see the ways that ace-normativity defaults to whiteness, as Przybylo explains.⁷³ It is difficult to read Clara as an ace character of color because her identity is situated in what she lacks, home and companionship, by way of her migrancy. Clara becomes an individual who is constructed and understood narratively through absence.

At the same time, there is a latent potential in Clara's refusal of the developmental trajectory that conflates intimate relation with individualistic monogamy through her continual movement. Although that potential is not used to move toward collectivity and networked relations, we still see the refusal of a cis-heteropatriarchal linearity. Perhaps this provides glimpses of the queer horizon that Muñoz conceptualizes as well. However, we must pull the potential from it ourselves. Utopian futures require sustained efforts to continually (re)produce within the fleeting moments we can glimpse them. Such effort is not always easy. In *Sense of Brown*, Muñoz describes how building the Brown commons is particularly laborious because it must be constructed within the messy realities of the existing commons of social life that simultaneously seek to constrain its potential.⁷⁴ The Brown commons is understood not only through its connection to shared harm but "the potential for the refusal and resistance to that often-systemic harm. Brownness is a kind of uncanny persistence in the face of distressed conditions of possibility."⁷⁵ Although the novellas we focus on here do not explicitly address race, we see a project of asexual utopias as necessarily intertwined with that of anti-racist and anti-colonial utopias. There is a collective effort inherent to the organizing of a commons that desires and enables liberatory futures. And it's through the collective effort of imagination that worlds are reconstructed.⁷⁶

Toward Aesexual Utopias

Aceness is a call to community. As such, asexual utopias imagine connections that are nonreproductive, nonbiological, and center depths of intimacy that allow for radically collective futurities. These intimacies both can be recognized in the quotidian here in the present, that which is often dismissed as "nonfunctional" and "locked-down dead,"⁷⁷ like Warhol's Coke-bottle

commodity, or “dead inside,” like Nancy’s seemingly cold asexuality,⁷⁸ and found in the horizon, that which is not yet present in our own world and relations. That is, the potential is here, which needs to be connected to the activation that lies somewhere on the horizon, in order for us to build asexual utopias here and now.

To bridge everyday asexual potentialities in the present and the future worlds they can build, we conclude by advocating for two modes of asexual praxis: breaking linear sexual trajectories and centering nonsexual intimacies. First, *Every Heart a Doorway* demonstrates the potential inherent in refusing linear narratives of sexual partnership and reproduction, even if it is later constrained within structures of power. Nancy locates her understanding of sexuality in a falling away from the normative path. At a sudden point in her childhood, the intimacies that she desired and enjoyed were no longer “enough” for everyone else. In moving along a preordained linear trajectory, one that can only end in sex, her classmates lose the potential to desire and enjoy the myriad other means of intimate relations *as ends in themselves*. When we deny the linear path of sexual development, we open ourselves to a network of relational connections.

Second, this leads to the creation of worlds based in radical collectivity and community, rather than the individualism often used in Western cis-heteropatriarchal and allonormative frameworks to narrate sexual partnership. By moving beyond sexual relations as the end goal of intimate connections, asexual worldbuilding opens us to utopian possibilities based in extensive relational networks. Aimee Carrillo Rowe notes, “whom we love is who we are becoming.”⁷⁹ Opening up whom we love and desire can open new pathways of becoming, both for us and for the worlds we create together. For all that the connection of asexuality to roboticism is problematic, there is still potential in the portrayal of asexual intimacies among human and machine in *The Cybernetic Tea Shop*. Asexual intimacies can open us to not only deeper relations with humans and their creations, but also with animals, land, and water. Asexual worlds hold the potential for infinite expressions of intimacy, once they are delinked from the single outlet of sexuality.

Centering asexuality means engaging intimately with all those around us, creating networks of desire, belonging, and connection that can activate new worlds. As Hanchey writes, “queer/feminist desire can pull as yet indescribable futures into being—futures too radical to imagine within the contemporary constraints of the present.”⁸⁰ What we long for is what we are creating; by opening ourselves to longing in a multitude of textures and

depths,⁸¹ facets and capacities, we create the basis for new relations—and new worlds. Asexual desires provide a groundwork for utopias based in expansive intimacies, allowing for multifaceted and varied ways of constructing community and collectivity beyond sex and sexuality.

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Notes

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3. Seanan McGuire, *Every Heart a Doorway* (Tordotcom, 2016).
4. Meredith Katz, *The Cybernetic Tea Shop* (Soft Cryptid, 2019).
5. Katz, *Cybernetic Tea Shop*, 10.
6. Brandley and Labador, “Towards an Asexual-Affirming Communication Pedagogy,” 332.
7. Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper, “Asexual Resonances: Tracing a Queerly Asexual Archive,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbia and Gay Studies* 20, no. 3 (2014): 311.
8. Theresa N. Kenney, “Thinking Asexually: Sapin-Sapin, Asexual Assemblages, and the Queer Possibilities of Platonic Relationships,” *Feminist Formations* 32, no. 3 (2020): 9.
9. Ela Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality* (The Ohio State University Press, 2019).
10. Audre Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* (The Crossing Press, 1978), 9.
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those who *choose not to have sex* until reaching a depth of relation; we do not feel sexual desire for a specific individual at all until that point.

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14. ben Bradley and Katherine Mullé, "When Nothing Changes into Something: Gender Roles Stress/Conflict Among Asexual Viewers of BoJack Horseman," in *Rhetoric of Masculinity: Male Body Image, Media, and Gender Roles Stress/Conflict*, ed. Donnalyn Pompper (Lexington Books, 2022), 59.

15. Vance, "Unwilling Consumers," 149.

16. Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (Verso Books, 2013), 294.

17. Julie Sondra Decker, *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality* (Carrel Books, 2015).

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19. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 7.

20. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 9.

21. Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York University Press, 2019), 19.

22. Keeling, *Queer Times*, 19.

23. Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Indiana University Press, 2013), 27.

24. Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 27.

25. Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 34–35.

26. Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 27.

27. Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 28.

28. Bill Ashcroft, "Critical Utopias," *Textual Practice* 21, no. 3 (2007): 411.

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30. Linda Heidenreich, "Colonial Pasts, Utopian Futures: Creative and Critical Reflections on the Monstrous," in *Altermundos: Latin@ Speculative Literature, Film, and Popular Culture*, ed. Cathryn Josefina Merla-Watson and B. V. Olguín (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2017), 220.

31. Heidenreich, "Colonial Pasts, Utopian Futures," 221.

32. Michael Lechuga, personal communication. For more of his work on the relation between dystopia and utopia, see Michael Lechuga, "Intimate Borders and the Sense of Never-Quite-Being: A Dystopic (Non-)Fiction," *Cultural Studies <=> Critical Methodologies* 21, no. 6 (2021): 445–54.

33. For more on the potential of collapsing desired futures into the present, see Rasheedah Phillips, ed. *Black Quantum Futurism: Theory and Politics* (Afrofuturist Affair, 2015).

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35. Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 7.

36. Here, we're thinking of friction in a similar manner to Keguro Macharia's frottage. Keguro Macharia, *Frottage: Frictions of Intimacy Across the Black Diaspora* (NYU Press, 2019).
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38. Barrera, "Utopic Dreaming," 477.
39. See Hanchey, *The Center Cannot Hold* (2023); and Hanchey's forthcoming *Decolonial Dreamwork: African Futurism and Imagination Beyond Development* (The Ohio State University Press, exp. 2027).
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41. Ashcroft, "Critical Utopias," 411.
42. Nishant Shahani, "The Future is Queer Stuff: Critical Utopianism and its Discontents," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 19, no. 4 (2013): 547; and see Hanchey, *The Center Cannot Hold*; "Desire and the Politics of Africanfuturism," *Women's Studies in Communication* 43, no. 2 (2020): 119–124.
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44. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010), 120.
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47. McGuire, *Every Heart a Doorway*, 37.
48. McGuire, *Every Heart a Doorway*, 35–36.
49. McGuire, *Every Heart a Doorway*, 37.
50. McGuire, *Every Heart a Doorway*, 38.
51. Katz, *Cybernetic Tea Shop*, 91–92.
52. Vance, "Unwilling Consumers," 149.
53. McGuire, *Every Heart a Doorway*, 52.
54. McGuire, *Every Heart a Doorway*, 10.
55. McGuire, *Every Heart a Doorway*, 20.
56. McGuire, *Every Heart a Doorway*, 62.
57. McGuire, *Every Heart a Doorway*, 163.
58. Katz, *Cybernetic Tea Shop*, 11.
59. Katz, *Cybernetic Tea Shop*, 72.
60. Katz, *Cybernetic Tea Shop*, 92.
61. McGuire, *Every Heart a Doorway*, 164.
62. Katz, *Cybernetic Tea Shop*, 20.
63. Vance, "Unwilling Consumers," 134.
64. McGuire, *Every Heart a Doorway*, 117.
65. Ashcroft, "Critical Utopias," 412.

66. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy (Second Edition)* (Heinemann, 1989). For more on how this understanding of time disrupts developmental trajectories, see Hanchey, "Africanfuturism Beyond the Future."
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69. Bowles, "Toward a Mexican American Futurism," 339.
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72. Katz, *Cybernetic Tea Shop*, 12–13.
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74. José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown* (Duke University Press, 2013), 6.
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76. Jason A. Bartles, "Navigating Uncertainty: The Ambiguous Utopias of LeGuin, Gorodischer, and Jemisin," *Utopian Studies* 33, no. 1 (2022): 108.
77. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 7, 9.
78. McGuire, *Every Heart a Doorway*, 37.
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