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Nonbinary Representation in Sci-Fi Media: A Continuing Mission
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NONBINARY REPRESENTATION IN SCI-FI MEDIA: A CONTINUING MISSION

By

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“The question involved here is the question of The Other— the being who is different from yourself. This being can be different from you in its sex; or in its annual income; or in its way of speaking and dressing and doing things; or in the color of its skin, or the number of its legs and heads. In other words, there is the sexual Alien, and the social Alien, and the cultural Alien, and finally the racial Alien.” - Ursula K. Le Guin, *American SF and the Other* (1975)

“Don’t even pay attention to whether authors and/or characters are queer, trans, or nonbinary… In other words, I want a world where that shit just doesn’t matter, where we’re no longer Other but the norm.” - Nicola Griffith, *12 Authors, Critics, and Activists on What’s Changed in the Last Ten Years* (2020)

At its core, science fiction gives form to possible worlds; it is a genre that lends itself to the imaginings of endless futures and histories without boundary, where even the most fundamental rules of the universe are as easy to break as it is to breathe. Beyond any political or ideological agenda, sci-fi is “a tool to help you think about the present—a present that is always changing… It doesn’t tell you what’s going to happen tomorrow. It presents alternative possible images of futures, and presents them in a way that allows you to question them” (Delaney 52). In this way, the genre appeals to those who have ideas about the present and want to express them in a creatively cosmic manner. Perhaps ideas so groundbreaking, yet essential, that such a conversation can only exist in a space where anything can. Through these opportunities, understandings of science fiction intersect with politics, where the portrayal of universes as derived from the present allows real-life concepts to transform through metaphor into unfamiliar or alien societies, shapes, and cultures. As this essay will prove, this unique feature of science fiction makes it the perfect vessel for stories of queer lives, whose depictions had historically been too ‘out of this world’ for legitimized inclusion outside of fictional realities.
However, at one time, any sort of queer inclusion into sci-fi stories was only a ‘potential’ future itself, as science fiction in the first half of the 20th century was “dominated by white, male North American authors,” who told stories of themselves and more universal abstractions (Roberts 295). In this so-called ‘Golden Age’ of sci-fi, from around the end of WWII in 1945 to 1960, prolific authors like Isaac Asimov wrote about universes with advanced artificial intelligence, which “figure upon issues of logic, identity difference and resemblance,” efficiently summarized as “ethical fictions” (Roberts 291). Meanwhile, fellow writers like Robert Heinlein, Jack Vance, and Cleve Cartmill joined Asimov as the creators of pieces collected in the science fiction magazine *Astounding Science Fiction*, compiled by John W. Campbell. In Campbell’s search for stories to fill pages of the magazine, his success placed him in a position where he was the eminent authority over science fiction, as people looked to him for what sci-fi stories were worth reading (Asimov). As he held power to direct a genre, he looked for works with “pseudo-sciences such as telepathy; can-do stories about heroes solving problems or… expansionist humanocentric (and, often, phallocentric) narratives; extrapolations of possible technologies and their social and human impacts,” all elements that would become tropes associated with this ‘Golden Age’ (Roberts 287). These universes were thought-provoking, boundary-breaking, and ideologically challenging; however, many boundaries remained, and problematic ideologies were left uncontested. While retrospectively examining the period, a pattern emerges where “these stories tend to orbit an unspoken ideological focus that certain people… are to be respected & others… are to be derided” (Roberts 303). Moreover, this era of science fiction, while definable by its content, can also be characterized by an apparent absence, as even among distant complex futures, “it is striking how rarely (in many cases, how never) female characters with agency appear in the writing of these male golden age ‘SF’ masters” (Roberts 303). For science fiction
readers who did not share an identity with their story's authors, the endless futures possible in sci-fi may have seemed depressingly limited, even bleak.

Fortunately, the story of science fiction does not end there, as the 1960s mark the beginnings of ‘New Wave’ science fiction, a time of civil rights activism, along with a resurgence of feminism and counter-culture at large, where even new approaches to sci-fi “reacted against the conventions of traditional SF to produce avant-garde, radical or fractured science fictions” (Roberts 334). This essay begins its analysis of nonbinary representation in sci-fi here, a time “when women artists and fans were inspired by the revival of feminism and the creation of the first gender studies programs to create cons, fanzines, and publishing venues of their own,” signaling a feminist movement that brought female science fiction authors like Ursula K. Le Guin and Octavia Butler into the fray (Yaszek 4). Many gender-nonconforming bodies that come to life throughout this essay originate from early feminist journeys into the science fiction multiverse. In the pursuit to “question the preoccupation with a colonial/modern binary sex/gender system” and women's role in it, queer side effects begin to emerge (Barry 125). From this point, this essay will track the mutual evolution of the nonbinary instances in literature and (television/film) media and their corresponding cultural contexts. That is to say, the manifestation of genderqueer representation in sci-fi is not a coincidence but directly and inherently linked to the sociopolitical landscape of the time. Throughout this essay, that link is examined, critiqued, and retrospectively understood from the present perspective.

When reading queer science fiction, the queerness may not always be overt or explicit but somewhat concealed, hidden in implication, waiting to be uncovered. Ritch Calvin, Professor of Women’s and Gender Studies at Stony Brook University, addresses ways in which queerness emerges by reinterpreting ‘categories’ of queer science fiction texts as presented by Wendy Gay
Pearson’s *Alien Cryptographies* through a modern lens, defining three ways in which queerness in stories take shape: “(1) Those in which issues of queerness are addressed obliquely… (2) Those in which the queerness is explicit but not central to the narrative, and… (3) Those in which queerness is explicit and central to the narrative” (Calvin 50). This essay will engage with each of these inclusions of queerness, with varying frequency, and do so on a level playing field, treating each type of queer inclusion as not greater or less than any other type. However, this is not to say that these instances will be immune to critique, but rather that no one of these approaches to queer stories is inherently worse than another. As for interrogating the examples of nonbinary individuals, this essay will first explore the genderqueer depiction as it is within its own universe, answering the question of what it means to be queer in this imagined reality before reapproaching a ‘real-life’ context. For this essay, potential nonbinary bodies do not include examples of monstrous, animalistic beasts, non-sentient robots, or other beings that may not be capable of thinking for themselves or lack the capacity to have a gender identity at all.

When analyzing instances of nonbinary representation, this essay will inherently invoke queer theory and the texts that define the field of study. As a tool of literary critique, “queer theory asks us to consider that heterosexuality is neither a natural nor universal form of sexuality; that sexual identity is a social construct rather than an essentialist feature of the self; and that gender is performative rather than simply biological,” positing claims regarding sex, gender, and sexuality that reject classic hegemonic heterosexual understandings of these concepts (Stockton 3). These arguments made by queer theory find their origins in foundational works that challenge traditional ideas of gender and sexuality, such as Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *The Epistemology of the Closet*, both published in 1990. Specifically, Judith Butler introduces the concept of gender performativity, in which “gender is
instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of a gender abiding self,” presenting a reality in which gender is not something one ‘is’ but something one ‘does,’ embedded in patterns of behaviors (Butler 519). In her poststructuralist analysis of gender, sex, and desire, she breaks down the believed inherent alignment of these concepts, paving the road for future theorists to explore gender without sex, desire without gender, or any combination thereof.

Moreover, she identifies the existing heteronormative hegemony, describing how “The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire,” labeling this ‘institution’ the “heterosexual matrix” (Butler 30). As queer theory gained popularity, this apparatus would come to be used by queer theorists to examine those who disrupt these ‘regulations’ and binary definitions of people through their desire. However, she does also seem to set the stage for genderbending identities to rebel against the matrix, as she notes that “the cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of ‘identities’ cannot ‘exist’—that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not ‘follow’ from either sex or gender” (Butler 23-24). Even before the widespread acknowledgment of nonbinary existences, Butler invited the exploration of an evident weakness of the matrix, where nonconformity can render it ‘unintelligible.’ As a revolutionary reconstruction of ideas surrounding the assumed realities of gender, sexuality, and desire, Butler’s Gender Trouble would heavily influence the landscape of queer theory as it
developed over the next few decades, as well as many of the queer readings of the media throughout this essay.

Beyond Butler, the breadth of queer theory expanded exponentially after the turn of the century, creating a demand to evaluate approaches to the newborn field of ‘queer studies’ for their strengths and weaknesses. Specifically, Shari Thurer’s 2005 queer theory retrospective, *The End of Gender: A Psychological Autopsy*, provides methods to critique presented interpretations of gender, addressing many theories, including Butler’s ideas of ‘performativity,’ and giving them corresponding ‘grades’. Her thorough inquiry into each approach to gender allows for the development of a sort of ‘do’s and don’ts’ for explanations of gender, guidelines that facilitated the discovery that some arguments are fundamentally flawed if informed by equally flawed ideas of gender. For example, she praises Butler’s argument “that a self is an object without a body,” saying, “her theory has been seen as epitomizing to the queer project, one aim of which is to liberate people from ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ and binary gender identity,” ultimately giving Butler an “A” (Thurer 154). On the other hand, she criticizes interpretations of queerness as “kinks,” pushing against fetishization and Freud, describing their perceptions as “not a happy thought for feminists and queers,” but conceding some feminist interpretations that “‘played’ with who is allowed to assign phallic… status to things, and to what things they may assign them”, grading this analysis a “D” (Thurer 178). Thurer’s explication of perspectives towards queer theory drew important boundaries between each point of view that are critical to evaluating which methods are best for engaging in queer readings.

Queer theory in the present has used foundations built by Butler and other early prominent theorists to construct a now vast universe of readings, arguments, identities, and voices. One such voice, Peyton Campbell, in “Queer Science Fiction, Queer Relationality, and
Utopian Insurgency,” discusses the crucial role science fiction can play in creating queer futures. They suggest that “by depicting the utopian potential nestled within imagined worlds, [one] offers alternative futures to the dominant narrative of heteronormativity, settler colonialism, and apocalyptic capitalism,” highlighting how the inspiring effect of queer stories in science fiction can directly motivate a movement to similar utopias in real life (Campbell 131). Furthermore, Campbell argues that the joyful queer story is the ideal structure of queer science fiction, as it is one of the few mediums that “may offer hope of alternative futures for those who find no solace in a tomorrow that replicates the oppressive structures of the present” (Campbell 131). Although queer theory and queer rights have come a long way since Gender Trouble, contemporary queer theory addressing the same hegemonic apparatuses as their foundational texts indicate that society’s utopian development still leaves much to be desired. In response, queer science fiction allows one to figuratively ‘fast forward’ through this process to portray worlds that have finally shed bigotry, providing a necessary image of a hopeful queer future. While not all nonbinary or queer representations must or should be utopian, Campbell’s essay argues that queer suffering is already too common in the actual present, so images of queer joy should be praised and encouraged.

Notably, this essay includes three sections, defined chronologically, beginning with Gender Dreams (1969-1999), followed by Gender Awakening (2000-2014), and catching up with the present in Gender Frontier (2015-2023). These dates and delineations are not arbitrary and point to distinct phases in the mutual evolution of nonbinary instances in sci-fi and their real-life queer counterparts. Albeit expanded upon in each section's preface, these periods have patterns that arise in sci-fi media that respond to the sociopolitical context of the time. Ursula K. Le Guin’s publishing of The Left Hand of Darkness in 1969, a work that comes to be one of the
most heavily cited books in scholarship surrounding queer science fiction, marks the start of this chronology. Gender Awakening’s turn of the century distinction owes itself not to the new millennium but to the widespread inclusion of trans issues into more popular queer movements, as “the 2000 Millennium March on Washington was the first to include a transgender plank” (Morgan et al. 111). Finally, 2015’s *Orbergefell v. Hodges*’s universal legalization of same-sex marriage across the United States signals the Gender Frontier, inviting and inspiring queer voices to be more confidently represented in media and their own voice. This essay will track and explore each chosen instance of nonbinary representation as it exists within the boundaries of its own story, then the implications it has for the real world, revealing a rich history of science fiction’s continuing role to play in the mission for queer rights and equality.

**Gender Dreams (1969-1999)**

Before diving deep into the analysis of these instances of nonbinary identities, it is critical to contextualize them with the political and social landscape(s) of the corresponding era. While 1969 to 1999 is by no means a short time, each gender-bending example selected from these years follows a pattern of existing as an unintended ‘queer side-effect’ of other stories their authors wanted to tell. As revealed in this section, these nonbinary depictions are born as an inadvertent result of political metaphor or literary techniques. During this period, the status of the LGBTQ movement was behind that of the other, more popular political revolutions like the Civil Rights Movement or Second Wave Feminism. Even after milestones like the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the queer community was excluded, as its protections “covered all Americans except those with disabilities, LGBTQ people, and undocumented immigrants” (Morgan et al. 32). Fortunately, in response, LGBTQ activism first started to build momentum, as “by the end of
1969, there were activist organizations throughout the American Northeast, Midwest, and West; open rebellion on the streets; and an increasingly visible and strident LGBTQ print media,” placing the start of this investigation near the movement’s figurative ‘birthday’ (Morgan et al. 32).

This section will first examine the in-universe ways the nonbinary examples manifest, exploring the dynamics presented in the source material, the characters who carry these gender-nonconforming identities, and their interactions with those that adhere to the canon’s version of ‘normativity.’ Then, it will uncover the intended effect of their inclusion, discover why these nonbinary characters are present in the stories, and answer the question of their role in the medium. However, once their origins are clear, this section will reapproach these presentations with a mindset of queer validation, considering the depictions at face value, and reevaluating the queer implications and side effects, regardless of original intent.

This journey into queer universes begins with one of the most popular gender-bending novels of all time, Ursula K. Le Guin’s 1969 classic, *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Cited as “perhaps the most famous novel that destabilizes the gender binary,” this story depicts the genderless race of Gethenians, a species that only experience any sexual difference during a short mating period referred to as ‘kemmer’ (Kurowicka 72). As told from the perspective of Genly Ai, a human envoy to Gethen, this world is very different from Earth, particularly in how it has uniquely developed without the influences of the separation of gender. Le Guin uses this novel to pose the question, “What if there were no gender?” and explores the intricate, rippling effects that appear as an answer. Throughout the novel, the relationships between Genly and the Gethenian Estraven, the pregnancy of the King, and the queer biological intricacies of
reproduction all stand out as moments highlighting the Gethenians’ nonbinary culture. As a prominent feminist icon of the New Wave, Le Guin comes to ask this question with feminist intent and does ultimately receive a feminist answer; however, it is delivered through the construction of a queer, nonbinary body. Moreover, the novel foreshadows issues that real-life nonbinary people will face, where restrictively heteronormative language struggles to allow them to identify themselves accurately, as well as the flawed gendering of a person by their genitals, sexual desire, or anything other than their personal identity.

Through Genly Ai, the reader is acquainted with the Gethenians primarily in their distinctions from humanity. Most glaringly, Ai strains to comprehend this genderless world, noting the androgyny of the Gethenian race and electing to use a universal “he/him” to navigate his alien surroundings more easily. In this setting, he is out of place and is learning about Gethenian normativity from the outside, allowing the reader to find out more about this society alongside him. As the novel continues, Ai discovers more deviations from Earth society, the King is declared pregnant, non-consensual sex is absent, and no large-scale warfare or conflict of a broader scope exists other than a family feud. At first, these alien realities are increasingly incomprehensible for Ai until his time with Estraven, allowing him to talk through some conflicting understandings of gender at play. In a scene where Ai tells Estraven about Earth, he explains that gender “is the most important thing, the heaviest single factor in one’s life is whether one is born male or female. In most societies, it determines one’s expectations, activities, ethics, manners, almost everything,” to which Estraven, now feeling Ai’s confusion, asks, “equality is not the general rule then? Are they mentally inferior?” (Le Guin, 253). As the two grow closer, Ai finally accepts Estraven’s nonbinary reality, telling the reader, “I saw then, again, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not to see in him:
that he was a woman as well as a man,” cementing this embrace of Estraven, and his Gethenian gender-nonconforming concepts of identity (Le Guin 266). Although the story does not end well for Estraven, in a broader sense, this experience changes Ai’s perception of gender when reunited with other humans, noting, “They all looked so strange to me, men and women, as I knew them… they were like a troupe of great, strange animals, of two different species; great apes with intelligent eyes, all of them in rut, in kemmer” (Le Guin 318). This defamiliarization indicates Ai’s time amongst Gethenians had instilled him with their understanding of genderless normativity, now seeing other humans just as the Gethenians had only three years prior.

This gender-bending narrative originates in the feminist counterculture arguments of the period and exists primarily as an investigation into the discrimination women feel on account of men. Le Guin joined this feminist resurgence as “traditionally, men writing about male protagonists have dominated the SF genre… Le Guin's work helped to disrupt these systemic conventions and contributed significantly to the ‘New Wave’ of feminist SF”, acting as a sort of rebellious feminist response to the exclusively hyper-masculine science fiction landscape in her time (Sayers and Martin 629). In 1989, Le Guin revisited her thoughts on *The Left Hand of Darkness* in her essay *Is Gender Necessary? Redux*, where she explains that the androgynous culture of the Gethenians “was a heuristic device, a thought-experiment” designed to explore a feminist version of society (Le Guin 17). While writing, she recounts focusing on answering the question: “because of our lifelong social conditioning, it is hard for us to see what, besides purely physiological form and function, truly differentiates men & women…are there real differences… If so, what are they?” primarily to poke holes in the patriarchal ideological apparatuses that have separated genders from each other, placing cisgender heterosexual (cishet) men at the top of authoritarian pyramid (Le Guin 17). To do so, she removed the ‘physiological form and function’
and introduced engaging complex scenarios such as when “the king is pregnant” (Le Guin 16). In creating a society of fictional queer bodies, the absence of nonconsensual sex and large-scale war due to the lack of gender certainly lends itself to the feminist belief that society would be better off without gender discrimination. However, these forms exist not to represent queer bodies in reality but as a tool to discover the new society that arises when erasing heteronormative physicality of gender from history and the present.

Despite the authorial intentions, these gender non-conforming Gethenians serve as an early representation of nonbinary individuals as they will come to be known in the future, even sharing similar struggles when perceived through a heteronormative individual like Ai. For example, there is an apparent disconnect between the masculine pronouns used for the Gethenians and their androgynous society. Le Guin reasons that she calls “Gethenians ‘he’ because I utterly refuse to mangle English by inventing a pronoun for ‘he/she,’” speaking from a time before the popularization of ‘they/them’ pronouns for many nonbinary individuals (Le Guin 21). Nevertheless, the failure of language here may accurately represent a familiar struggle for genderqueer individuals exploring their identities without the right words. Kate Bornstein, a famous queer theorist and nonbinary author, wrote an account of her encounters with gender in her 1994 book *Gender Outlaw: on Men, Women and the Rest of Us* relatively early in the LGBTQ+ movement timeline. In it, she describes her relationship with her own identity, saying “I know I’m not a man—about that much I’m very clear, and I’ve come to the conclusion that I’m probably not a woman either, at least not according to a lot of people’s rules on this sort of thing” (Bornstein 8). In this case, the English language proves to be not universal enough for nonbinary individuals to describe themselves correctly. Le Guin unintentionally echoes these very concerns in *The Left Hand of Darkness* when a human scientist observing Gethenians
Halpern 15

remarks that “the very use of the [he] pronoun in my thoughts leads me continually to forget that the Karhider I am with is not a man, but a manwoman” (Le Guin 101).

For *The Left Hand of Darkness*, a force of misgendering appears in criticism of its biological heterosexuality and the potential development of gender during the Gethenian reproductive period of kemmer. Anna Kurowicka writes in their essay “Asexual and Genderless Futures” that *The Left Hand of Darkness*, while famous for upsetting the gender binary, “continues to depict desire as fully dependent on heterosexual attraction,” and uses this understanding to apply Judith Butler’s theory of the heterosexual matrix (Kurowicka 72). Beginning her critique, Kurowicka presents Butler’s heterosexual matrix as a system by which “one’s gender is largely defined through sexual attraction to people of the opposite gender: one is a woman if/because one desires men, and the other way around,” (Kurowicka 73). She argues that in the brief period of kemmer, the temporary manifestation of male/female organs as humans understand them, alongside craving and participating in heterosexually aligned sex, leads to a gendering through desire in the matrix. However, it is essential to note that “normal individuals have no predisposition to either sexual role in kemmer; they do not know whether they will be the male or the female, and have no choice in the matter,” suggesting a disconnect between one’s body and their mind when entering kemmer (Le Guin 97). The Gethenians relate to lived queer experiences precisely in this disconnect, whereas even if their bodies temporarily have sexed organs, they do not define Gethenian gender identity due to the random factor involved. Humans do not choose what genitals they are born with, nor do those organs necessarily align with gender identity, echoing the idea of mind/body separation. Even if there were a sort of inert ‘internal’ gender that was different between people, then Le Guin's gender-rejecting experiment would prove to be for naught.
Interestingly, Kurowicka interprets Le Guin as “she treats sex/gender and sexual desire as somehow simply dormant outside of kemmer… thus, it is perhaps not so much that gender and desire do not exist at all, but rather they remain latent until activated in the mating season”, which reads as equating sex, gender, and desire all inherently connected in the sense that there cannot be one without the other unavoidably appearing (Kurowicka 74). Although, this is to assume any sort of agreed identification between body and mind, especially during the manifestation of traditionally heterosexual genitals and penetrative sex during kemmer. Though this consensus between body and identity does not happen, as while Gethenians find themselves with heteronormative body parts and urges, they do not temporarily stop identifying as genderless during the time, just as nonbinary humans continue with their identities in more permanently sexed forms but remaining genderqueer regardless. While a queer side effect of a grander feminist experiment, the Gethenian experience seems to mirror real-life gender nonconformity, especially in moments where language fails and in opposition to equating one's body to their identity.

Reigning supreme as one of the largest sci-fi franchises of all time, *Star Trek* has had its fair share of boldly going into the genderqueer frontier. Taking to the screens of televisions across the United States in 1966, *Star Trek* followed the ‘New Wave’ trend of science fiction in its progressive versions of the future that challenged bigotry, being home to scenes like the first interracial kiss on TV in 1968’s “Plato’s Stepchildren.” In the *Star Trek* universe, the 1993 spin-off show *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* tells stories from a space station at the mouth of a wormhole to the opposite side of the galaxy, where they introduce a new type of body that is primarily liquid. This race of shapeshifters, known as the Changelings, is shown to have a
complex relationship with gender because they can transform their bodies into any other shape or person regardless of the subject's identity. The Changeling’s natural form on their homeworld is that of a massive hivemind-like existence, as a Changeling, while not shapeshifting, is a liquid. This ocean of flesh spans the entire planet and is called The Great Link by its inhabitants. However, since the Changelings are the deified ‘Founders’ of an aggressive galactic faction made up of followers who are ‘solid’ non-shapeshifters, they are often met with situations in which they must take a humanoid form to interact with their solid subordinates or masquerade as another person to conduct espionage on rival factions. Notably, not all Changelings saw The Great Link as their home. For example, Deep Space Nine’s security chief Odo was brought up by solids in an entirely different galaxy quadrant and believed alongside the viewer that he was the only one of his species for much of the show's earlier seasons. As one of the main characters in Star Trek: Deep Space Nine, Odo fills the 90’s Star Trek trope position of a person longing for humanity, a role similarly filled by characters like Data in Star Trek: The Next Generation and The Doctor in Star Trek: Voyager. Examining Odo’s gendered existence as a man, and the queer side effects created as the Changelings from the Great Link act as a foil to him, reveal how these ‘Founders’ depict a nonbinary experience in the form of genderfluidity and simultaneously reinforce ideas of gender as a malleable concept in a time that believed it to be rigid.

The term ‘fluid’ used here represents not only how beings move throughout gender presentation but is literal in describing the most natural state of a Changeling. While it is somewhat vague whether the Great Link is one collective consciousness, a mass of mixing consciousnesses, or something different, physically speaking, the vast majority of Changelings exist in this vast sea of liquid Changeling flesh. This expansive, combined, gelatinous continuance can be understood to be ‘normativity’ in the Founders' culture, as not only is it the
state that most Changelings exist in, but it requires effort for one to take a different (usually solid) form, demanding a ‘rest period’ from those shifting for long periods where they return to fluid form to recharge. When it becomes necessary, an individual Changeling can manifest from this form through a process described as when “the ocean becomes a drop,” providing an image of a shared consciousness temporarily separating into a smaller isolated state (“Behind the Lines”). In the show, the Founders are the leaders of the ‘Dominion,’ a powerful fascistic empire intending to impose ‘order’ on the galaxy. Occasionally, a Changeling from The Great Link must take a rigid humanoid form to effectively govern, control, and communicate with the solids that make up their armies, allies, and enemies.

Throughout Star Trek: Deep Space Nine, the viewer meets the character only referred to as the ‘Female Changeling,’ an inherently flawed description of the character’s existence, but understandably derived considering the solid body she decides to take when interacting with non-shapeshifters. Through the main characters' interactions with her, the viewer learns about the inner workings of normative Changeling society alongside cultural norms, taboos, and expectations within their community. For example, she is the one who describes herself away from the Great Link as when “the ocean becomes a drop,” and introduces the primary Changeling ideology, which argues that to be a shapeshifter is to be exponentially more complex and superior to those confined to a solid shape (“Behind the Lines”). She often expresses her disdain for solid form, noting how verbal communication is ‘inefficient’ when attempting to convey her thoughts or feelings accurately. She prefers to ‘link’ with other Changelings in a liquid state to share these ideas directly untranslated. As the prime spokesperson of the Founders, the Female Changeling’s ideology and culture are representatives of the average, hegemonically reinforced status quo within Changeling society, establishing a baseline normativity from which
definitions of what is queer within that context are derived. As indicated by the Female
Changeling, in the Founders' civilization, it is normative to remain in gelatinous form amongst
the Great Link. To them, taking form is to reduce one’s self to a lesser state, however, only
temporarily to facilitate the demands of leading the Dominion.

However, not every Changeling adheres to this thinking, as in the case of security chief
Odo, who was raised away from the Great Link and surrounded by solids. Odo found himself in
this unique situation as one of 100 young Changelings sent out into the galaxy by the Dominion
to gauge how other societies treat life forms that are weak or helpless, as the baby shapeshifters
have yet to learn how to take different shapes effectively. In this child-like state, he was
discovered by Dr. Mora, a male scientist who experimented on Odo, teaching him to shapeshift
through replication, mimicking the shape his liquid form took when placed in a container, simply
without the container. This process was traumatic for Odo, leaving him with scarring memories
of electric shocks and constantly being ‘poked or prodded’ by needles, although ultimately
leading to him successfully taking a humanoid form if only to tell Dr. Mora to stop hurting him.
As Odo matures, he eventually takes the position of Chief of Security on Deep Space Nine,
where the viewer meets him in the opening episode of Star Trek: Deep Space Nine.

As a consequence of Odo growing up disconnected from the Great Link, his ideology
develops significantly differently. His status as a Changeling among solids leaves him feeling
detached from his crewmates since he does not share in many behaviors that come with being
solid, like eating, drinking, or sleeping. Moreover, his appearance is also an alienating
characteristic. His unperfected shapeshifting abilities make crafting an accurate humanoid face
difficult, resulting in vague, undefined features that dip slightly into the uncanny valley. Odo’s
‘near-human’ experience places him among other humanity-seeking characters from the 90’s
Star Trek era, specifically Data and The Doctor from Star Trek: The Next Generation and Star Trek: Voyager, respectively. In Data’s case, he is an android and describes himself as “superior… in many ways, but I would give it all up to be human,” leading to a Pinocchio-esque tale of his encounters with human concepts (“Encounter at Farpoint Part I”). His artificial qualities and inability to experience emotion motivate him to participate in explorations of human behavior, but also frequently has his validity as a sentient lifeform challenged.

Similarly, The Doctor in Star Trek: Voyager is a holographic manifestation, a computer simulation designed to be the ‘Emergency Medical Hologram’ or ‘EMH’ onboard the U.S.S Voyager in case the physical medical professionals on board are otherwise incapacitated or overwhelmed. Due to a catastrophe in the first episode of Voyager, the ship and her crew are stranded on the opposite end of the galaxy. The Chief Medical Officer dies in the process, leaving the EMH Doctor as the only, and therefore leading, medical professional available. Throughout the years of filling this position, the Doctor is interested in the arts and desires to gain more human traits. As Chief Medical Officer, he wants recognition as equal with the rest of the crew despite his holographic existence. In one case, he files a formal grievance to the captain, citing a “failure to acknowledge sentience;” meanwhile, he attempts to program himself the ability to daydream, motivated by wanting to be more similar to the biological people around him. One of his crewmates supports him, arguing, “We all do it now and then, why not the Doctor?” while the Doctor reaffirms, “My thoughts exactly” (“Tinker, Tenor, Doctor, Spy”).

As the final piece of the puzzle between the 90’s Star Trek series, Odo also finds himself drawn to human behavior that he does not have access to. Although he can have emotions, daydream, and does not have his sentience debated, he finds elements of the solid experience enviable. During an episode in which Odo’s body is consensually home to two consciousnesses-
his own and that of a solid man named Curzon- he receives the memories and experiences of
Curzon’s non-changeling life. Examining these memories, Odo confesses he “never understood
how much joy you humanoids experience in things like eating, drinking, staying up all night
playing tongo,” expressing a sort of jealousy of life in solid form (“Facets”). The central
repeating motif between these three characters is their attempts to gain humanity through
mimicry: Data and the Doctor, mainly by coding unique human behaviors into their
programming, often with unsuccessful results, and Odo constantly exerting effort to take
humanoid shape and be recognized as humanoid by others.

Notably, Odo identifies as a man and uses masculine pronouns, presenting consistently
masculinely whenever he is humanoid. Since Odo’s shape at rest is a sexless gelatinous puddle,
the origins of this gendered identity can be traced to his upbringing with Dr. Mora and this
mimicry pattern. In Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble, she searches for the origins of gendering a
physical body and concludes that because “bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence
prior to the mark of their gender, the question emerges: to what extent does the body come into
being in and through the marks of gender?” (Butler 13). Indeed, this is difficult to answer for
humans as they are perceived through a gendered lens as soon as they are born, sometimes even
before then, based on their anatomy. This question becomes more answerable in the universe of
Star Trek, as a being like Odo does have a ‘signifiable existence’ prior to being inscribed with
gender. In the episode “The Begotten,” Dr. Mora returns to recreate his experiments previously
conducted on Odo now onto another recently discovered baby Changeling, allowing the viewer
to see how Odo came into his form and identity. In an emotionally poignant scene, the infant
Changeling referred to exclusively with “it/its” pronouns, performs its most independent act of
shapeshifting and appears to attempt to form itself into Odo’s face, matching his nose and other
facial features. While this young Changeling passes away before it can fully manifest a human form, it is reasonable to believe that Odo went through a similar formation of self during his early time with Dr. Mora, and where the baby Changeling mimicked Odo’s face, Odo mimicked the only other humanoid around, Dr. Mora. It is not at this moment that Odo takes a humanoid shape the likes of Butler may be searching for, but at the moment immediately after. Dr. Mora perceives this humanoid body through a gendering lens, and as it mimics the male presenting body of Dr. Mora, it is inscribed with ‘man-ness’. The moment that Dr. Mora begins to use masculine pronouns for Odo instead of objectifying “it/its” pronouns is when Odo’s body becomes ‘marked’ by gender. Once Dr. Mora perceived Odo as a male, thus began the process in which Odo perceived himself as a man, developing a gender identity. Butler argues that “gender identity might be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meaning subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusions of a primary and interior gendered self,” which is to say that by imitating Dr. Mora’s masculinity, Odo then became subject to the expectations and norms that come part and parcel with the male identity (Butler 176). As a result of a society with a gender binary, like that of Dr. Mora, all masculine presenting figures imitate each other, creating cohesive attributes that define the ‘man’ identity. Originating as an amorphous sexless being, Odo was not drawn to any sort of gendered expression before his time with Dr. Mora, indicating a lack of sort of inherent gendered pull, and “if the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems genders can neither be true nor false, but only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity” (Butler 174). In Odo’s case, his ‘primary and stable identity’ manifests as his consistent humanoid form, always returning to the same shape with the same voice, face, and clothing (made of his flesh). The
‘truth effects’ that are born from this consistent form are how solids view him as a man, treat him as a man, and refer to him as a man, even if they understand his Changeling biology. In this way, Odo does not view his ungendered liquid form as his ‘natural’ state but rather as the form he must take to rest. Instead, he most identifies with his solid man-presenting humanoid body, a line of reasoning supported by Butler, who argues “it does not follow that the construction of ‘men’ accrue exclusively to the bodies of males, or that ‘women’ will interpret only female bodies” (Butler 10). Thus, despite his fluidic origins, Odo is inscribed with gender as he learns to take humanoid form by mimicking Dr. Mora and embraces this identity as it manifests in the masculinity of his consistent body of choice.

Through this understanding of Odo’s unique upbringing as a Changeling away from the Great Link, one may come to effectively interrogate the way the ‘normative’ Changelings exist primarily as a foil to Odo unintentionally as a society of nonbinary entities. Where Odo’s purpose in Star Trek: Deep Space Nine is to seek out ways to come closer to humanity, or in this case, ‘solidity,’ the Founders look down upon those restricted to a solid form, considering it a state to avoid if at all possible. In this repudiation of the solid existence and all associated behaviors, not only do the Founders reject things like verbal language but also concepts unique to solids, such as gender itself. Potentially, characters like the Female Changeling and their physical manifestation may challenge this claim of a genderless normativity amongst shapeshifters of the Great Link; however, this demands further interrogation. As Odo identifies chiefly with his stable gendered humanoid state and views his resting gelatinous form as inaccurate to his self-perceptions, the opposite is true for one such as the Female Changeling. As indicated by her belief that dying is “far less cruel” than being solid, the Female Changeling does not identify with the humanoid body she inhabits to communicate with solids and only manifests
that way out of necessity (“Broken Link”). To navigate this complicated intermixing of bodies, identities, and forms, Butler suggests that “we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance,” which is to draw the lines between different sites of gendering (Butler 175). In the case of the Female Changeling, and the title of ‘female’ that she is inscribed with as solids perceive her humanoid manifestation, her apparent anatomical sex and gender performance align with traditional definitions of femininity. The characters in the show believe her to look, sound and behave like a woman, thus referring to her as female. However, this is a flawed interpretation, as the Female Changeling’s gender identity does not align with her gendered body, and while “gender is instituted through the stylization of the body, and hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of a gender abiding self,” to fall for the ‘illusion’ of her chosen humanoid form does not override her anti-gendered reality, but rather attempts to enforce a “heterosexual coherence” that demands a unified identity (Butler 519). To use a human-centered metaphor, the Changelings that align with the Great Link ideas of normativity are agender beings that participate in the equivalent of drag when they take a humanoid form that adheres to a gendered stylization of their body. While their anatomical sex and gender performance may suggest a sort of consistency, the Founders identifying primarily with their sexless form amongst the ocean of the Great Link disrupts that alignment, maintaining the nonbinary, anti-gender presentation of the Changeling society.

This depiction of beings who are generally agender, although able to move fluidly through gender expression as they deem necessary, is an image that strongly defies rigid ideas of gender. Changeling civilization primarily represented the ‘anti-Odo’ ideology concerning Odo’s
desires regarding solids and the inverse of accepted gendered concepts of solid heteronormativity. This rejection appears as a nonbinary, even anti-gender culture, in which moving into solid and, therefore, gendered forms is literally to become lesser in their society. Ultimately, the Changelings in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, intentionally or otherwise, reject “heterosexual coherence,” representing and reinforcing challenges to traditional ideas of the necessary alignment between one's body, identity, and presentation.

**Gender Awakening (2000-2014)**

The turn of the century marks the start of a new era for the American LGBTQ movement, best identified by the pursuit of queer equality under the law. In a post-AIDS crisis cultural landscape, the country had developed an even stronger stigma for any anti-heteronormative behavior, born from “homophobic rhetoric from religious and government leaders in the early years of the epidemic” in attempts to “reverse the hard-won battles for acceptance and visibility” (Morgan et al. 78). In response to the government’s failure to protect or assist the LGBTQ community during the crisis in any meaningful way, considering President Reagan had first addressed the issue only after “nearly forty thousand Americans had been diagnosed with the disease and over twenty thousand had died,” activists turned to fight the longstanding laws that had oppressed the community for a century (Morgan et al. 83). This new wave of LGBTQ advocates set goals to dismantle structures such as anti-sodomy laws, LGBTQ exclusionary provisions, and, most notably, the refusal to recognize same-sex marriage legally.

Meanwhile, as LGBTQ issues became popularized, transgender nonbinary identities began entering the public consciousness and challenged the heteronormative gender binary. As legal battles regarding LGBTQ rights raged, a new mindset emerged, where “for a whole
generation, the meltdown of gender categories is a given and not a problem,” signaling a sort of “end of gender, or at least the end of gender in the way that it has been customarily defined” (Thurer 6). These new gender-bending ideas and the divisive LGBTQ political landscape set the tone for media produced during this era. Engagement with non-heteronormative images is no longer the fictitious queer side effect of another story but knowingly representative of real, lived experiences and enters the heated LGBTQ conversation of the time.

This section, like the last, will first consider the nonbinary identities presented as limited to the media from which they originate, exploring the form they take and their interactions with normativity in the context of the story. Then, due to the prevalence of LGBTQ issues during this era, uncovering the argument made by including gender-nonconforming depictions will reveal what the source material intends to add to the sociopolitical conversation. Upon identifying this argument, it will then be subject to analysis, evaluating its effectiveness and overall relevance to lived nonbinary experiences.

*Star Trek* enters the 21st century in the form of its series *Star Trek: Enterprise*, which tells a prequel story of early Starfleet and humanity’s first significant steps into the stars, and in the process, learns how to become the near-utopian society shown in existing *Star Trek* media. Meanwhile, the franchise enters a new landscape of LGBTQ awareness, where the understanding is that people who identify between and outside of the binary gender spectrum are not restricted to the imaginings of fiction but the real lived experiences of those fighting for their rights at the time. Entering the fray, *Star Trek: Enterprise* introduces a race known as the ‘Vissians’ with three anatomical sexes, male, female, and ‘cogenitor.’ In this episode, “Cogenitor,” the Vissians’ treatment of the cogenitor is overtly and overwhelmingly negative,
using “it/its” pronouns to represent their objectification of the cogenitor, furthered by the fact that it does not have a name. Throughout the story, one of the human main characters, Trip, chief engineer of the NX-01 Enterprise, attempts to rescue the cogenitor in ways he views as ethically correct by treating it like a person and acquainting it with humanity. However, his mission is ultimately unsuccessful. The episode closes with Trip being staunchly reprimanded by his commanding officer, Captain Archer, for interfering with Vissian culture and his learning that the cogenitor had committed suicide once it returned to the Vissians. In Star Trek: Enterprise’s depiction of the miserable nonbinary cogenitor, the show makes a brutal yet compelling argument, simultaneously advocating for better queer treatment while disavowing the concept of a human cishet savior.

Nonbinary representation, as manifested as the cogenitor, is shown to have a unique place in the Vissian culture. In normative Vissian society, the viewer learns that the cogenitors comprise only 3% of the population, a fraction described as “the perfect ratio” by the Vissian chief engineer (“Cogenitor”). By watching how the Vissians treat the cogenitor, it can be derived that all cogenitors are met with a similar sort of objectification as seen in the microcosm of Vissian culture. As a cogenitor, one is not permitted to have a name, an education, travel freely, or participate in any behavior deemed ‘unnecessary.’ More generally, it is barred from developing any semblance of identity beyond its label as a tool for reproduction. Cogenitors do not choose who they are to facilitate breeding with but are instead ‘assigned,’ perform their ‘purpose,’ then are ‘reassigned,’ not allowed to participate in raising the children they help produce. Overall, this management of the cogenitors is reminiscent of human understandings of slavery, where “the dominant males and females treat the third sex like a thing to be used: more or less as a reproductive slave” (Lindenmuth 254). While this reality is obvious and intolerable to
the human observer, it is understood to be completely normative within Vissian culture, whose male and female counterparts seem to be perfectly reasonable people outside of their behavior toward the cogenitor, expressing interest in human cultural texts and being friendly in most interactions with the crew. Notably, the Vissians' othering of the cogenitors stems from an ignorance of their mental capabilities. The Vissians believe that the cogenitors have an inferior mental capacity, lacking the rapid ability to learn demonstrated by the males and females. Therefore, their objectification of the cogenitors comes from the belief that the third sex cannot operate beyond reproductive functions, unlike the rest of the population.

In the miniature simulacrum of general Vissian culture presented in the episode, the interactions between Trip and the cogenitor assigned to the Vissian Chief Engineer and his wife Calla unveil the truth to the cogenitors and their status amongst Vissians, challenging their hegemonic depersonalized preconceptions. As a human, Trip observes how the Vissians manage the cogenitor and, upon noticing its visible misery, “feels a negative intuition about the cogenitor’s situation, and then seeks a reason to confirm his discomfort” (Lindenmuth 255). To substantiate his human ‘hunch,’ Trip has dinner with the cogenitor’s assigned couple with ulterior motives, secretly conducting a neural scan on each instance of Vissian sex for later investigation. As the ship's doctor, Dr. Phlox compares each brain scan and introduces the grand twist. He finds that the “synaptic density and neural mass are almost identical to the other two. [The] cogenitor appears to be no more or less intelligent than the male and female” (“Cogenitor”). This revelation spurs Trip to sneak into the couple’s quarters to meet with the cogenitor, convincing it to begin learning how to read despite its claims that “it’s not right for me to read” and that its sole reason for existence is because “they need me to have children,” it eventually accepts Trip’s mentorship (“Cogenitor”). The next time Trip visits the cogenitor, it
has fully learned how to read and is now craving knowledge, developing an identity beyond its reproductive purpose. The cogenitor desires a name and calls itself ‘Charles,’ naming itself after Trip, whose full name is ‘Charles ‘Trip’ Tucker III’. These scenes with Charles emphasize its thirst for life beyond objectification. It joyfully talks about wanting to climb mountains, displays endless curiosity for technology aboard *Enterprise*, enjoys watching humanity’s movies, and skillfully masters board games in just a matter of minutes. However, the Vissians discover Trip had been sneaking off with Charles and demand its return to their ship. While Captain Archer is upset with Trip for his actions, Charles asks the Captain for asylum to stay with Trip, rejecting its Vissian community in favor of humanity and thus significantly complicating the situation. Ultimately, after debating the status of the cogenitor and ‘human’ rights with the non-human Vissians, Captain Archer acknowledges the poor treatment of the cogenitor and nevertheless elects to deliver it to its fellow Vissians. This decision consigns Charles to the miserable place depicted when Trip first met it, only now with the knowledge that it has the potential for more but will be denied those opportunities at every turn. In the episode's closing scene, Trip learns from Captain Archer that Charles has committed suicide, and Trip takes full responsibility. In an uncharacteristically upsetting yet evocative ending for an episode of *Star Trek*, the crew must learn from these actions and their catastrophic consequences.

In dissecting what went wrong, it is critical to investigate the motivations behind Trip’s actions, their perceived justification, and their flaws. When Trip sees the depressed state of the cogenitor alongside its poor, objectifying treatment, both he and the viewer understand that something is not right. From a human point of view, the Vissian behavior is reducing the cogenitors to the status of a “reproductive slave” (Lindenmuth 254). In Trip’s mind, regardless of the cultural differences between humans and Vissians, there is no reality in which this
depersonalization is ethically sound, therefore “Trip evinces moral absolutism—that is, the view that such factors may change, but right and wrong hold fast… Trip, as he sees it, is doing his moral duty… He’s showing compassion to someone who needs it… emancipating someone who has no voice” (Lindenmuth 258). Trip evokes the image of a ‘human savior’ parallel to that of the ‘white savior’ in stories of marginalized people's experiences. In white savior films, the “messianic white self is the redeemer of the weak, the great leader who saves blacks from slavery or oppression, rescues people of color from poverty and disease, or leads Indians in battle for their dignity and survival,” and in this episode, this same mindset can be identified in Trip, believing himself to be heroically saving Charles from a life of objectification (Vera 33). Although his intentions are not malicious, Trip falls into an old human habit, as “Humanity has a long history of cultures “helping” other cultures by telling them who the right gods were, how to dress, how to speak, what to eat, and where to work” (Lindenmuth 256). However, this approach veers from the ‘savior’ concept as it proves to be unintentionally fatal to Charles, presumably because it loses the voice and freedom it had a brief taste of before its return to normativity, then understanding the potential and joy it is restricted from simply based on its sex. In no way does the episode persuade the viewer to agree with the Vissians and their treatment of the cogenitor, emphasizing the most inhumane aspects of the treatment through the casual yet overwhelming oppression juxtaposed against the happiness exhibited by Charles when with Trip. Instead, the episode's argument can be found in Captain Archer's words while telling Trip about Charles’ death, saying, “You thought you were doing the right thing. I might agree if this was Florida, or Singapore, but it’s not, is it? We’re in deep space, and a person is dead. A person who’d still be alive if we hadn’t made first contact” (“Cogenitor”). In acknowledging the understandable moral justifications for Trip’s actions and the unintended disastrous consequences, the episode
Halpern 31

simultaneously criticizes the Vissians' treatment of the cogenitor and condemns the idea of using one’s own cultural beliefs and worldview to make choices regarding others, as this translation can lead to devastating results.

With this foundational moral insight into the cultural dynamics at play, the fact that the cogenitors are explicitly nonbinary demands a queer reading, especially considering the historical backdrop of the battle for LGBTQ rights at the time. As a reflection of real-life issues, the plight of the cogenitor is recognizable as tackling many of the structures of oppression that exerted force on many marginalized communities, precisely that of the queer community. In 2014, a Washington Post article explored the day-to-day life of a nonbinary teacher, Kelsey Beckham, and the daily experiences that come with their gender identity. This feature, aptly named “When no gender fits: A quest to be seen as just a person,” depicts a consistent unending invalidation of their identity in nearly every aspect of their life (Hesse). Many of the people around them refer to them with “she/her” pronouns, including their own family, even though “Kelsey doesn’t want to be a ‘she,’” their mother continues to question their identity, asking “Kelsey more than once, ‘Are you sure? Are you sure that maybe you’re not just a boyish girl?’” (Hesse). Much like Star Trek: Enterprise’s cogenitor Charles, Kelsey finds themself in a state of unhappiness due to potential treatment based on gender identity, saying that “It just makes me feel separated from society, when we have to keep talking about it. It’s like — am I even human?” (Hesse). Notably, the misgendering that is so prevalent throughout Kelsey’s life also manifests in the episode, as the crew of the Enterprise, who are limited to the belief that on “Earth there are only two genders,” refer to Charles using “she/her” pronouns, inscribing it as feminine because it “looks more like a her than a him” (“Cogenitor”). At no point does Charles express a desire to be perceived as a woman, although at the same time, it is never addressed as a
woman directly, as all of the uses of these feminine pronouns are in scenes in which Charles is absent, never giving it a chance to reject this gendering, while never aligning with binary as its personhood develops either. In this case, Charles has no community that genuinely respects its identity, stuck between the objectification of the Vissians and misconceptions of the Enterprise crew.

With these clear connections to lived experiences of real people, this episode proves to be in conversation with actual LGBTQ issues and allows for its in-universe argument to translate into one regarding the discussion of LGBTQ rights. For example, the ‘human savior’ narrative told through Trip’s actions can be viewed as a ‘cishet savior,’ exhibiting an explicit lack of knowledge of Charles's nonbinary experience not only by never asking about it but by inaccurately using gendered pronouns in his attempt to comprehend it. This site of misunderstanding may have proven to be unavoidably harmful to Charles, as in the episode it leads to Charles's suicide, but considering if Charles had been granted asylum, it would then be subject to constant othering as an alien person of a third sex, as it was behind closed doors. Beyond the episode, this idea of a harmful ‘cishet savior’ exists in the real world in the form of conversion therapy, a type of psychological treatment that consists of “a variety of practices enacted by health care practitioners and others (often religious counselors) with the ultimate goal of altering gender identity or gender expression to conform with social norms for gender identification and expression” (Riverto and Paldo 52).

Like Trip, many people have historically viewed the lives of nonbinary individuals as something to be corrected, even going so far as to have the “inclusion of gender identity disorders in previous editions of the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders” (Riverto and Paldo 53). While in Trip's case, the
oppression of the cogenitors is blatant and a valid concern, there are those in real life who believe queer individuals are suffering in their ‘gender confusion’ and find it ethical to attempt to force them to adhere to heteronormativity. Ultimately, both the actions of Trip and conversion therapy seem to lead to the same result, regardless of intention, as people who endure conversion therapy are “at significantly elevated risk for depression and suicide attempts” (Riverto and Paldo 59). The argument presented by the episode, in a queer context, pushes against the attempts made by those outside of the LGBTQ community to try and ‘help’ as they see fit because, despite their perceived moral obligations, their actions are rooted in a deep, inherent misunderstanding of a culture that is not their own.

As Star Trek: Enterprise navigates the LGBTQ rights movement of the era, it uses the image of the nonbinary cogenitor Charles to simultaneously represent the unfair treatment of queer individuals and denounce endeavors to correct or fix the queer community made by those who fundamentally cannot understand them, no matter the intentions. “Cogenitor” continues the Star Trek franchise’s commitment to progressive ideals as the leading ideology in their universe’s future, advocating for LGBTQ rights and autonomy during a tense contention surrounding the subject. Ideally, this episode aims to teach the crew and the viewer this critical lesson of respecting not just the humanity of others but also the cultural nuances of others, potentially laying the ideological foundations for the near-utopian Star Trek society to become a reality.

During an era of contentious debate over LGBTQ rights, satire offers Futurama a path to respond to religious critics of the movement by ironically inversing the imagery of their afterlives in the 2008 animated film “The Beast with a Billion Backs.” The movie enters the
LGBTQ conversation by depicting the nonbinary extradimensional planet-sized being known as Yivo, who uses “shkle/shkler” neopronouns in favor of traditional he/she/they/it pronouns. While this manifestation of gender nonconformity may seem ridiculous, under thick layers of comedic moments and irony lies a genuine argument for the fair treatment of those who identify beyond the binary. Specifically, the film ironically uses overt Christian symbolism, using the images of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to tell a story of queer love, identity, and joy. One of the largest sources of anti-LGBTQ sentiments in the United States originates from the organized Christian religion. *Futurama* intentionally mixes religious and queer themes purposefully to make fun of and delegitimize the theological argument against LGBTQ rights. In the film, the environment understood to be the Christian heaven is revealed to have been the product of Yivo, who recalls that “Centuries ago, I sent an image of myself into the minds of your artists,” explaining that the heavenly setting complete with clouds, angels and massive golden gates on Yivo’s surface came first, and was the inspiration for the Christian heaven (“The Beast with a Billion Backs”). Combined with Yivo’s emphasized queerness, *Futurama* flips the hateful religiously-fueled anti-LGBTQ narrative of queer people going to hell by simultaneously presenting heaven as nonbinary, queer, non-monogamous, and ultimately joyful, as well as representing the bigoted zealots as jealous leagues of robots, who ironically work with the devil to put an end to queer happiness.

Yivo’s first contact in the film has a ‘rocky start’- however, as the characters meet and interact with Yivo personally, they learn that shkle is a charming individual. The first of Yivo shown on screen is in the form of massive, monstrous tentacles that pour out of an interdimensional rift above Earth, seeking out sentient life and embedding into the back of their necks. Before the viewer comes to learn of Yivo’s sentience, shkle is characterized as a terrifying
zombifying force, seemingly brainwashing each person shkle captures to “love the tentacle” and be obsessed with “the tentacle” to the point it is the only thing they can talk about (“The Beast with a Billion Backs”). One of the main characters, Fry, who wears a tentacle-themed Christian bishop ensemble, eventually properly reveals Yivo. Fry clarifies that “Yivo is the lover of all things, male and female. But Yivo has no gender, thus Yivo has proclaimed that instead of ‘he’ or ‘she’, we are to use the word ‘shkle’. And, instead of ‘him’ or ‘her’, we are to use ‘shklim’ or ‘shklr’,” directly and explicitly having the nonbinary aspect of Yivo overtly known. Notably, after making this point, when characters use the wrong pronoun for Yivo, they are quickly corrected and soon learn to refer to Yivo by shkler preferred pronouns. Upon being scolded by Leila, the last tentacle-free person, for attempting to ‘mate’ with their universe through the tentacles, Yivo begs forgiveness, asking to start over as friends and “see where things go,” removing shklimself from each person’s neck (“The Beast with a Billion Backs”).

In a comedic montage of events, Yivo simultaneously goes on dates with literally every person in the universe (except for Leila), including individuals potentially on the asexual/aromantic spectrum- as a character remarks, “Yivo makes me feel sexy, and I’m asexual!” (“The Beast with a Billion Backs”). After these universe-wide dates, Yivo proposes to this universe with a massive diamond ring the size of an average car, and the entire universe agrees not only to the engagement but to move in/on Yivo’s planetary body. Meanwhile, the secondary plot intersects with the Yivo story, as the main robot character, Bender, arrives with an ‘army of the damned’ he was given by Beelzebot, the robot Devil, with intentions of taking over Earth and committing genocide on humanity. However, since this universe’s population is moving to Yivo’s surface, and robots cannot cross the extra-dimensional rift into Yivo’s
universe, the humans simply let Bender have Earth, citing that they “don’t need it anymore” (“The Beast with a Billion Backs”).

Yivo sends golden escalators to descend from the dimensional rift, exponentially increasing religious imagery. Whereas the symbolism had previously been limited to the cult-like worship of Yivo before shkle introduced shklimself and the presence of a Robot Hell, the plot becomes a sci-fi retelling of Adam and Eve being banished from the Garden of Eden. Arriving on Yivo’s surface, the people of the universe discover an overwhelming amount of Christian heaven imagery: a surface made of solid clouds, angels flying overhead, harps strewn about, and a large set of towering golden gates marking the entrance. Once on Yivo, shkle sets one ground rule, asking the universe for a promise to “never, ever communicate with any other universe” (“The Beast with a Billion Backs”). Notably, these heavenly qualities expand beyond the physical, as everyone receives whatever they could want materially, everyone is happy with Yivo, even Leila, who comes to love shklim, joining the universe-wide polyamorous relationship. Unfortunately, Fry breaks Yivo’s one rule and, like Eve taking a bite of the Forbidden Fruit, dooms himself and the rest of the universe to be cast out from paradise. He sends a letter to Bender using paper from Yivo’s universe, which Bender applies to his weapons to allow him and his hellish robot army to attack Yivo through the extra-dimensional rift. The film comes to a close after Bender leads a pirate-themed invasion of Yivo, pulling shklim through the rift out of their universe and into the one where robots can travel freely. The fighting comes to a halt as Yivo realizes Fry has broken their promise, leading shklim to break up with all of the universes except for another polyamorous person, Colleen, who shares Yivo’s non-monogamous dating preferences. Upon banishing the universe’s population from Yivo’s body,
shkle reenters and shuts the rift, closing the door to the literal manifestation of the Christian heaven.

Religion's place in the LGBTQ rights debate has often directly opposed any variation from cisgender heteronormativity. While Christianity has many denominations, the broadly popular anti-queer Christian take on the gay rights movement of the period can be derived from the story of the two anatomical sexes as presented in the book of Genesis and the story of Adam and Eve. Religious authorities cite that this separation of the sexes is to “designate the fundamental distinction that God has embedded in the very biology of the human race; and Distinctions in masculine and feminine roles as ordained by God are part of the created order and should find expression in every human heart” (Southern Baptist Convention). Furthermore, according to Baptist ideology, transgender (including nonbinary) identities are born from “the Fall of man into sin and God’s subsequent curse… which can result in such biological manifestations as intersexuality or psychological manifestations as gender identity confusion” (Southern Baptist Convention). Overall, many Christians pushed against recognizing and accepting LGBTQ individuals during this time, not just in law but in society as a whole.

_Futurama_’s presentation of Yivo satirizes these blatantly invalidating ideas of gender identity by inverting the traditional concepts of gender, instead presenting a future where the identities that emerge from ‘sin’ are embodied in the form of Heaven, and ‘ordained’ heteronormativity takes the shape of a violent faction supported by the Devil equivalent himself. Yivo has been purposefully queered in as many ways as possible to upset religiously backed normativity, this manifesting as the very ‘alien’ gender with “shkle/shkler” pronouns, the universe-wide polyamory, and the perceived same-sex relationships, as Yivo is voiced by male actor Daniel Cross and is shown to be involved romantically with other characters also voiced by
male actors. Yivo simultaneously personified the joyous neverending paradise described as the Christian Heaven and queered to the extreme acts to counter religious claims that queerness is an extension of “the Fall of man into sin and God’s subsequent curse,” as Yivo is equated to holiness and does not align with heteronormativity, but is a place of everlasting love regardless (Southern Baptist Convention). Moreover, the main antagonists to this heavenly life with Yivo are shown to align not only with heteronormativity but with Hell itself. Bender, the leader of this attack, is shown early in the film to identify as a man attracted to women; his alignment with the sexist, patriarchal power structure is reinforced in his demeaning comments towards women, disrespectfully calling Leila “Chesty McNag-Nag” and referring to women as “bimbos” (“The Beast with a Billion Backs”). He makes a ‘deal with the Devil’, acquiring an army of robots from Beelzebot in Robot Hell to wage war on the organic people who left the universe in favor of Yivo. Cementing Bender as a violent heteronormative representative, Bender justified his attack on Yivo with a familiar argument, saying, “Bender knows love. And love doesn't share itself with the world! Love is suspicious. Love is needy. Love is fearful. Love is greedy” (“The Beast with a Billion Backs”). This explanation reveals his aggressive actions to be an enforcement of his own understandings of queer realities, a sentiment uncoincidently echoed by real-life anti-queer Christian religious leaders who attribute gender non-conformity to sin and mental illness, ‘correcting’ these traits as “some churches sponsor SOCE [sexual orientation change efforts] and related programming,” SOCE being “therapy aimed at changing homosexual or other LGBTQI+ persons into heterosexuals” (Plante 115). In this figurative flipping of the script, Futurama’s “The Beast with a Billion Backs” combines the paradise imagery of heaven with the queer nonbinary depiction of Yivo to argue against the religiously fueled anti-LGBTQ rhetoric of the
period, equating those that make such hateful claims to the very Devil from whom they are attempting to ‘save’ the queer community.

**Gender Frontier (2015 - 2023)**

This final section is where many ‘gender dreams’ become a reality. After the battle for same-sex marriage, a new front had manifested, where “this more cohesive LGBTQ advocacy, combined with the emergence of local and national transgender advocacy groups, has… the power to affect greater political and social influence” (Morgan et al. 111). In this new era, nonbinary individuals are no longer understood to be a negligible fraction of the population, nor invisible altogether, but instead are legitimized by society at large, such as when in 2017, “Oregon became the first state to allow non-binary ‘X’ gender markers on state identification documents, a move quickly followed by nineteen other states” (Morgan et al. 111). Ideologically, heteronormative views on gender have broken down, as many allies in and out of the queer community come to “contend that gender identity is independent of biology, and is a purely personal decision, and, as such, should be respected and never regulated or discriminated” (Schiappa 1). This positive shift in queer acceptance and understanding by many seems to suggest this era’s zeitgeist is, while not unanimously, far more comfortable with queer bodies, identities, and lives. In congruence, instances of gender nonconforming individuals began to appear in genres outside of speculative fiction, such as Deputy Bishop from *Deputy*, a crime drama described by Bex Taylor-Klaus, the nonbinary actor who plays Bishop, as a “white man’s show” but still a place where “you get voices of people who feel like they’ve been silenced” (Radish). With this new vocal power of queer individuals and their exponentially more frequent appearance in the present media, there is now accountability in portraying these lives. For
example, nonbinary speculative fiction author Eris Young guides those wanting to write
genderqueer characters into their own stories, emphasizing that “we don’t need to be aliens or
faeries… we don’t always look androgynous… [and] our gender is not the only thing about us”
(Young). Moreover, in collections of queer stories such as Brit Mendalo’s Beyond Binary, they,
“as a queer person whose gender expression is fluid… have longed for books that speak to and
for people like me”, specifically including works that “challenged all too common destructive
tropes about queer and trans people… There are no tragic ‘big reveal’ stories here; no one is
shocked by anyone else” (Mendalo, 7). While avoiding the generalization of a homogeneous
queer or nonbinary perspective, these voices can speak to a larger desire from the community for
accurate and specifically joyful portrayals of their identities.

This section will examine the instances of nonbinary representation in sci-fi informed by
these modern understandings of gender identity and queer expectations. Continuing the pattern,
the gender-bending presentation is first examined in the context and universe from which it is
derived, defining what shape it takes and what role it may (or may not) play in the grander story.
From there, this section will identify how the depiction aligns with this new era of gender
ideology, pointing to how queer representation may affirm ideas like the separation of gender
identity and biology or the freedom of gender expression without sacrificing identity. Finally, the
nonbinary form will be scrutinized for how it interacts with desires expressed by voices from the
queer community, with the ideal nonbinary depiction in science fiction being socially accepted,
joyful, and treated with respect.

The Good Place (2016-2020) boldly answers, “Where does the soul go when one dies?”
taking the sitcom out of the stereotypical Seinfeld-esque apartment settings of New York City
and into the fantastical universe of the afterlife. Combining the traditional sitcom with the cosmic aesthetic of sci-fi, this version of a world after death takes the shape of a complex outerversal reality coated in familiar aesthetics that a human can comprehend. Separated primarily into a “Good Place” and a “Bad Place” as stand-ins for “Heaven” and “Hell,” alongside a collection of dimensions in between like the “IHOP,” or “Interdimensional Hole of Pancakes,” the science fiction aspects of the show are presented comedically, playing on the infinitely unusual existence after Earth (“Chidi Sees the Time Knife”). One of the main characters the viewer meets is Janet, a self-described “anthropomorphized vassal of knowledge” designed to accommodate the souls of the dead, much like an AI personal assistant (“The Eternal Shriek”). While she starts as a depersonalized ‘tool’ of a character, as she comes to help the humans in their mission to fix the broken system of the afterlife, she develops, grows, and ultimately is treated with the same respect and validity as a person. Notably, although she uses feminine “she/her” pronouns, and exists in a form aligned with womanhood, both in perceived bodily anatomy and gender expression, whenever she is called a ‘girl,’ she is quick to correct the assumption, reminding the individual that she is indeed, “not a girl” (“What’s My Motivation”). This body/identity discrepancy originally serves as an alienating fact, lending itself to the artificial aspects of Janet, where she was created to carry out a specific task instead of to be a person. As Janet steps out from her intended purpose as a tool, this status as a nonbinary individual carries over as part of her identity. Furthermore, this depiction of a feminine presenting person who maintains her nonbinary identity speaks to an understanding of gender identity as separate from biological sex, sexuality, and gender expression. Janet’s embodiment of both explicitly being nonbinary and overtly feminine in her shape and expression pushes against the androgynous forms that had been historically synonymous with queer bodies.
In the first season of *The Good Place*, Janet is primarily portrayed as an omnipotent, ultra-powerful, hyper-happy assistant to the ‘neighborhood’ of afterlife residents. However, as she interacts with the human characters, she develops a more complex identity beyond her original purpose. After a series of unnatural disasters, Michael, the extradimensional ‘architect’ of the neighborhood, has elected to retire after failing to maintain a perfect society in the afterlife, a process in which his “soul is disintegrated, and each molecule will be placed on the surface of a different burning sun” among other horrible effects (“The Eternal Shriek”). Two main protagonists, Chidi Anagonye and Eleanor Shellstrop, discover that the only way to prevent Michael from submitting to this torture is to ‘shut down’ Janet, making it impossible for him to leave the neighborhood. Eventually, Chidi hits Janet’s killswitch, alerting the neighborhood of her ‘murder,’ but just temporarily taking time to reboot, a procedure where Janet ultimately “gains more wisdom and social abilities” with each generation, equating it to “growing up” (“The Eternal Shriek”). During her reboot phase, Janet temporarily loses her omniscience and finds comfort in Jason Mendoza, another main character who explains to her what Jalapeno Poppers are in a time of confusion and vulnerability for Janet (“... Someone Like Me as a Member”). This relationship continues, as upon Janet gifting him wings from ‘Ugly Nick’s Meat Trench,’ Jason declares his love for Janet, proposes, and Janet accepts. This moment marks the beginning of a show-long romance between Janet and Jason, who always find each other after being ‘rebooted’ hundreds of times by Michael. Janet continues to love Jason even as they lose their memories during reboots, exhibiting unconscious jealousy as Jason unsuccessfully tries to romance a different person. Moreover, Jason loves Janet exactly for who she is, even after being reminded that she is ‘not a girl,’ eventually using this exact fact as a way to catch another Janet pretending to be her, calling her ‘girl’ and the imposter not correcting him with ‘not a girl’
(“Tinker, Tailor, Demon, Spy”). In the final episode of the series, Janet and Jason’s relationship comes to an end as Jason decides to move on from the afterlife, but summarizes the joyful connection between the two, placing a necklace that he made that reads ‘J+J,’ remarking, “Looks good, not-a-girl,” and entering the next phase of existence (“Whenever You’re Ready”). At this point, Janet has fully evolved from her original cheerful tool-like existence as an assistant, now exhibiting a full range of emotions, being capable of deep love, and making her own choices, ultimately becoming much more than the sum of her parts.

As an artificial being complicating gender and sexuality, Janet enters the lengthy history of robots, cyborgs, and androids facing potentially incompatible gender constructs. While Janet’s body was made for her, particularly in a form consistent with feminine anatomy, her identity is entirely separate from this femininity and its associated pronouns. This non-alignment between her body and identity echoes a familiar idea in Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, where they describe “the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance” (Butler 175). Here, Janet may not necessarily have an ‘anatomical sex’ as biologically understood but is built in the form of a woman and, in congruence, participates in the gender performativity of a woman as she reproduces the “bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds [that] constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler 519). However, her gender identity does not follow the pattern, as she is very openly ‘not a girl,’ instead presenting herself as nonbinary in the sense that she does not place herself on the extremely limiting gender binary. This disconnect can be found in the analysis of other works concerning gender and the artificial being, as queer theorist Jacob Barry examines how “robots, cyborgs and androids as present-day realities thus offer a vehicle to experiment with gender in a manner that produces a tangible, perhaps even non-fictitious account
of how gender is a way of regulating and disciplining the body” (Barry 125). Although Janet is also explicitly “not a robot,” as she reminds characters in a similar way when she affirms she is “not a girl,” her synthetic origins allow for the intersections of gender and robot to remain relevant. For Barry, AI stories support modern rejections of the internal ‘true’ gender, and he explores how a robot can problematically have a “gendered ‘true self’ narrative imposed upon them” (Barry 128). A similar gendering of Janet takes place as people refer to her as a ‘girl’ or ‘lady,’ and uniquely, Janet pushes back against these identity labels. In contrast to this outdated thinking, a new gender nonconforming ideology appears, where “traits traditionally identified as masculine or feminine are accepted as masculine or feminine” but with the freedom for people to “express their gender with whatever combination of traits they choose” (Schiappa 52). With the understanding that gender is an oppressive, multifaceted structure, Janet’s constant rejection of definitive ‘womanhood’ is an open rebellion against forces of gender inscription, not giving up the freedom she has in embracing feminine gender expression nor consigning herself to be a ‘girl’ when she is not.

Another way of viewing Janet’s body is through Wendy Gay Pearsons’ interpretations of plasticity, where “thinking of bodies as plastic and as largely detached from identity produces a scenario in which it is possible to rethink how we consider the relationships between sex changes, gender constructs, corporeality and their relationship to sexual desire” (Pearson 179). This reality is quite accurate for Janet, as her body is artificial and sporadically incorporeal when she spends time in her ‘Void,’ a space (or lack thereof) she enters, usually when she is unneeded. Excitingly, this detachment between body and identity allows Janet to break from historical precedents, where nonbinary expression has avoided “extremes of gendered behavior because they are uncomfortable identifying as ‘male’ or ‘female’... in contrast, characters who change sex
in science fiction novels generally adopt stereotypical gender performance” (Morgan). In this new age of gender understanding, Janet participates in a typical gender performance of femininity while abstaining from any change in anatomical sex or gender identity to accommodate it.

Notably, this experience is not unique to the radical futures or dimensions of science fiction, as in the case of Rachel Anne Williams, writing of her non-androgynous nonbinary life in her 2011 article “Being Nonbinary Has Nothing To Do With Looking Nonbinary.” She deconstructs misconceptions, as her “presentation is femme” and she uses “she/her” pronouns, she still considers herself “nonbinary, neither a man nor a woman” (Williams). Moreover, she calls out harmfully inaccurate stereotypes, pointing to the “stereotype that nonbinary people must strive for perfect androgyny” and that “all nonbinary people prefer ‘they’ pronouns” (Williams). Janet’s representation in The Good Place as the femme nonbinary ‘not-a-girl’ acts to break each of these erroneous preconceptions of what must come part and parcel with an identity beyond the binary. Furthermore, her joy-filled story as representative of lived experiences speaks to how “for trans and gender diverse individuals, science fiction… is a way to cultivate alternative livable worlds- perhaps even one in which our diverse relationships to gender are not only affirmed but celebrated” (Barry 129). As this celebration takes form in Janet’s healthy relationships, platonic and romantic, The Good Place provides a depiction of a nonbinary individual who victoriously takes up the torch of gender rebellion found in stories of synthetic life. Simultaneously, she breaks body-focused precedents in queer science fiction and counters stereotypes of non-fictitious nonbinary individuals.
This paper’s own queer journey brings us to a future more distant than ever. One of Star Trek’s modern series, Star Trek: Discovery, has its newer seasons set in the late 32nd century, more than 800 years from the in-universe date of the final episode of Star Trek: The Next Generation, “All Good Things….” In this far away future, the fuel for warp travel is scarce, and the Federation is only a fraction of itself, but the anti-bigotry utopian ideals from the now ancient times of The Next Generation and Deep Space Nine continue to persist these hundreds of years. Disappointingly, they do not evolve as expected, as shown by the handling of the franchise’s first nonbinary human character, Adira. Unlike many of the characters who were flung into this future through time travel, Adira is from this ultra-futuristic setting, only meeting the crew of the Discovery as part of the United Earth Defense Force. Although they are first introduced to the crew as a woman, using “she/her” pronouns, Adira eventually comes to reveal that they “never felt like a 'she' or– or a 'her,' so… would prefer 'they' or 'them” (“The Sanctuary”). Upsettingly, the show depicts this moment as characterized by Adira’s fear, who is apprehensive about revealing their gender identity, presumably from a fear of rejection or misunderstanding. Fortunately, the crew of the Discovery accepts this identity wholeheartedly. Still, the fear of coming out exhibited by Adira implies a dystopian story of nonbinary and queer discrimination that reaches into the far future, persisting even 1,000 years from the present day. However, this show’s choice to use a human for this nonbinary representation fills a long-standing gap in queer depictions, finally stripping away the ‘alien’ coating that has previously surrounded many of the instances. Queer relationships function as the core of Adira’s character; not only do they form a healthy, loving relationship with their boyfriend, Gray Tal (who is also trans), but they eventually discover a family aboard Discovery in Commander Stamets and his husband, Doctor Culber. Adira’s explicitly nonbinary presence in Star Trek: Discovery exists as the culmination
of *Star Trek*’s previous oblique approaches to gender nonconformity, and in a new age of
genderqueer acceptance, it is refreshingly human, it is restoratively heartwarming.

The viewer meets Adira when the recently-time-traveled crew of the *Discovery* seeks out
familiar faces in this far-flung future, deciding to go to the ‘heart’ of the Federation, Earth. Upon
arriving, the ship is subject to a thorough inspection by the United Earth Defense Force, with
Adira investigating *Discovery*’s engineering. In this first feature of Adira, they are presented as a
woman, using “she/her” pronouns, and as a remarkable engineer, skillfully and precisely
sabotaging *Discovery* to buy themselves extra time to discover the truth of the ship alternative
form of faster-than-light travel, the ‘Spore Drive.’ At the end of the episode, Adira chooses to
stay on *Discovery*, not only to learn more about the Spore Drive but also because they are host to
a Trill symbiote with memories that may be able to be accessed which point the crew in the
direction of the remains of the Federation. Shortly after finding themselves aboard, Adira begins
to bond with Stamets and Doctor Culber. While assisting the Stamets in deciphering an
encrypted transmission, Stamets compliments Adira’s coding skills, telling his commanding
officer Captain Saru that “Adira can write an algorithm that can find and decode it… she’s pretty
fast” (“The Sanctuary”). Adira takes a moment but corrects Stamets, saying, “*they’re* fast… not
‘she’… I’ve never felt like a ‘she’ or a ‘her’ so… I would prefer ‘they’ or ‘them’ from now on,”
seeming to prepare for rejection, avoiding eye contact, and sighing in relief when Stamets kindly
reassures them, “Okay” (“The Sanctuary”). They reveal that they had kept this identity a secret,
ever having told anyone but their boyfriend Gray, but felt comfortable enough now to share it
with Stamets and the crew. From here, although Adira is a whiz kid engineer, they do minimal
engineering. Instead, their plotline surrounds the Trill symbiote within them, who was once
bonded with Gray, and a story of reconnecting to Gray through memory and love. Furthermore,
this connection between Adira, Stamets, and Culber leads to a found family dynamic, where Adira joins Starfleet and the crew to work alongside the couple, and Stamets comes to view Adira as him and Culber’s child (“There is a Tide…”).

On the surface, Adira’s storyline can be viewed as a wholesome coming-of-age story that deals with queer love, kinship, and family in the distant future. However, upon further analysis, Star Trek: Discovery’s illusory, socially utopian future is potentially apocalyptic for nonbinary individuals and viewers. Similar criticism of the Star Trek series is not newfound; in “Engaging with Gender: Star Trek’s Next Generation,” Victoria Korzeniowska discusses the fact that traditional gender roles still exist in this distant future, pointing out that “the two female officers… nevertheless conform to today's stereotypes of femininity and occupy roles which perpetuate essentialist stereotypes… rather than offering a vision of a diversification of female potential” (Korzeniowska 21). Here, the concerning continuance exists briefly between Adira revealing their nonbinary identity and Stamets embracing them for who they are. Even though the episode occurs in 3189, they expect potential rejection from Stamets because of their identity. Where Korzeniowska looks to Star Trek: The Next Generation’s failure to depict a positive future of female equality, Star Trek: Discovery fails to present a distant future where one can be unafraid to proudly, or even casually, exist as a nonbinary individual. As a vessel for imaginative, potentially utopian worlds, “queer and feminist science fiction may offer hope of alternative futures for those of us who find no solace in a tomorrow that replicates the oppressive structures of the present, something necessary for the creation of better worlds both in the immediate now and the future,” however, this future seems bleak for nonbinary people (Campbell 131).
More accurately, this future seems familiar, as the stories of violent reactions of friends or family to a person coming out are all too prevalent in the present era. In her opening to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin discusses how “science fiction is often described, and even defined, as extrapolative. The science fiction writer is supposed to take a trend or phenomenon of the here-and-now, purify and intensify it for dramatic effect, and extend it into the future,” highlighting a perceived ‘duty’ that aligns with her work and those who take inspiration from it (Le Guin, xvii). Unlike Le Guin’s call for ‘extrapolation’ in science fiction, *Star Trek: Discovery*’s handling of queer issues directly represents today and stops short of imagining what may change about nonbinary lives in the distant future. While this may make Adira more relatable for present-day nonbinary viewers, the show’s failure to create an original image of coming out in a sci-fi setting is a missed opportunity for a science fiction story.

The absence of human nonbinary characters in much of science fiction can be partly traced to how existing beyond the binary is an ‘alienating’ force. Wendy Gay Pearson cites the pattern of gender non-conformity most frequently being embodied by alien species and finds its origins in the “concept of doing gender and of being undone by it, or by its recognition or misrecognition and the possibility of being seen as human… in terms of understanding the exploration of gender …within science fiction-- which is, after all, so often about what it means to be human” (Pearson 76). Which is to say, the fear of losing the ability to be recognized as a human was at risk when imagining nonbinary forms, where bodies were “threatened by queer’s potential disintegration in the face of a defensive and frighteningly powerful heteronormative hegemony over lives and meanings” (Pearson 73). Nevertheless, in this new age of increased gender freedom, *Star Trek: Discovery* overcomes this fear, combining the human and the genderqueer to prove that the two are not mutually exclusive, rejecting the idea that being
nonbinary is to be non-human. Despite the depressing potential future suggested by Adira’s coming out scene, the story that follows is one ultimately of love, as they reconnect with their loved ones and form new familial connections with Stamets and his husband. This queer happiness corrects the initially disheartening prediction and paints a hopeful image for nonbinary people to find those that embrace their identities in the future, and while “hope is often disappointing in its inability to make real imagined realities… it nonetheless attunes us towards cultivating better ways of living together within the world” (Campbell 134). Combining these juxtaposed visions of queer desolation and triumph, *Star Trek: Discovery* suggests possibly preventing that terrifying future by treating nonbinary people today with the kindness shown to Adira 1,000 years from now. Overall, the acceptance of Adira and characters like them creates a queer utopian version of the universe, where the restrictions associated with one's gender identity are obsolete and provides crucial images where nonbinary people are not unfamiliar aliens but humans like everyone else.

**Conclusion**

The history of nonbinary representation in science fiction is a story of visibility. In the past, a world where a person may identify beyond the gender binary seemed impossible, but media like the works of Ursula K. Le Guin and *Star Trek* proved otherwise. As the sociopolitical landscape changed, so did the presentation of genderqueer characters, mutually evolving alongside one another. At first, sci-fi’s place as a vessel for nonbinary images was largely unintentional, as authors exploring gender as a ‘human’ trait imagined queer bodies to interrogate the role gender plays in society and identity. After the turn of the century, these queer identities were revealed to be real and fighting for their rights. The science fiction genre allowed
the LGBTQ community and its allies to respond to the LGBTQ debate. Subsequently, the nonbinary bodies depicted argued for the freedom and equality of non-heteronormative identities. Eventually, congruent with the rise in queer voices, a demand grew for intentional and accurate portrayals of nonbinary people beyond their use as a political tool. Frequently, modern science fiction now engages with the revolutionary ideas presented by early queer theorists as reality and is informed by real queer experiences to develop instances of nonbinary representation that is no longer restricted to alien form. While the future for nonbinary lives is unpredictable, it is depictable through sci-fi. For many science fiction creators, the genre’s limitless possibilities provide an opportunity to generate much-needed images of a world where queer bodies are legitimized, queer relationships are celebrated, and queer joy is possible so that one day these new worlds may become a reality.
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