

## **Toward an “Other” Dimension: An Essay on Transcendence of Gender and Sexuality**

ROSEANN PLURETTI  
(provocateur)  
University of Kansas, USA

JESSA LINGEL  
University of Pennsylvania, USA

ARAM SINNREICH  
American University, USA

Imagine a distant universe, where humans are provided cognitive data packages at birth. These cognitive data packages contain interconnected networks of socially constructed attitudes, roles, beliefs, traits, and appearances. Wired into the individual’s brain, they affect every human process. However, this universe deems certain data packages as superior. It hegemonically favors humans with the perceived superior data packages and marginalizes the “Others.” This distant universe is not too distant. Rather, it is the world we live in, and these cognitive data packages are gender and sexuality.

Gender and sexuality provide a set of acceptable attributes and behaviors, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual, for men and women. However, cultural institutions have placed gender and sexuality in a hierarchy, favoring masculinity over femininity and heterosexuality over homosexuality (Hollander, Renfrow, & Howard, 2011). This marginalizes those with feminine or homosexual attributes, labeling them as the Other, while rewarding masculine and heterosexual traits as normative (Bryerly, 2007).

As culturally signified terms, *gender* and *sexuality* are continuously being defined and redefined. Science fiction texts, which include books, films, and television series, provide platforms for debate and redefinition of our gendered society. Through these realms, we can ask the crucial subsequent questions: Can we imagine a society devoid of these stringent and stereotypical gender and sexuality roles, and if so, what would this society look like, and how do we create futures that give voices to the Other? This essay will examine these questions through science fiction and futuretypes.

Examination of futuretypes present in current science fiction provides predictions about gender and sexuality in our future society. The purpose of this essay is to examine how science fiction texts serve as pertinent platforms to question cultural gender and sexuality norms that marginalize the Other. Therefore, this essay will explore (1) the unique facets of science fiction texts in regard to debating gender and sexuality, (2) brief examples of gender and sexuality futuretypes embedded in these texts, and (3) how science fiction can be used to create a less marginalized future.

### Science Fiction Texts: Platforms for Debate

Science fiction includes facets that make it a desirable space for gender and sexuality debate. Two of these qualities are extrapolation and defamiliarization. Extrapolation involves "speculating from what exists to what might exist" (Roberts, 1999, p. 2). Defamiliarization takes the familiar and makes it unfamiliar or strange (Roberts, 1999). Both of these textual qualities have been applied to current gender and sexuality issues in our society—for example, extrapolating from our gendered society to a future society where men and women live in separate cultures. An example of defamiliarization could be going from the familiar of men seeking women based on appearance to women seeking men solely on appearance (Merrick, 2003). Both extrapolation and defamiliarization highlight specific cultural beliefs and encourage the audience to reflect on these beliefs in a new light. These qualities are crucial for debating the hegemonic gender and sexuality societal beliefs that often go unnoticed. Overall, these facets allow science fiction to have a unique ability in exploring gender issues.

### Science Fiction in Culture, and Gender and Sexuality Futuretypes

Although science fiction can shine a light on gender issues in society through its textual features, we must remember that these texts are embedded and created for audiences in this same society. In other words, mediated texts are products of their time and can be shaped by the cultural biases and beliefs of that time (Hall, 1975). For example, our culture has deemed science and technology as masculine spheres, which can affect how women are portrayed in science fiction in relation to science and technology. This highlights the unique dialectical tension science fiction faces and the power of futuretypes. These texts predict our future while being explicitly tied to the present. This tension can be seen in the futuretypes presented in science fiction texts.

Science fiction has been used as a way to solve current societal issues through imagined futures. Two particular genres of science fiction, feminist utopias and feminist science fictions, have focused specifically on the development of futures that transcend the marginalization of Others. Both genres complement each other and are often intermixed, but each tackle Othering in different ways. Feminist utopias extrapolate from our gender dichotomous society to a future society just for women that heralds feminine traits and occupations. The present hegemonic patriarchal society is overthrown by establishing a future without men or simply without gender (Roberts, 1993). One example of this is through the use of androgyny.

To remedy gender and sexuality inequalities, androgynous futuretypes have been imagined. In these androgynous worlds, the gender is indeterminate or merged, in hopes of diminishing gender categorization and marginalization (Attebery, 2002; Merrick, 2003). One pivotal example of this is Ursula Le Guin's (1969) *The Left Hand of Darkness*. In Le Guin's future, the people of Gethen are androgynous by completely lacking gender. Because of the lack of gender binary, Le Guin's (1969) futuretypes can take on any social role and sexual role (see Figure 1 as an artistic rendering of this androgynous future). Although, *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a pivotal feminist utopia that disassembles gender marginalization while heralding feminine attributes, it is still a product of its times. Created in the late 1960s during the second wave of the Women's Movement, it provides an androgynous society, but in a masculine view through a

male protagonist, Genly Ai, and includes the predominant use of male pronouns (Attebery, 2002). This allows “a safe trip into androgyny and back, from a conventionally male viewpoint” (Le Guin, 1992, as cited in Merrick, 2003, p. 247). Also, one must ask if androgynous futures truly eradicate present gender roles. As Attebery (2002) argues, “how can you say you are mingling the masculine and the feminine unless you are sure you know what is to be feminine and masculine?” (p. 133). Finally, feminist utopias tend to reinstate marginalization of race and sexuality and only tackle present day sexism by eradicating men or gender entirely.



**Figure 1.** *The Left Hand of Darkness* cover art, by Alex Ebel.

Feminist science fiction also tackles marginalization of Others, but through different strategies. These texts deconstruct patriarchy by retaining differences in gender and sexuality, but taking away or shifting the power and marginalization that have been associated with each gender or sexuality. Feminist science fictions are also more integrated racially and sexually (Roberts, 1993). Future societies with a multitude of genders that are celebrated and contain freedom of sexual expression have been imagined in feminist science fictions.

One recent example of this is in Kim Stanley Robinson's (2012) *2312*. In *2312*, individuals are not just men or women but both, and multiple gender and sexual identities can be expressed:

Distinctions can be pretty fine, with some claiming that gynandromorphs do not look entirely like androgyns, nor like hermaphrodites, nor eunuchs, and certainly not like bisexuals—that androgyns and wombmens are quite different—and so on. Some people like to tell that part of their story; others never mention it at all. (Robinson, 2012, p. 430)

These multiple options for gender variations allow for gender and sexuality to no longer be a deciding factor of power and marginalization and do not affect one's core identity. In addition to this, different gendered pronouns proliferate, and many major characters go without pronouns and their gender variation is not established.

The futuretypes present in *2312* are also a reflection of the culture in which the book was embedded. In an interview with Space.com, Robinson explained that his futuretypes in *2312* represent the current tension between parts of the world, dismantling patriarchy for gender and sexual equality and other parts of the world still marginalizing gender and sexuality (Moskowitz, 2012). Robinson hoped that his futuretypes would challenge present notions that biological sex is so strictly linked to gender and to one's identity (Moskowitz, 2012). This can be seen explicitly in *2312*: "We selectively encouraged or repressed traits, so for most of our history we have reinforced gender. But in our deepest selves we were always both. And now, in space, openly both" (Robinson, 2012, p. 430). Additional contemporary narratives have also challenged the present marginalization of gendered and sexual Others. For example, in the novel *Ancillary Justice*, Leckie (2013) presents a genderless society and language as normal in stark contrast to the strict gendered societies with whom the protagonist, Breq, must communicate.

With these unique representations in mind, this essay returns to its original questions. Is it possible for us to imagine a future devoid of the culture we are currently constrained in? Can our ideological expectations that we weave into our stories about the future include expectations that demarginalize the Otherved gender and sexuality? I argue that we should strive to not let the current cultural perceptions cloud our perceptions of the future. We must imagine a future where the marginalized Other has a voice and is no longer Otherved. We must ask ourselves, "if we weren't taught to be a woman [man, heterosexual, homosexual] what would we be?" (Fowler, 1996, as cited in Merrick, 2003: p. 251). Science fiction should be fully used as a stage for this debate.

### Response by Jessa Lingel

In their influential book on infrastructure and classification, Bowker and Star (1999) note that marginalized subject positions are “heralds of other worlds” (p. 307), whose marginal viewpoints are able to reveal structures and systems that become invisible to people with conventional, dominant, centered points of view. Science fiction brings us heralds of other worlds, and often those heralds present different norms and practices of gender and sexuality.

Although a disappointing number of science fiction has indulged racist, sexist, and homophobic characters or plots, the queerness of science fiction emerges from presentations of Otherness, other bodies and other norms. Science fiction may disappoint us, as queers or as feminists, when it is able to imagine worlds and societies that are radically altered in some ways but stubbornly recognizable in others. I am thinking of *Star Trek’s* willingness to produce radically alien species and imagine fantastic technologies of communication and transportation while continuing to maintain the dulllest and most predictable binaries of race, gender, and sexuality (Cranny-Francis, 1985; Wilcox, 1991).

On this point, it’s worth noting that as much as we may hope that the future is more equitable and less bigoted, more sophisticated and less essentialist in its understandings of bodies and desires, there is still value in science fiction that fails to portray more diversity, more forms of pleasure and community. Within these narrative failures we can produce critiques that remind us that we cannot rely on progress unfolding in a gentle, logical series of steps. We may need to produce our own critiques of essentialism and dualism when they appear, in science fiction as elsewhere.

And, indeed, contemporary fan fiction and mash-up culture demonstrate the playfulness that can be provoked by heteronormative science fiction. Whether due to production censorship or values of individual writers, mainstream science fiction fails when it is too representative of the structures we would rather it critique. Happily, the most radical reimaginings of even staid tropes of science fiction can be found in fan narratives, each plot and character a hydra of new possibilities and plotlines. Thus even the most egregious and disappointing errors of sexism and homophobia can be reworked, Othered, and queered. As a feminist and queer activist with a longstanding love of sci-fi, speculative fiction, and horror, I take no small amount of comfort from fan communities that produce their own antidotes to uncritical, unimaginative, unprovocative narratives.

Roseann is right to advocate for science fiction that exposes futuretypes freed from binary genders, where the objective should not be to render gender null and void but rather as a vindication of gendered heterodoxy, a gender-full rather than gender-less society. But when these heralds of other worlds are lacking in mainstream science fiction, there are still possibilities for play and perversion in the mash-ups and remixes of feminist, queer, and nonnormative authors. In our considerations of what futuretypes imagine for nonnormative, nonmainstream portrayals of bodies and desires, it’s worth remembering that the very sources and communities producing these texts are changing, where the political economy underlying the creation of these discourses may be as or more radical than the texts themselves.

### Response by Aram Sinnreich

Jessa, thank you for bringing fan fiction and other forms of "configurable" culture (Sinnreich, 2010) into the conversation. It would be remiss to discuss *Star Trek* and sexuality in the same breath without acknowledging the enormously influential role played by "slash" producers from the 1970s to the present day. As Penley (1997) describes, a community consisting primarily of heterosexual women first took advantage of the productive affordances of new home video technology during the final decades of the 20th century to "manipulate the products of mass-produced culture to stage a popular debate" (p. 101). Specifically, these fan creators recut scenes of their favorite male characters (usually Kirk and Spock), often with popular ballads as soundtracks, to tease out and make visible the latent homoerotic subtext in the original series. By doing so, the slash producers challenged the heteronormative relationships and identities encoded into the original episodes, thus rendering a space of possibility in which collectively to imagine a queer (or, at least, queer-friendly) future. To go back to Roseann's use of Stuart Hall (1980), this act took the radical act of "resistant" decoding one step further, recoding and recirculating mainstream media content in a way that permanently undermined the capacity of broadcast media to impose a dominant master narrative on audiences by fiat.

To be sure, savvy programmers are quick to close the loop(hole), seemingly upping the homoerotic quotient on television shows in the 1980s and 1990s, ranging from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to *The X-Files* for the very purpose of hailing (and, by extension, incorporating and recuperating) these radical revisionist audiences. Much ink has been spilled in the past 30 years debating the relative costs and merits of this semiological tug-of-war, with little in the way of resolution. Yet there can be little argument that, due in large part to the work of slash producers, mainstream media narratives now regularly include queer characters and plot lines. In science fiction (as with other genres), these efforts may tend towards both spectacle (cf. the use of lesbian sexual themes in the *Battlestar Galactica* reboot of the 2000s) and well-intentioned inclusiveness (cf. Captain Jack Harkness of *Torchwood*, perhaps the only gay leading man in "mainstream" science fiction television). But the radical spirit of reimagination that animated so many slash producers, and which is so vital to successful speculative fiction, is noticeably absent from nearly all of these commercial narratives and franchises.

As I've argued elsewhere, however, we shouldn't count too quickly on the recuperative capacities of the mainstream media in relation to slash. Configurable culture practitioners (including slashers, modders, mashers, remixers, etc.) aren't merely altering the *meanings* of signifiers in the work they alter and recirculate, they're actively changing the *structures* of media systems on a global scale, and the *cultural logics* that inform the process of signification itself. Thus, like a virus that establishes and propagates itself by dismantling the body's own immune system, configurable cultural practices such as slash have the capacity to undermine not just the master narrative but the masters themselves. That's why I'll stake my hopes for better, more inclusive futuretypes not on mainstream media producers (even those like Lana Wachowski, who was probably the first blockbuster science fiction filmmaker to undergo gender reassignment but still makes films such as *Jupiter Ascending*, in which the guy and the girl hook up in space) but rather on the homespun radicals retelling their favorite stories, for lulz and sheer necessity, cutting with purpose and pasting with passion, on laptops and tablets far from Hollywood yet only a click away from any of us.

### References

- Attebery, B. (2002). *Decoding gender in science fiction*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bowker, G. C., & Star, S. L. (1999). *Sorting things out: Classification and its consequences*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Bryerly, C. (2007). Situating "the Other": Women, racial, and sexual minorities in the media. *Women in Mass Communication*, 3, 221–232.
- Cranny-Francis, A. (1985). Sexuality and sex-role stereotyping in "Star Trek." *Science Fiction Studies*, 12(3), 274–284.
- Hall, S. (1975). Introduction. In A. C. H. Smith (Ed.), *Paper voices: The popular press and social change, 1935–1965* (pp. 11–25). London, UK: Chatto & Windus.
- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In D. Hall, A. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, media, language: Working papers in cultural studies, 1972–79* (pp. 128–138). London, UK: Hutchinson.
- Hollander, J. A., Renfrow, D. G., & Howard, J. A. (2011). *Gendered situations, gendered selves: A gender lens on social psychology*. Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Le Guin, U. K. (1969). *The left hand of darkness*. New York, NY: Berkley Publishing Group.
- Leckie, A. (2013). *Ancillary justice*. New York, NY: Orbit.
- Merrick, H. (2003). Gender in science fiction. In E. James & F. Mendlesohn (Eds.), *The Cambridge companion to science fiction* (pp. 241–252). London, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Moskowitz, C. (2012, May 18). The future in 2312: Q&A with author Kim Stanley Robinson (Pt. 2). *Space.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.space.com/15743-kim-stanley-robinson-2312-future.html>
- Penley, C. (1997). *NASA/Trek*. New York, NY: Verso.
- Roberts, R. (1993). *A new species: Gender and science in science fiction*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Roberts, R. (1999). *Sexual generations: "Star Trek: The Next Generation" and gender*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Robinson, K. S. (2012). *2312*. New York, NY: Orbit.

Sinnreich, A. (2010). *Mashed up: Music, technology, and the rise of configurable culture*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.

Wilcox, R. V. (1991). Shifting roles and synthetic women in "Star Trek: The Next Generation." *Studies in Popular Culture*, 13(2), 43-65.