Affective Be/Longing: Redefining Public Spheres

Textual Encounters of Hope and Be/Longing: Science Fiction and Trans Worldmaking

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Introduction: (Re-)Claiming Trans Futures in Science Fiction

Despite its tendency towards conservatism, science fiction has long exhibited an often troubling and hesitant fascination for the possibility of gender transgression. Nevertheless, in the face of mounting evidence about the transcultural and historical existence and increasing visibility of trans people, most science fiction narratives have remained largely allegorical and speculative with regards to the possibility of trans identification, until recently. For example, despite its reputation for inclusion and diversity, it took the Star Trek franchise until 2020 to finally include the show's first two trans and nonbinary characters (played by nonbinary actors) on *Star Trek: Discovery's* third season. However, even then, it placed these characters into a universe that seemingly remains thoroughly cisnormative otherwise.[1]

Nonetheless, trans readers and audiences have exhibited a remarkable ability to read ourselves into narratives that were not meant to include us and reclaim them as a means to sustain our "transgender becoming[s]" (Keegan, "Revisitation" 30).[2] As YouTuber Jessi Earl ob-

1 For a more thorough discussion of this phenomenon, see Whybrew, "Transgender and Nonbinary Trek Characters" in The *Routledge Handbook to Star Trek* (Forthcoming 2022).

2 Lucas Cassidy Crawford conceptualized this potential under the heading of "aesthetic transgendering" in his descriptions of trans folks' reclamation of built

serves about the 1992 Star Trek episode "The Outcast": "When I watched this episode as a kid, it helped give me the representation, words, and thoughts to help me begin to understand who I was as a trans person. It helped me feel a little bit less like an outcast" ("Star"). Although this phenomenon, arguably, speaks more to the resilient potential of trans viewers and our ability to read ourselves into these narratives than to the franchise's and the genre's progressive character, it nonetheless highlights science fiction's significance for many trans people and the potential that finding ourselves represented within it may hold for us in a world that all too often remains hostile to our existence. Indeed, while being literally out of this world, for me, the trans adjacent alien allegories of Star Trek represented one of the few glimpses of the possibility of a livable trans existence that did not come laden with the affective weight of feelings of shame and pain within the narrative cosmology of my own childhood. Similarly, despite being regrettably behind the times and including several severe missteps,[3] *Star Trek: Discovery's* tentative first steps toward trans inclusion left me with a hopeful feeling of potentiality and a desire for more.

environments that were not meant to include them ("Poetics" 483). Cael M. Keegan has proposed that this might also occur in trans people's interactions with visual media and that it ultimately "reveals how trans phenomenology lies, embedded and unacknowledged, in the architecture of culture itself" ("Revisitation" 30). Through their work, Crawford and Keegan highlight how trans people can uncover trans "forms of meaning that allow transgender phenomena to extend into the world" and how this ultimately may contribute to "extend[ing]" and "sustain[ing]" trajectories of "transgender becoming" (Keegan, "Revisitation" 30).

3 For example, the show's writers killed off the trans masculine character, Gray, mere moments after introducing him, only to have him return as a disembodied spirit that is only visible to his nonbinary partner, Adira, for much of the season (Whybrew, Forthcoming 2022).

Moving towards Trans Science Fiction

Since the 1980s, the increasing social awareness towards trans identities brought about by the work of trans advocacy groups in the United States and Canada, as well as the theoretical work of queer theory and trans studies, has resulted in a diversification of North American science fiction stories that include gender-nonconforming or transitioning human characters (Melzer 397; Lothian 70). Significantly, this development also resulted in the publication of seven anthologies of trans-authored and themed science fiction stories since 2012,[4] which I have had the pleasure of reading and studying for my doctorate. Although these publications have been limited to small publishers or came about as a result of crowdfunding projects (Morgan, "Tipping" 95, 99), I argue in my dissertation that their contributors have used the genre's conventions to explore an unprecedented plurality of affective trans experiences, connections, and associations. Moreover, they envision both trans worlds of mutual recognition, care, and affirmation and offer the hopeful promise of and longing for futures in which wider social acceptance is more than just a painfully deferred dream. As a result, these stories not only represent a significant challenge to the genre's legacy of trans erasure, but they may also offer more fertile ground for trans worldmaking than the cis-authored stories that preceded them.

Indeed, in some ways, these narratives may be viewed as literary extensions of trans rights movements and as examples of a literary coming-to-voice of the trans communities in North America, as they are indicative of a new, self-determined register and "oppositional discourse" (hooks, *talking* 29) of trans representation within the science fic-

4 Namely, *Beyond Binary: Genderqueer and Sexually Fluid Speculative Fiction* (2012) by brit mandelo, the "Queers Destroy Science Fiction!" issue of *Lightspeed* edited by Seanan McGuire (2015), K.M. Szpara's *Transcendent: The Year's Best Transgender Speculative Fiction* (2016), and Bogi Takacs' *Transcendent 2* (2017), *Meanwhile, Elsewhere: Science Fiction and Fantasy from Transgender Writers* edited by Cat Fitzpatrick and Casey Plett (2017), and *Transcendent 3* (2018) and *4* (2019) also edited by Bogi Takacs.

tion genre that may light the way to better pasts, presents, and futures, by illuminating and challenging the violence of the cisnormative status quo. As such, these narratives hold the potential to act as affective and collective resources of hope and be/longing for trans readers, as they offer opportunities for having our identities and experiences affirmed, mirrored, validated, and possibly even celebrated. Such opportunities are often withheld in cisnormative social worlds. In the words of José Esteban Muñoz, they may function as "the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality" (*Cruising* 1) and, as Belinda Deneen Wallace puts it, "become[] a safe space of belonging where the future is now" (60), or rather, where traces of more bearable worlds might be found.

For, as Muñoz makes clear, worldmaking[5] can create and share "alternate views of the world" that may function as "oppositional ideologies" and "critiques of oppressive regimes of 'truth' that subjugate minoritarian people" (*Disidentification* 195). As a result, trans-authored science fiction stories may function as counterpublics and form a basis for "support," thus contributing to trans community building (Nicolazzo et al. 307). Indeed, these stories may be said to constitute a form of trans worldmaking and function as affective and collective counterpublics for trans readers. Talia Mae Bettcher conceives of resistant spaces that fulfill this function as "trans worlds" in which trans people can find respite from cisnormative impositions (Bettcher, "Trapped" 389). However, spaces that can function as trans worlds are finite and might be

5 Muñoz uses the notion of worldmaking to highlight the "ability" of minoritarian performances "to establish" counterpublics as "alternate views of the world" (*Disidentification* 195). Similarly, I use the term to describe the capacity of trans readers to (re-)appropriate elements from science fiction texts that were not meant to address them or that include harmful elements. I further use the term to show the ways in which trans authors use the genre's conventions to create new trans sf narratives and how trans readers may affectively attach to them as communal resources that transcend the constraints of cisnormative worlds, acting as spaces that validate and reflect their experiences, identities, and struggles through those of the stories' respective characters.

difficult to access or even be entirely out of reach for some of us—particularly for BIPOC, poor, disabled, or otherwise marginalized or rural trans folks.

Trans Worldmaking and Science Fiction

For this reason, I have asserted in my research that cultural and literary narratives can serve a similar function of having our experiences validated and reflected, thereby potentially offering the prospect of a more hopeful future. For, as Judith Butler holds, the realm of fantasy may be "what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise" and transcend and challenge the norms that marginalize us (*Undoing* 29). Hence, (science fiction) narratives may allow for the creation and circulation of and participation in "alternative world[s] in which other forms of identification and social relations become imaginable" (Rodriguez 26).

Therefore, the recent expansion in cultural visibility within North American science fiction stories holds tremendous potential for trans readers. This may be said to be particularly true for trans-authored stories. For, as Gossett, Stanley, and Burton argue: "Immense transformational and liberatory possibilities arise from what are otherwise sites of oppression or violent extraction . . . when individuals have agency in their representation" (xvi). Indeed, trans science fiction stories may serve to create "provisional collectivities" by offering the potential of "new forms of recognition, relation, and community" (Horak, "Visibility" 100). For example, these texts may serve as a foil to help process and share discriminatory experiences and the resulting feelings of pain, shame, and rage. To be sure, seeing our experiences "mirror[ed]" may help to mitigate feelings of isolation and invalidation (Malatino, "Though" 134).

As such, trans science fiction narratives can be seen as an outgrowth and a form of trans utopianism that enables the creation and sharing of hopeful and supportive stories of communality, as well as external communication, that offer "autonomous spaces in which to breathe" (Jones 3). Indeed, as Muñoz asserts, the straight (and I would add cis) present

can be made more bearable if it is "known in relation to the alternative temporal and spatial maps provided by a perception of past and future affective worlds" (*Cruising* 27). In fact, witnessing that others also "share a similar crucible" (Malatino, "Though" 135) may help process trauma and (re-)build resilience. Hence, the narratives may produce a sense of communality that aid in their reframing "as a justified response to situations of injustice" (Malatino, "Though" 133). This belief also finds its reflection in Martin Joseph Ponce's observation that "[g]ay and lesbian readers frequently attest to the pivotal role that reading for representations of same-sex desire has played in facilitating sexual self-understanding and alleviating a sense of isolation" (317). Indeed, similar to how Michael Warner describes the power of queer stories, trans science fiction stories may enable trans readers "in isolated places around the country and around the world [to] know, if only vaguely, that somewhere things are different: somewhere they can go and find strangers with whom they can share an intimate world" (qtd. in Jagose, "Queer"). Thus, as Laura Horak observes about YouTube videos by trans creators, they may "tell trans youth that self-determination and transformation are viable routes," as they "solicit desire, empathy, and emulation" ("Visibility" 581), thereby creating a sense of community and be/longing (582).

Hence, these narratives may function as affective communal resources, as they constitute opportunities of trans worldmaking in that "trans subjects may reach out to […them] as a surface for becoming" (Keegan, "Revisitation" 30),[6] thus allowing for "[re-]negotiation[s] of the terms of selfhood and belonging" (Drabinski 305). Michael Warner has discussed this potentially supportive role of textual encounters as worldmaking practices under the heading of counterpublics. Warner defines counterpublics as "multicontextual spaces of circulation, organized not by a place or an institution but by the circulation of discourse" ("Publics" 85). As Rita Felski notes, narratives may fulfill this function

6 While Keegan talks about the possibilities of "[a]esthetic transgendering" ("Revisitation" 30) of narratives that do not explicitly depict trans representation, I feel that this argument also applies to more overt and direct forms of recognition ("Revisitation" 26–27; 30).

of acting "as lifelines for those deprived of other forms of public acknowledgment" in the face of "patent asymmetry and unevenness of structures of recognition" (*Uses* 43).[7]

Claudia Breger has discussed this potential under the heading of "affective narrative worldmaking" ("Configuration" 241). According to Breger, narrative worldmaking entails the exchange of "affects, associations, attention, experiences, evaluations, forms, matter, perspectives, perceptions, senses, sense, topoi and tropes in and through specific media" ("Configuration" 242). Breger argues that readers "orient" themselves in relation to the text by "performing comparisons" and through "associations" with previous affective experiences, textual encounters, and their own historically and socially situated positionalities ("Narratology" 245). Consequently, processes of affective worldmaking are characterized by a complex, spontaneous, and unpredictable intermingling of elements of texts and our "lifeworld experiences," and their associated affects that hold the potential to "(re-)configur[e]" both our relationship to texts (Breger, "Configuration" 244; 231), but, as I suggest, also to ourselves, our lives, and others.

Here, the affective charge of the stories I have discussed becomes essential. For, as Silvia Schultermandl suggests, the readers may "feel[] connected to an unknown reading public based on the understanding that what unites them is their experience of the affective structures a text evokes" (253). In fact, Schultermandl finds that these "feeling[s] of kinship" are the result of readers "becom[ing] part of the text," as they "invest" their "own ideas[,]" experiences, and emotions "into the text" (260). They fulfill a longing for a world or worlds in which our identities are not only seen and tolerated but believed, accepted, affirmed, celebrated, and reflected in those of other trans people. As such, they stand in opposition to and suggest alternatives to dominant societal structures that invalidate our identities and may even threaten our very

7 Felski includes this capacity for offering moments of recognition alongside enchantment, knowledge, and shock as the four "modes of textual engagement" (*Uses* 14).

existence. Thus, these alternative trans-oriented discourses act as counterpublics that potentially offer points of recognition and hope to trans folks. For, as Lauren Berlant suggests, "a tiny point of identification can open up a field of fantasy and de-isolation, of vague continuity, or of ambivalence" (*Female* 11). Indeed, the affective charge and often everydayness of the narratives I have discussed are productive in this way, as they may invite feelings of communality (Felski, *Beyond* 94), which "seems to emanate from" a shared sense of "history" between readers, texts, characters, narrators, and authors and "their ongoing attachments and actions" (Berlant, *Female* 5).

Moreover, these stories may suggest blueprints for more accepting and validating social relations, trans be/longing, and trans for trans (t4t) care,[8] as well as the promise of more affirming and broader social worlds (Bettcher, "Trapped" 389). For, as Felski highlights, recognition in reading and representation can bring about both "moment[s] of personal illumination and heightened self-understanding" and "practices of acknowledgment" as well as "acceptance and validation" in the wider social and political realm (*Uses* 30).

Potential Limits of Trans Worldmaking

While Laura Horak maintains that trans "visibility" may function both as an assertion of "trans people's existence and humanity" and as "a form of collective worldmaking and radical imagination" ("Vulnerability" 98), this does not mean that this potential is universal, guaranteed, or necessarily unproblematic. In fact, as Nancy Fraser shows, although subaltern counterpublics might aid in "expand[ing] discursive space," they can be marked by "their own modes of informal exclusion and

8 Hil Malatino conceives of "trans for trans (t4t)" care as a praxis of "creative and caring acts of trans intimacy that render life in the interregnum—in the moments during transition . . . —not only livable but also, sometimes joyous" ("Future" 635).

marginalization" (67). In other words, potential moments of affirmation and recognition may not be actualized in the same manner, as they emerge through the interplay between the respective texts and potential readers. Therefore, a particular text's potential for recognition may vary according to the individual reader's positionality. For, as Che Gosset points out, trans visibility is often "premised on invisibility" in that, in order to "bring a select few into view," it tends to make other less desirable subjects "disappear into the background" and thus "reinforces oppression" (1831–84). Therefore, the increased visibility and the extent to which they may be said to hold transformative potential may be determined by the diversity of voices and perspectives within trans-authored science fiction and the representations it generates.

Moreover, moments of recognition may not only be reassuring or empowering. They may also be uncanny, uncomfortable, disconcerting, disruptive, and even (re-)traumatizing (Felski, *Uses* 29). Hence, these texts can also be difficult for trans readers to read since they might feel triggering and too close to home (cf. Nuttall 393)—rather than serving as "an escape or release from one's everyday existence" (Felski, *Uses* 34–35).[9] For example, in researching these texts for my dissertation, I found that I often needed a break after reading a narrative that reminded me of some of my own painful experiences. [10]

Thus, stories like Nino Cipri's "The Shape of My Name," in which the narrator uses letters and time travel, in an attempt to gain his absent mother's recognition, and Jeanne Thornton's "The L7 Gene" that explores familial rejection through the allegory of a narrator coming home for Thanksgiving only to learn that her mother created a cisgender clone of

9 In fact, Suzanne Keen suggests that "[e]xtreme personal distress in response to narrative usually interrupts and sometimes terminates the narrative transaction" (Keen, "Narrative").

10 As Felski notes, moments of recognition in literary works can be "[s]imultaneously reassuring and unnerving," as they "bring[] together likeness and difference in one fell swoop" (Felski, *Uses* 25). As a result, recognizing oneself may also be troubling in that it might even "inspire[] a revised or altered sense of who [… we are]" (Felski, *Uses* 25), that might "not always [be] flatter[ing]" (Felski, *Uses* 48).

her pretransition self, hit home particularly hard. On the other hand, narratives like Susan Jane Bigelow's "The Heart's Cartography" and RJ Edwards' "What Cheer," whose narrators find recognition, (self-)acceptance, and hope in the friendship with a time traveler or in the companionship of a visiting alien that takes on their appearance to "walk" with them, felt reaffirming and reinvigorating. Finally, Julian K. Jarboe's "The Heavy Things"[11] and Gillian Ybabez's "Lisa's Story: Zombie Apocalypse"[12] brought to mind my own frustrations, fears, and struggles with navigating cisnormative environments and medical systems in which recognition, support, personal autonomy, self-determination, and safety are all too often conditional and precarious—even if I do not always share all of the characters' experiences.

However, even seemingly optimistic or utopian narratives may not just result in positive affective experiences. They may also trigger feelings "of envy, annoyance, jealousy, . . . judgment[,]" and of missing out that are themselves the result of "survival struggles" in cisnormative worlds in which trans acceptance, or even safety, remains scarce and fragile (Malatino, "Future" 656). Consequently, trans worldmaking may be said to be both a promising and complicated praxis of trans for trans care (t4t) since, according to Malatino, one "can't presuppose or predicate such love on identitarian or subjective sameness" ("Future" 656). Nonetheless, the proliferation of trans-authored and themed science fiction narratives may hold tremendous "formative and transformative power," as it allows us to craft and share self-determined stories about our identities, experiences, and worlds (Gossett et al. xvii). As such, it can open up new possibilities for affective connections and support through trans worldmaking in the face of an all-too-often devastatingly transphobic present (Gossett, et al. xvi–xvii; cf. Muñoz, *Cruising* 27).

11 Jarboe's story offers a powerful and visceral portrayal of its narrator's bodily dysphoria that is ultimately exacerbated when they are deprived of their agency and access to medical care.

12 Gillian Ybabez's story, "Lisa's Story: Zombie Apocalypse," explores the themes of discrimination and violence faced by trans people—particularly black and trans women of color—through the lens of a zombie apocalypse.

This is particularly true when this new subgenre of science fiction fulfills its potential for diversifying voices and perspectives, be it in terms of authorship, characters, or experiences.

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