**Star Trek and the Non-Binary Gender Individual**

Meghan Kajihara

**Abstract**

This study investigates the symbolic function of these non-binary individuals through an analysis of 8 characters across four iterations of *Star Trek*, seeking connections between their fictional embodied meanings and how the role of real non-binary people is conceptualized today. I posit that the non-binary characters of *Star Trek* are portrayed dualistically, with those that are more ambiguous being portrayed as dangerous while those who possess easily gendered qualities are portrayed as benevolent and relatable. In the *Star Trek* universe, non-binary gender individuals are the “unknown” incarnate. Their identities, like non-binary people today, are continually parsed by the assumptions of a cisgender society—but through the performance of their gender identity, they find unity in liminality to begin reconcile the dual faces of their “self” which society sees and judges, but which they can only live.

**Keywords**

Star Trek — Gender Studies — Cisgender

1 Department of Anthropology, University of North Texas

*Faculty Mentor: Dr. Tom Miles*

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**Introduction**

In the United States, individuals exist within what is referred to as a gender binary. This means that the people are expected, based on socially constructed criteria, to fit into male or female identity. Anthropology distinguishes between gender and sex; sex is biological and determined by a person’s reproductive organs, but gender, to make use of anthropological parlance, is culturally constructed (and/or) socially created, and exists within the mind of the individual. One could say that it is a person’s internal sense of self. In the United States the social roles, attitudes, and even toys and activities, for example, are marked by the gender culturally assigned from childhood based on their biological sex.

There are, however, those whose sense of gender does not align with their sex. It is therefore helpful to clarify what it means to be “transgender,” with a quick overview of some of the related terminology for the sake of differentiation. To be “transgender” is for one’s individual sense of gender not to align with one’s culturally assigned gender role. The term “transsexual” is usually reserved for those who have taken surgical measures to align their sense of gender with their biological sex. The term “intersex” usually applies when a person’s sexual biology is ambiguous or dualistic, which can affect how society assigns them a gender and how they personally form their identity. The most appropriate (and perhaps polite) term within the community, though, is “trans” or “in transition.” However, the sex-gender conflict these individuals face exists within a male-female dichotomy—that is to say, their conflict occurs within the gender binary that exists in the sociocultural environment in which they live.

However, outside of maleness, femaleness or ‘trans,’ there are individuals who identify (or are identified by society) as neither male nor female. Such individuals are said to be of a non-binary gender. This group is the primary concern in terms of this project. Because it encompasses all that is neither distinctly male nor female, “non-binary gender” can be a rather nebulous term. The following are examples of what exactly non-binary gender can be:

The “berdache,” or two-spirited peoples, of many Native American societies are typically male individuals, who after
the personal revelations experienced through their coming-of-age process, are found to be spiritually beholden of both the male and female spirit. They are biologically male, but culturally are considered to be both men and women, but also neither, as they occupy a position of near-Shamanistic religious and ritual significance in their relationship between ordinary people and the supernatural. The two-spirited person is often considered a third gender.

The emerging identity of “genderqueer” has only recently developed a vocabulary. Genderqueer individuals identify as neither fully male nor fully female, or sometimes neither at all (also known as “agender”), “Genderfluid,” also a new term in the realm of gender jargon, applies to individuals who do not identify as having a fixed gender or strongly feel an overlap amongst multiple identities. “Genderfuck” has recently come into use to describe the identity of individuals who purposely toy with binary notions of gender through the performance of androgyny or gendered extremes, and sometimes display both simultaneously.

Gender is a complex and unwieldy issue for all sexes to navigate, much less study. As a cultural construction, so much as cultures may vary from each other, definitions of gender will vary as well. Studying non-binary gender individuals encapsulated within the classic science fiction series Star Trek provides an opportunity to understand the roles and significance of these individuals within an institution of American pop culture spanning over three decades with a reputation for pushing the envelope of representation. Analysis of non-binary gender in the context of the Star Trek universe may help to illuminate how society interprets and inscribes meaning onto the bodies of these individuals.

1. Literature Review

On the coattails of Second Wave feminism and the LGBT equality movement, gender issues and emerging non-binary gender identities have begun to receive attention, not only in political and personal spheres, but within pop-culture as well. These gender issues have been explored with particular depth in the realm of science fiction. The seminal American science-fiction television series Star Trek (and its various incarnations) abounds with representations of these non-binary individuals, though these representations often lean toward the threatening and fearful. In the context of the show’s uniquely-contained cultural framework, these individuals are symbols, manifestations even, of an ingrained fear of the unknown.

There is incredibly rich scholarship on the subject of feminism and the role of women in Star Trek, but significantly less on the presence and role of other marginalized gender identities. Those that do address these issues do not specifically deal with the symbolism of these individuals, but use the presence of non-normative identities to break down the relationship between gender and sex and how the issues are often conflated [1]. Kerry focuses especially on using “trans theory” and the genderqueer identity to interpret alternative gender identities in Star Trek. For him, using gender to create the notion of the “other” is a mechanism of fear. I add to his assertion that encountering the “other,” especially in an unfamiliar gender form, is quite frightening in the context of the series, since even in many of the “strange new worlds” depicted in Star Trek, there is much that is familiar, including the depiction of binary gender and sex identities. Other researchers have focused on a single incarnation of the series and how it creates and manages such non-normative (read: non-binary) identities, as Ferguson does with Jadzia Dax [2].

Although not specific to Star Trek or even science-fiction, the literature includes serious academic inquiry into the social function and creation of non-binary identities (in some cases, sexuality rather than gender, but the principles are both applicable), in particular by Butler in Gender Trouble [3] and Whitney, who herself frequently tips her hat to Butler [4]. Both confront the issue of gender performativity, meaning gender is created by expectation and repetition of that expectation in a binary until it becomes a social norm. But for individuals in Star Trek who live outside of binary expectations, what identity do they create and how does it work in a binary system? Whitney uses the metaphor of the cyborg to represent the individual in a liminal state of sexuality, but this also functions with relation to gender, and rather elegantly when superimposed, for example, on the Borg Collective of Star Trek: The Next Generation.

This conflict is addressed by another rich area of anthropological theory, again not necessarily aligned with science-fiction. Because these individuals of non-binary gender identity can be said to exist in a state of liminality, between and outside of the gender binary that chiefly governs relationships in Star Trek, Victor Turner’s analysis on the role of liminality in rites of passage is rather apt and helpful to understanding the nature of the liminal state [5]. Like non-binary gender, the liminal phase of a rite of passage is trapped both between and outside of a binary with opposing states of being at either pole. Both states, in the parlance of cultural anthropology, are social constructions embedded with cultural truth. Ritual and gendered liminality also share a destabilized nature and inherently destabilizing influence on their environment. Mary Douglas, in her book Purity and Danger, elaborates on the disruptive force of liminality [6]. What is unclear is unclean; a liminal state is polluting by its ambiguity in that it threatens cherished ideals, such as gender in this case, with contradiction and even destruction.

In the realm of science-fiction and gender theory, others have approached the blurring of gender lines from a technophilosophical perspective, looking at how technology affects the way the body becomes socially gendered and, as the body and technology fuse, if we are rendered “post-human,” or as applied to this case, “post-gender” [7]. Again, Mitchell does not work specifically with Star Trek. She does not even work with television as a medium, instead focusing on novels by feminist science-fiction authors Justina Robson and Pat Cadigan. However, the principles she applies and derives from her analysis of their works are equally applicable to the sym-
bolic function of non-binary gender in Star Trek. Bringing up Cadigan’s *Tea from an Empty Cup*, she posits that indeterminacy of gender breeds anxiety in the text—a result of the gendered body’s physical substance being clear but its cultural substance (assigned gender roles) ambiguous. In *Star Trek*, it breeds fear.

The non-binary body physically exemplifies the unknown and its accompanying apprehension—it is physically and substantively an ominous mystery. Marcia Allison, who similarly works with neither *Star Trek* nor television, addresses this sense of mystery and “otherness” through the creation of the body’s sex through language, and from this sexed language, gender [8]. She notes that non-binary gender expression in the English language is problematic because the only gender-neutral pronoun is not generally used toward humans, except negatively. Even more problematic is the linguistic sexual binary (as opposed to a gender binary) that assumes the naturalness and truth of the divide between “male” and “female” bodies. Exploring the dimensions of created fictional bodies, such as the non-binary characters in *Star Trek*, may represent limitations in the way we conceptualize the human body.

Beyond the potentialities for meaning within a single series, some scholars have turned their gaze to what pop culture says about its consumers and how the consumers shape pop culture in turn. Our interactions with pop culture can influence our opinions and behaviors [9] and even our fears [10]. In its mass production and ubiquity, pop culture is a tool of the masses—it can be used as a litmus test for their feelings on a topic, such as non-binary gender, but the role of class distinctions cannot be understated [11]. Those who have power decide who is designated as “other”—the privileged act of “othering” another group may be enough to turn a balanced liminality into something more perilous, resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy as vulnerability itself becomes an identity. Edward Said, in his treatise *Orientalism*, suggests that social constructs like the concept of orientalism (though equally applicable to other social constructs like gender) do not just feed the identities people attach to “others” but become their own systems of knowledge; a way of engendering bodies with a social truth, grounded in history and politics [12].

The aforementioned sources and scholars contribute much to the understanding of the nature of non-binary gender and its creation, but still do not address the symbolic importance of these individuals as vessels of meaning in a culture. As I hope to do with regard to *Star Trek*, exploring the symbolism of these individuals is an opportunity to understand the encoded meaning of the non-binary body in a finite (rather than infinitely variable) setting. Seeing the meanings non-binary people contain in the American pop culture-influenced closed system of *Star Trek* can illuminate the meanings we innately attach (and why) to real people living a non-binary existence in a binary-philic society such as the United States. Like looking in a fun house mirror, the pop-culture image may be an imperfect representation, but it is not without truth and forces one to be more cognizant of the individual truth of self and others’ perceptions of it.

### 2. Methodology

I will survey the surrounding relevant literature on the role and symbolism of gender and “otherness,” particularly in application to science fiction, and where available, *Star Trek* itself. I will also draw from Said’s *Orientalism*, Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, Douglas’s *Purity and Danger*, and Victor Turner’s essays on liminal identities. The principles from these works will be synthesized with my own analysis of selected characters from the franchise.

With regard to the characters I will analyze, I am chiefly concerned with those that are part of humanoid species. For my purposes, I am defining “humanoid” not necessarily as mammalian but as habitually walking bipedally (or in a similarly erect fashion) with spoken language. The selected characters are limited by these qualifications because the nature of their interactions with the main characters, despite being different species, can be viewed in terms of a human-to-human relationship with the accompanying nuances of etiquette and emotion. Such an interaction would not be possible with characters such as the tribbles or the enigmatic Crystalline Entity. Even though their gender is non-binary, their interaction with the main characters lacks depth of communication and the reciprocity of a human-to-human relationship.

The characters included in my analysis are broken into two groups for ease of organization: non-binary individuals with a distinctly gendered aspect (such as voice, gendered qualities of appearance, use of pronouns, or clear gender of the actor) and non-binary characters without any sort of gendered aspect. The included characters are from the following incarnations of *Star Trek: The Original Series* (TOS), *The Next Generation* (TNG), *Voyager* (VOY), and *Enterprise* (ENT).

The non-binary characters with an identifiably gendered aspect that I will analyze are as follows:

- Soren, the J’naii (TNG)  
- “Charles,” the Vissian (ENT)  
- Lal, the android (TNG)  
- Hugh/Third of Five, Borg (TNG)

The non-binary characters without a gendered aspect that I will analyze are as follows:

- The Talosians (TOS)  
- Borg Collective (TNG and VOY)
3. Non-binary Characters with a Gendered Quality

3.1 Soren

Soren, who appears in the ST: TNG episode “The Outcast” [13], is a member of the J’naii species from a planet of the same name. The J’naii are referred to as an “androgynous” people. In one scene, Soren explains to a confused Riker that the J’naii species and culture consider gender identities to be primitive and oppressive.

The androgyny of Soren and the J’naii people is visually represented through their dress; they wear loose, earth-toned garments in a cut that one might call “unisex.” Their comportment also seems to be uniform, marked by a measured and deliberative manner. They also use a gender-neutral pronoun that does not translate, as explained by Soren, while gently chastising Riker for his use of gendered pronouns toward the J’naii. However, it is later revealed that Soren identifies with a female identity, but can only express that part of herself clandestinely due to the social unacceptability of gender among the J’naii. She “comes out” to Riker in a shuttle (interestingly, I think, on a mission in a pocket of “null space”) saying “there are a few who are born different who are throwbacks from the era when we still had gender” but recalls seeing the treatment of J’naii who experience gender being forced to undergo “psy-chotectic treatment.” “After that, I realized how dangerous it was to be different,” she says.

For Riker, the arch-womanizer of the series, his seemingly inexplicable attraction to Soren may not have been all that inexplicable. On some level, that feminine aspect of Soren could be sensed even before her admission, by both the viewer and Riker. Soren’s voice, for instance, seems rather feminine. Johnathan Frakes, the actor who played Riker, even remarked that he felt that the fact that Soren was played by a female actress was quite obvious, and this subtle femininity to the character made the kiss shared between Soren and Riker less subversive or with less a sense of danger than it otherwise might have had with a male actor as Soren. Though, I would argue that it is this familiar gendered quality that helps make Soren so sympathetic.

In the context of the episode, encounters between the Enterprise and the J’naii are cordial, if formal. The J’naii themselves are not necessarily of any danger to the crew of the Enterprise. No, it is actually Soren who is the greatest danger to the Enterprise, specifically Riker. Her gendered qualities do not damage her interactions on the Enterprise, though they do put her at significant risk of persecution on J’naii, which leaves her in a liminal state, caught between two realms where she is not sure she fully belongs. Soren herself, during her hearing, emphasizes that her gender identity among the J’naii does not do anybody harm, including anyone aboard the Enterprise. However, it nonetheless threatens precious social values of both parties with deep contradiction, so strongly that to reconcile it would call for a profound changing of hearts, minds, and culture—nothing short of a revolution. The idea of gender and gender roles calls into question the very structure of J’naii society and recalls what they now consider a shameful period of their past. Soren’s persecution but also her decision to willingly undergo psychotectic treatment confuse and incense Riker, encountering a type of discrimination that, as Crusher explains, has not been present on Earth for quite some time and confronting the one’s capacity truly to know what is in another person’s heart.

Her liminal state is resolved at the end of the episode when she emerges from treatment and dreamily refuses Riker’s offer to spirit her away to the Enterprise, claiming to feel nothing for him. With her liminal state resolved by force, the cultural substance of her body is once again clear and nonthreatening as a normal J’naii and, as Soren hazily claims, “is so very happy.”

3.2 Charles

Charles is a formerly-nameless Vissian cogenerator who appears in the ST: ENT episode “Cogenitor” [14]. The Vissian are a technically a trigender species, with two of the genders aligning almost exactly with the binary male-female dichotomy. These males and females are the reproducing parties of the species. The third gender is known as the “cogenitor.” They exist outside of this binary and contribute an enzyme necessary for the male and female Vissian to reproduce. Cogenitors are only 3 per cent of the population, and considered a great privilege by the families they are placed with, since only when one has a cogenerator in their home they may reproduce. Cogenitors are passed between families and are constantly cycled throughout the Vissian population to ensure the propagation of the species. Some couples may wait years for the opportunity to have a cogenerator in their home so they can have children. It is forbidden for them to participate as individuals in society and they are erroneously believed to be of a lower mental capacity than male and female Vissians. It disturbs some of the Enterprise crew members, especially Charles Tucker (who will be referred to as Tucker), to think that the cogenitors are treated like pets by other Vissians. Tucker flirts with violating the Prime Directive to secretly teach the cogenerator and develop their sense of individuality. Out of gratitude, the cogenerator chooses to adopt the name “Charles.”

Visually, Charles the cogenerator’s non-binariness is represented through their shapeless grey clothing and a facial structure that is markedly more ambiguous than what would be the identifiably male and female qualities of the binary gender.
Vissians. The pronoun most commonly used toward Charles the cogenitor is “it,” though Tucker refers to the cogenitor as “her,” suggesting a gendered aspect that some ascribe to the cogenitor. The self-selected name of Charles could suggest masculine self-identification, though I would argue that, considering a Vissian cogenitor’s social context, it is the choice itself that is important, though the fact that the choice is an act with a level of gendering cannot be missed. In a conversation with T’Pol, Tucker protests the cogenitor’s treatment, saying “They treat her like a pet. Kept in a room, not taught to read or write” (emphasis mine). The episode, mostly from Tucker’s perspective, provides a deeply sympathetic portrayal of the cogenitor.

Following a trend seen in other non-binary characters, Charles is in a difficult situation as a liminal being. As a nameless cogenitor with no autonomy, Charles was out of place among the crew of the Enterprise during the Enterprise-Vissian first contact meetings. As a cogenitor, Charles’ body was a site for contested meanings and values of the Enterprise crew. Non-binary gender and trigender reproduction, first of all, were difficult to grasp, given Tucker’s baffled conversation with Dr. Phlox. Also, their values of upholding individualism and independence but also the Prime Directive were challenged. Seeing Charles treated in a way they considered unjust was unacceptable, but the situation had to be negotiated in such a way that it avoided violating the Prime Directive, which is why Tucker went about his tutoring in secret. Although uplifting Charles’ individuality and independence may have brought the cogenitor out of a liminal state amongst the Enterprise crew in terms of understanding their own personhood and autonomy; it put Charles in a liminal state amongst the Vissian, even more so than before. Previously Charles as a cogenitor had existed in a sort of liminal equilibrium. Cogenitors had the potential to be extremely disruptive and destructive to society, given their small numbers and necessity for reproduction, but this was controlled through the denial of agency. In the dichotomy between cogenitors and binary gender Vissians, to be of a binary gender is to have agency and it be recognized by others. Charles’ decision to be called Charles is then significant in two mutually-reinforcing ways: the act of choosing a name is an act of agency in itself, and the act of choosing a binarily gendered name is a demand to have that agency recognized.

However, this agency will not be recognized by Vissian society, whose survival is contingent upon Charles’ unquestioning acquiescence, and cannot be recognized by Captain Archer because granting Charles asylum would amount to interference in the customs of another culture, which is expressly forbidden by the Prime Directive. Unwilling to surrender the joys of this newfound autonomy, Charles despondently returns to the Vissian ship where this liminal state persists. As a liminal being, Charles’ independence would mean danger for the values and potentially even the evolutionary viability of the species. This liminal state, and therefore the danger, is only resolved when Charles commits suicide, choosing a final act of independence over a continued lifetime of reproductive servitude. If the cultural substance of Charles’ cogenitor, non-binary body became murky with greater independence, it was returned to normal among Vissians upon death. The Vissian couple to whom Charles was assigned lamented that now they would have to wait many more years before they could have children. After Charles’ death, they lamented the loss of a cogenitor rather than a full being and participant in society.

### 3.3 Lal

Lal is an android built by Data, the android lieutenant commander aboard the Enterprise of ST: TNG and appears in the episode “The Offspring” [15]. Always curious about the human experience, Data built Lal to be his child so that he might better understand what it is to “procreate” and have a family. The seriousness with which he pursued this fatherly enterprise can be seen in the name Lal itself—it is Hindi for “beloved.”

While at an incomplete stage of development, Data accompanies Lal around the ship. Lal at this time is humanoid in appearance, but sexless and not possessing any identifiable gendered qualities. The young android receives many odd looks and wary stares from other crew members and does not understand why. Data explains that it is because they do not know what to make of Lal’s appearance, which is why choosing a gender for the young android to display is important. Choosing a gender identity to perform, Data notes, will ease Lal’s social interactions, perfectly summing up people’s anxiety about Lal’s ambiguous gender and remarking that people are afraid of the things they don’t understand. Lal chooses to present as a human female. This is as far as Lal’s time being non-binary gender goes, but the apprehension she inspires in people due to the ambiguous cultural substance of her body is only a prelude to future mirrored forms of apprehension people experience towards her.

Picard struggles with the idea of Lal’s being an invention versus being an offspring and of being child versus being a machine with adult capacities. Her social graces are sometimes lacking, much like a child, but she also has access to the sum of human knowledge and possesses the strength of ten men. Children in school on the Enterprise are also uncomfortable around her because she looks too adult for them and is too smart for the classes. Even Starfleet sends an admiral, Haftel, to evaluate her progress and relocate her to the Daystrom Institute where she can be studied as a scientific innovation rather than raised as a child. Caught between being a human and a machine, a child and an adult, the meanings ascribed to her are once again unclear and Lal finds herself in a liminal state. Legally, within the United Federation of Planets, this liminal state also exists since androids had recently been recognized as sentient beings, but some still struggle to recognize that this entitles them to the same personal liberties and freedoms as other beings.

At its heart, the discomfort and debate surrounding Lal was ultimately about if she was human enough, and to an
extent, female enough. Lal saw her performance of gender as central to adjusting to life among humans, but as an android she still struggled to convincingly substitute her “innate android behavior” with “simulated human responses”. She was excited to learn about flirting while working in the ship’s lounge, and tested her newfound knowledge on an unsuspecting Riker, seizing him by the uniform and kissing him over the bar. Even though in some regards her human performance fell short, she exceeded her father Data by quickly learning to speak with contractions. Her appearance was also an improvement upon her father’s—she appeared to be a rosy-cheeked youth with her hair in a short dark bob, lacking her father’s pallid skin and obviously-inhuman gold eyes.

There is a precarious balance to the android state that hinges on the inability to feel emotions. Lal breaks this barrier between organic and inorganic life, when overcome by her situation, empathic Deanna Troi is able to sense fear and confusion from her, which she can normally only sense from sentient organic, non-machine lifeforms. Lal’s ability to feel turns her temporarily into the ultimate question. She is walking, talking challenge to what they consider life and her body literally becomes the battleground between two perspectives as they fight first over her “place” in society and then side by side in order to save her. Her ability to experience emotions is revealed to be the result of a cascade failure in her neural net. Her emotions are at the expense of being whole—of being a true, functioning android—but neither being able to be fully human. The cascade failure functions as the collapse of the various liminal states in which Lal found herself entrapped. Her death was the only way to resolve for those in a society that could neither comprehend nor create social space for such a being who blurred the line between human and machine. In the words of Admiral Haftel, “it just wasn’t meant to be.”

4. Non-binary Characters Lacking a Gendered Quality

3.4 Hugh, formerly Third of Five

Hugh, though this was not always his name, first appears in the ST: TNG episode “I: Borg” [16] and later in the episode “Descent” [17]. Originally known as Third of Five, he was a member of a party of Borg drones on a Borg scout ship that crashed in the Argolis cluster. Since he is the only survivor, the crew of the Enterprise faced a moral quandary over whether or not to kill him on the spot, heal him aboard the Enterprise, or whether or not to alter his programming to implant a virus within the Collective and destroy it from within. Ultimately, Third of Five was brought aboard the Enterprise to be treated, but the crew was understandably uneasy, since the Borg were one of their main nemeses. Underlying this unease is a current of fear related to the nature of the Borg. Through assimilation and becoming Borg, one has all cultural (even species) meanings and designations stripped away: name, social class, occupation, nationality, and even gender. Because the process of assimilation is to effectively de-culture someone, they are also ungendered. On a visceral level, they lose the body as their most basic frame for understanding the world and, through the removal of gender, their way of understanding their body’s place in it. Borg-ness aside, this agendered quality—this threat to the body—is an undercurrent to their anxiety that can be seen in other non-binary gender characters.

However, like some other non-binary gender characters, something happens to render Third of Five less threatening than once thought; they rename Third of Five as Hugh. The assignment of a masculine name (and with it, a masculine-gendered sense of the body) initiates the beginning of the regrowth of individualism in Hugh. He is being re-cultured. When Picard approaches him in the guise of Locutus, claiming he will assimilate Geordi LaForge, Hugh’s first and newest friend, he protests this threat of assimilation and even returns to the Collective to protect the crew as a whole from the risk of assimilation. Though acquiring a gendered aspect may have helped resolve the dangerous state of flux, Hugh found himself aboard the Enterprise, and like other non-binary gender characters, he experienced a sort of double jeopardy with his home culture. Among the collective, he would occupy a dangerous liminal space between being Borg and being unassimilated, in which he thinks of himself as an individual but misses the companionship and comfort of the collective hive mind. The meaning of Hugh’s body upon his return to the collective becomes muddled. He cannot become fully Borg again with his newfound sense of individuality, so his liminal state is never resolved. His influence proves corrupting to other drones, and eventually, order collapses within his cube and he becomes something of a revolutionary leader among fugitive Borg [17].
The Borg, in performing gender, essentially remove it. When an individual is “assimilated,” whatever they were before is of no consequence. They are stripped of name, rank, individuality, and cultural designations such as gender—they are simply Borg. These qualifications almost mirror the conditions under which neophytes enter the liminal phase in Turner’s description of rites of passage. The liminal state, though, is meant to be temporary with a clear destination on the other side.

When binarily gendered beings, such as those aboard the Enterprise or Voyager, encounter beings that exist between all Western dualisms, which are the antithesis of their every value and mission ethic, there can be no possibility of a meaningful interface between the two groups because the inherent instability of their interaction must be rectified. That cannot be accomplished without either aggregating the Borg or being “assimilated.” The Borg will not aggregate because, presumably, there is nothing left to reabsorb—only Borg. Seven of Nine from Voyager was successfully reincorporated into life among humans, but she did not do so willingly [20]. Those on the Enterprise will not “assimilate” because it would mean having their bodies effectively “uncultured,” and therefore “ungendered,” becoming the unknown that they fear.

4.2 Xindi-Insectoids

The Xindi-insectoids are an agendered, asexually reproducing insectoid species of the 5-species Xindi race featured as one of the Xindi antagonists of ST: ENT [21]. Though they admittedly stretch the operating definition of humanoid in use here, I have chosen to include them because the character design, as described by visual effects producer Dan Curry, was meant to be more or less humanoid for the same reasons: “a creature that was about the size of a human being so people could look into its face” [22].

The function of gender (or rather, lack of) among the Xindi-insectoids is similar to the function of non-binary gender among some of the “genderable” non-binary characters in that their non-binary gender functions as a byword for other forms of liminality and the anxieties of such they inspire in other people. The first front from which the Xindi-insectoids find themselves in a liminal state is their homeworld, Xindus, which no longer exists. It was destroyed by the Insectoids and Reptilians during a Xindi civil war against the Xindi Primates, Aquatics, Arboreals, and now-extinct Avians. A new planet for a unified Xindi homeworld was not chosen, so the various Xindi factions ended up spreading across different planets in the Delphic Expanse [23]. Not insignificantly, the Delphic Expanse is a literal “liminal space” as a vast region of space filled with spatial anomalies that react dangerously and unpredictably to anything in the vicinity. For example, one unlucky Klingon ship that ventured into the Expanse came in contact with a spatial anomaly and emerged with the bodies of the crew inverted alive, with their internal organs on the outside of their body [24]. What’s more, the Insectoids are also a dangerous and liminal force strategically because their loyalties are not always clear. They, with the Reptilians, caused the extinction of the Avians, but then work together with the other Xindi factions during the Temporal Cold War in order to prevent the destruction of the future Xindi homeworld by Earth [25]. Though they do tend to agree with the Reptilians on most issues (and the Reptilians rely on this), they are more likely to be swayed from a hard line than the Reptilians, and therefore, less predictable [26].

The eggs produced by the Xindi, seen in the episode [27], have a similar effect on non-Xindi insectoids to Borg assimilation, if more subtle. Like assimilation, they subvert a person’s body, will, and cultural norms for the survival of the species; but instead of implants, they produce a chemical that causes one to “reverse-imprint” on the eggs and obsessively work to ensure their survival. As a captain, Archer had a responsibility to protect the lives of his crew, but after he impressed on the Xindi eggs, he was confined within the instinctual parameters of a Xindi parent, rather than a human man, willing to sacrifice the lives of his crew (much to their consternation) and the outcome of the mission. Archer’s liminality is at its peak toward the end of the encounter when he returns to the hatchery and sits amongst the new hatching who react to him as if he were their natural parent. He is a human man, yet accepted by the infant Xindi, a captain but derelict in his duties. His liminal state is resolved by Tucker shooting and incapacitating him and returning him to the ship for treatment by force. His loss of control (perhaps dominion?) over his body at the hands of a non-binary gender force is reminiscent of Picard’s own assimilation by the Borg as Locutus [28]. In a sense, the Borg imprint on Picard as Locutus as well. When Picard encounters Hugh/Third of Five on the Enterprise, he addresses him in the manner of Locutus, and Hugh responds to him as such, rather than responding to him as Picard. In the case of Archer, as with Picard, both men are eventually liberated through science restoring their bodies and its gendered meanings to normalcy.

4.3 Species 8472

Another group of “ungendered” characters that fits this pattern and are also coded as dangerous due to their unknowable bodies is Species 8472, which appears in ST: VOY. The true name of the species is unknown, but the title of Species 8472 assigned by the Borg is used by Voyager and for all intents and purposes is used as the species’ proper designation. Tripedal and capable of communicating telepathically with other species, they rest at an extreme of the definition of humanoid in use here, but I have included them due to how they could (and did) adopt humanoid forms as a disguise and how the character design was loosely humanoid in morphology [29].

Species 8472 is known to possess as many as 5 genders, but display no identifiably gendered features until they adopt humanoid disguises. Extremely biologically advanced, the Borg consider them the zenith of organic life but also fear
them. Their role in the series is not dissimilar from that of the Borg, as a mysterious and hostile alien force whose bodies seem immune (or at least highly resistant to) the strongest attacks that the Voyager crew can muster, and like the Xindi-insectoids, also inhabit a space (in this case, an extradimensional “fluidic space”) that is quite literally liminal. However, Species 8472 is motivated by a desire to wipe out all lifeforms it deems impure or biologically inferior, rather than assimilate them like the Borg [30]. In fact, Species 8472 is one of the only species seen to be inherently resistant to assimilation by the Borg. Like the Borg, Species 8472 represents a challenge to the notion of the power of binarily-gendered body by threatening to overwhelm it, as seen in the disfiguring infection its touch induces in Harry Kim and the Borg [29].

What inflames, but ultimately resolves, the conflict between the humans, Borg, and Species 8472 are the development and use of modified Borg nanoprobes by Voyager. They are used to treat the infection that afflicts Harry Kim and are also weaponized against the biology of Species 8472 [30]. Normally, nanoprobes are used by the Borg as part of the assimilation process, but in this case, one intimate threat to the gendered body’s substance is used to protect it from destruction by destroying those who are an embodied threat. The parties reach a truce with Species 8472 while they inhabit human disguises that are almost genetically perfect, distinguishable from actual humans by only the subtlest inconsistencies. Even though they adopted human guises for the purpose of preparing an invasion of Earth, suddenly Species 8472 became less intimidating and less explicable as an adversary [31].

Like the Borg Collective speaking through Seven of Nine, who Janeway identifies as having once been a human female, or the masculine-ascribed Hugh, agreement with these groups can be reached when those aboard the Enterprise or Voyager are able to interface with a being who can be gendered (either by themselves or others). The conflict resolves peacefully when Species 8472 returns to “fluidic space” with the nanoprobes in question. Science was a tool for both parties to guard and exploit gender and the body, but the threat, in a sense, is ultimately overcome through the restoration and stabilization of the body’s meaning for both parties, with science as a gendering force that empiricizes the body to make it knowable.

4.4 Talosians

The Talosians are a humanoid species inhabiting the underground of the otherwise deserted planet of Talos IV. They appear over the course of three episodes in ST: OS, “The Cage,” [32] “The Menagerie: Part I,” [33] and “The Menagerie: Part II” [34]. The most prolonged and significant contact with them occurs during “The Cage.” After a nuclear war on their planet, the few survivors cultivated their powers of creating illusions in order to survive. The cultivation of their mental capacities, however, came at the expense of their physical fortitude. This is reflected in their physical appearance; the Talosians are slight and gray skinned, but with bulbous veined heads, and wear gray or silver robes. There is nothing identifiably male or female about them nor suggested in their dress, and little to distinguish them greatly from one another, aside from the bulging veins wrapping the head of the Talosian known as the Keeper. Indeed, “The Cage” director Robert Butler noted in the design of the characters that he wanted them to be marked by an aura of “antisexuality”; and given the binary entanglement of gender with sexuality, their design could also be extended to a sort of “antigender” [35].

The Talosians are an intensely cerebral people whose world primarily exists in the form of incorporeal illusions. This creates an interesting dichotomy with Pike. Though Vina is partially a product of Talosian illusion, Pike is all reality. His performance and behavior is as physical and hypermasculine as the Talosians’ is cerebral (they refer to him as a “prime specimen”). He beats the walls, endures torture, and makes graphic threats against his Talosian captors. Physicality is how he interacts with, tests, and investigates an environment that behooves him at every turn—walls unaffected by even the strongest phaser fire and a sea of shifting images and sensations. Vina, his preternaturally beautiful fellow captive, is the only facets of the environment that he does not engage or question with such violence—rather, she assuages his doubts to her realness and he accepts her as such, given that, empirically, as a female and one of the somewhat more static parts of a highly changeable environment (though it is later revealed that she too is partially illusory), she aligns with his physical comprehension of reality.

His binarily gendered physicality manifests as a violent empiricism. Binary gender in this context is the root of the physical, empirical, and knowable through science, as contrasted with the Talosians’ non-binary gender as the root of that which is illusory, confounding, and almost mystical. The world mediated through the body is knowable, the world mediated through bodies that exist within our frame of reference is knowable, and it is translated through the experiences and expectations that one’s own well-understood body is marked with. Gender helps make one’s understanding of society and culture seem empirical. Without that gendered lens as a compiler, the non-binary body is an unempirical mystery to a binary society.

5. Discussion

For gendered non-binary characters, their non-binaryness is often a greater threat to themselves than the humans they encounter. The non-binary gender characters in possession of gendered characteristics are more often the recipients of pity and curiosity. Possessing binarily gendered qualities renders them easily integrated into the schemas of Starfleet crews, peopling “strange new worlds” with much that is familiar in terms of gender identity. It is the non-binary gender characters with nothing identifiably gendered about them that strike real fear into the hearts of Starfleet officers. Why does one group of non-binary gender characters receive a far more charitable portrayal than the other? Some of it is a numbers game.
Those with a gendered aspect tend to only appear in one or a few episodes and are often in a one-on-one context with other characters—a structure that allows for a more nuanced exploration of that individual character and a greater degree of empathy from viewers and their Starfleet proxies. Those without a gendered quality are generally recurring characters, often serving as the main villain for one or more story arcs of a given incarnation of Star Trek. What’s more, those with a gendered aspect tend to be individuals while those without tend to be groups or collectives, often depicted as a monolithically hostile enemy force.

One could argue that in many cases, the characters mentioned here face persecution or tragedy not because of gender, but because of other social conditions and forms of “otherness.” This is true—but I counter that in Star Trek, non-binary gender is often seen in tandem with additional forms of “otherness.” Non-binary inhabitants of “strange new worlds” who experience multiple vectors of “otherness” do so across two contexts: their home world and their encounters with Starfleet. Non-binary gender is usually a vector of “otherness” within the latter.

Soren the J’naii is an “other” in her homeworld of J’naii for feeling feminine urges when society at large considers gender identity primitive and as an engine of oppression. Jadzia Dax, as discussed by Ferguson [2], faces pressure within her home Trill culture for her contact with people from the past lives of her symbiont. Charles the Vissian faces “otherness” within Vissian society for wishing to abandon the prescribed social role of the cogitator. Lal, under the aspect of a human female, faces “otherness” from within the Enterprise by not being quite “human enough” for comfort, though she in many ways surpasses the humanity of her android father, Data, by learning to speak with contractions and feel emotions. The nervousness people felt around her in her pre-gender state was still present. Hugh would never regain the peace and companionship he found as part of the Collective. He would become “othered” by virtue of being an anomaly, an individual amongst drones in the Collective where such does not exist.

In this way, non-binary gender acts as an underwriter—a sort of symbolic by-word for a social precariousness of the body in the society of the Star Trek universe. The conditions or fates of some characters may indeed not be wholly attributable to their non-binary gender, but it is an underwriting condition that both heralds and exacerbates their liminality as beings and symbols. Because non-binary gender identity is not in itself necessarily the engine of their doom, but rather occurs frequently among characters that fall under a certain pattern of social conditions in the Star Trek universe, non-binary gender functions more as a symbol of the ever-presence of the unknown.

To gender characters in a male/female dichotomy is to make them less threatening to the sensibilities of the Starfleet characters, but in the context of a non-binary character’s own culture, this can be a harbinger of disaster. The binary gender prescriptions that such non-binary characters such as Soren, Charles, Hugh, and Lal may adopt or be ascribed by the Starfleet characters imbues them with a sort of double liminality, being neither fully enculturated into life with Starfleet nor able to fully fit in with their home society. Per Turner and Douglas, the liminal state is dangerous, inherently polluting, and as such, necessarily temporary, as it is in rites of passage. These characters have now been thrust into liminality as a permanent state of existence through gender, and thus cannot continue living across both societies without significant disruption to either. Douglas also notes that such liminality, in order to preserve the integrity of society, must be resolved as quickly as possible. Such resolution for these characters comes as exile or death. Soren elects to undergo “psychotactic” treatments in order to erase her gendered impulses and is then reintegrated into J’naii society, no longer a threat to social order. Charles, unable to remain aboard the Enterprise but prohibited from taking a more active role in Vissian society, commits suicide. Lal suffers a cascade failure in her neural net as she gains the ability to experience emotion, rectifying her secondary liminal state between being human and machine. Hugh’s liminality as an individualistic Borg creates chaos in the Collective, and order of his Cube dissolves completely, an example of what can happen when this liminality goes unchecked. He then goes into exile as a leader of a small band of Borg, teaching them to develop their individuality.

These characters, in their own ways, had to confront the unknown—a subaltern gender identity, a world beyond that which one was permitted to know, how to go back to one’s old life after seeing that new world, feeling emotion for the first time, becoming a willing pariah—and were consumed by it. At the height of their liminality, their bodies become spaces where the inscribed meanings of multiple societies are no longer clear, and they become vessels for the unknown.

All of the gendered non-binary characters here have something singular about them. They are individuals whether for good or ill, but it means nothing without the independence to express that individuality. The non-binary characters also, in various ways, find themselves restrained. Individuality and independence are on par with the exploratory ethos in terms of their importance to Star Trek. Assaults on these values on a bodily level to any character are deeply disturbing and reverberate powerfully throughout the series. In TNG, when Picard is taken by the Borg Collective and turned into Locutus, his individuality and independence are both attacked through his assimilation [28]. Though he survives, Picard is deeply traumatized and thereafter takes a far more aggressive attitude towards the Borg, even devising a plan to commit genocide against them when presented with the opportunity to implant a virus in Hugh/Third of Five and return him to the Collective, though he does not go through with it. Such violence was considered very out of character for him. Even in the pilot episode of ST: OS when Pike is held captive by the Talosians, his independence is attacked (mirrored later in the series by his disability and eventual return to Talos IV) and he fights...
For the gendered non-binary characters, their ability to pursue their individuality or their independence is often tied up in their gender identity. Non-binary gender characters without a gender aspect are more often portrayed as those who would take away or attack one’s individuality or independence: the Talosians created a cage of illusion, the Borg strip away life as one once knew it, the Xindi-insectoids are set on destroying Earth, and Species 8472 is set on destroying any species deemed impure. They are the deliverers of the threat and the threat itself, unlike the non-binary characters with a gendered aspect, who are more often the sympathetic recipients of such injustice.

Non-binary characters who lack a gendered aspect function similarly with regard to the role of their gender identity—it is not necessarily their non-binary gender in itself that is threatening, but what it represents. If gender is a system or type of knowledge, then the system of knowledge they represent is utterly beyond comprehension for the Starfleet officers—the true unknown. Portrayals naturally are slanted negatively towards apprehension and hostility because the most basic ways in which they experience and understand the world seem incompatible. Meaningful interaction requires rendering the unknown known, or alternatively, changing one’s perspective as to what constitutes the knowable.

6. Conclusion

The body is a place where fear, liberation, individuality, and vulnerability come to roost. Its meaning is constantly being negotiated. So, how does Star Trek help one understand how the body is constructed? Exploring the portrayals of non-binary gender characters gives one a degree of distance—a safe space, perhaps—from which to observe how our ideas about what the body is, and how its meaning is enacted with gender, are limited. However, these limitations to our understanding have real consequences. The trend of symbolic annihilation among non-binary gender characters, or at the very least, discomfort around them, would suggest that a social space for non-binary gender identities does not exist in the society that created the universe of Star Trek.

Intersex children are a living example of the nexus of this anxiety and limitation to our understanding. The ambiguity of the intersex infant’s body is particularly striking because the image of the doctor examining the infant’s genitalia and announcing to the proud parents, “It’s a boy” or “it’s a girl” is well known. What happens when the doctor cannot tell? There are, of course, other means of determining a child’s sex, and the non-normative appearance of one’s genitalia does not necessarily preclude their being perfectly functional. Indeed, it is often the case that a child with ambiguous genitals is otherwise normal and healthy, but what troubles the parents and doctor is the body as a space for performance and inscription of values. Parents worry about what colors to paint the nursery. Will their child be picked on in school? What will happen when they have to use locker rooms to change clothes before gym? More so than ambiguous genitalia itself, it is these additional, subtle forms of “otherness” for which it is a harbinger that worries parents most.

Because of the binary entanglement of sex and gender, unclear sex results in the inability to assign clear social roles. What this person’s body means is an embodied mystery. In this case, the construction of the body is limited by its polarization into a vulvar and penile ideal with little room for negotiation in between. That liminal space between—the wasteland of myriad forms of “otherness”—is feared, and as Victor Turner might put it, “ritually impure,” and therefore must be resolved [5]. In the case of many intersex children, their parents choose to resolve the liminal state of their genitalia, and as they see it, the substance of their cultural personhood, surgically as infants. The children’s ambiguous genitalia is shifted to one axis of the vulvar/penile ideal to resolve the external, parental concern about the aesthetics, function, and expectations of the child’s body, though whether or not this change resonates with the child’s gender identity remains to be seen.

To borrow from Said, gender is a system of knowledge [12]. It is received knowledge bearing assumptions about sexuality, attraction, repulsion, and the way the universe works. The gender-as-knowledge mechanism of Star Trek is constantly called into question by non-binary gender characters whose identity becomes a representation of the unknown, but one which an explorer cannot help but feel compelled to investigate. The exploration of this unknown between the poles of binary gender is in some ways a recognition that there is a habitable space there at all—a reminder that there are infinite points between any two points on a given line. In Star Trek, one can safely discover these “new possibilities of existence” as our collective imagination wanders into liminal space. Lingering too long, as Douglas warns, can threaten cherished ideals, such as rigid gender dualism, but they may be worth discarding in favor of changing our ideas about gender and the body to be more inclusive, rather than asking individuals to alter their gender performance to suit preexisting schemata [6]. Non-binary gender identity does not have to be a byword for ostracization.

In this life, the possibilities for variation are infinite and this does not exclude gender. Yet, in the American gender binary, people experience only two out of this multitude. The great power of science-fiction is that it alienates the familiar and familiarizes the alien, showing us ourselves, distorted, so we might treat our own culture with a degree of reflexivity upon reflection rather than presupposing our own intelligibility. By doing so, we open ourselves to realms of experience never before considered and, in the words of the immortal Q, “that’s the exploration that awaits you… not mapping stars and studying nebula but charting the unknown possibilities of existence.”
Author Biography

Meghan Kajihaara recently graduated Summa Cum Laude from the University of North Texas with degrees in Anthropology and History and a minor in French. She is a researcher at the xREZ Interdisciplinary Art + Science Lab under the mentorship of Professor Ruth West. Meghan has previously presented her work on Star Trek to a peer-reviewed conference at Texas Tech University and was awarded Best Visiting Presenter. She has also co-authored papers on the development of expertise and mental models in 3D volumetric data segmentation. She is currently taking a gap year to research, continue volunteering with the Denton Bach Society and the Denton County Office of History and Culture, and participate in AmeriCorps VISTA. Her timeline for the next few years is flexible, but she hopes to start her Masters in Anthropology within the next two years, allowing time for internships and travel.

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