

"Out of the Closet and into the Universe"

Queers and *Star Trek*

HENRY JENKINS

Star Trek celebrates its 25th anniversary in 1991. In that quarter century, one of the most important aspects of the series . . . has been the vision that humanity will one day put aside its differences to work and live in peace together. *Star Trek*, in its various television and motion picture forms, has presented us with Africans, Asians, Americans and Andorians, Russians and Romulans, French and Ferengi, Hispanics and Hortas, human and non-human men and women. In 25 years, it has also never shown an openly gay character.

(Franklin Hummel, *Gaylactic Gazette*)¹

Perhaps someday our ability to love won't be so limited.

(Dr Beverley Crusher, 'The Host', *Star Trek: The Next Generation*)

"2, 4, 6, 8, how do you know Kirk is straight?" the Gaylaxians chanted as they marched down the streets of Boston on Gay Pride day. "3, 5, 7, 9, he and Spock have a real fine time!" The chant encapsulates central issues of concern to the group: How do texts determine the sexual orientation of their characters and how might queer spectators gain a foothold for self-representation within dominant media narratives? How has *Star Trek* written gays and lesbians out of its future, and why do the characters and their fans so steadfastly refuse to stay in the closet? The chant captures the play between visibility and invisibility which is the central theme of this chapter and has, indeed, been a central theme in the struggle against homophobia in contemporary society.

The Boston Area Gaylaxians is a local chapter of the international Gaylactic Network Inc., an organization for gay, lesbian, and bisexual science fiction fans and their friends.² Founded in 1987, the group has chapters in many cities in the United States and Canada. Adopting the slogan, "Out of the closet and into the universe," the group has sought to increase gay visibility within the science fiction fan community and "to help gay fans contact and develop friendships with each other."³ The group hosts a national convention, Gaylaxicon, which brings together fans and writers interested in sexuality and science fiction. Although only recently given official recognition from the Network, group members have organized a national letter-writing campaign to urge Paramount to acknowledge a queer presence in the twenty-fourth-century future represented on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Their efforts have so far

attracted national attention from both the gay and mainstream press and have provoked responses from production spokespeople and several cast members. Gene Roddenberry publicly committed himself to incorporate gay characters into the series in the final months before his death, but the producers never delivered on that promise. The series *has* featured two episodes which can loosely be read as presenting images of alternative sexuality, “The Host,” and “The Outcast.” Although the producers have promoted these stories as responsive to the gay and lesbian community’s concerns, both treat queer lifestyles as alien rather than familiar aspects of the Federation culture and have sparked further controversy and dissatisfaction among the Gaylaxians.

The fans’ requests are relatively straightforward—perhaps showing two male crew members holding hands in the ship’s bar, perhaps a passing reference to a lesbian lover, some evidence that gays, bisexuals, and lesbians exist in the twenty-fourth century represented on the program. Others want more—an explicitly gay or lesbian character, a regular presence on the series, even if in a relatively minor capacity. As far as the producers are concerned, homosexuality and homophobia are so tightly interwoven that there is no way to represent the first without simultaneously reintroducing the second, while for the fans, what is desired is precisely a future which offers homosexuality without homophobia.

What is at stake for these viewers is the credibility of Gene Roddenberry’s oft-repeated claims about the utopian social vision of *Star Trek*. Roddenberry’s reluctance to include queer characters in *Star Trek*, they argue, points to the failure of liberal pluralism to respond to the identity politics of sexual preference. As one fan wrote, “What kind of a future are we offered when there is no evidence that we exist?”⁴

[. . .]

Children of Uranus⁵

During the course of our production, there have been many special interest groups who have lobbied for their particular cause. It is Gene Roddenberry’s policy to present *Star Trek* as he sees it and not to be governed by outside influences.

(Susan Sackett, executive assistant to Gene Roddenberry)⁶

We had been the target of a concerted, organized movement by gay activists to put a gay character on the show.

♣ (Michael Piller, *Star Trek* writing staff supervisor)⁷

In the late 1960’s, a ‘special interest group’ lobbied a national television network to renew a series for a third season. If those networks had not listened to those with a special interest, *Star Trek* would not have returned and today *Star Trek* might very likely not be all of what it has become. You, Mr. Roddenberry, and *Star Trek* owe much to a special interest group: *Star Trek* fans. Perhaps you should consider listening to some of those same fans who are speaking to you now.

(Franklin Hummel)⁸

The people who organized the national letter-writing campaign to get a queer character included on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* were not "outside influences," "special interest groups," or "gay activists." They saw themselves as vitally involved with the life of the series and firmly committed to its survival. As Hummel asserts, "we are *part of Star Trek*." They saw their goals not as antagonistic to Roddenberry's artistic vision but rather as logically consistent with the utopian politics he had articulated in *The Making of Star Trek* and elsewhere. Fans had long drawn upon Roddenberry's own comments about the program and its ideology as criteria by which to evaluate the series texts' ideological consistency. If fan writers often sought to deflect anxieties about ideological inconsistencies from producer (Roddenberry) to character (Kirk), the Gaylaxians had no such option. What was at stake was Roddenberry's refusal to act *as a producer* to reinforce the values he had asserted through extra-textual discourse. The fans reminded Roddenberry that he had said:

To be different is not necessarily to be ugly; to have a different idea is not necessarily wrong. The worst possible thing that can happen to humanity is for all of us to begin to look and act and think alike.⁹

When, they asked, was *Star Trek* going to acknowledge and accept sexual "difference" as part of the pluralistic vision it had so consistently evoked? They cited his successful fight to get a black woman on the *Enterprise* bridge and his unsuccessful one to have a female second-in-command, and wondered aloud "why can't *Star Trek* be as controversial in educating people about our movement as they were for the black civil rights movement?" (James).¹⁰

The people who organized the letter-writing campaign were *Star Trek* fans and, as such, they claimed a special relationship to the series, at once protective and possessive, celebratory and critical. Frank Hummel, one of the key organizers of the campaign, described his decision to take on Roddenberry:

We expected more of *Star Trek*. A lot of the letters came from a simple, basic confusion. We didn't understand why *Star Trek* hadn't dealt with it. Here was *The Next Generation*. Here was a new series. Here was the late 1980s–1990s. Why didn't *Star Trek* deal with this? Why didn't they approach it the same way they approached casting an inter-racial crew? It was a puzzle.

Frank, like many of the others I interviewed, had started watching *Star Trek* as a child, had grown up with its characters and its concepts. *Star Trek* provided him with a way of linking his contemporary struggle for gay rights with successful campaigns in the 1960s on behalf of women's rights and black civil rights. The producers' refusal to represent gay and lesbian characters cut deeply:

They betrayed everything *Star Trek* was—the vision of humanity I have held for over 25 years. They betrayed Gene Roddenberry and his vision and all the fans. They didn't have the guts to live up to what *Star Trek* was for.

Even here, we see evidence of a desire to deflect criticism from Roddenberry onto those (the unidentified "they") who "betrayed" his "vision."

Others might point to a series of compromises Roddenberry had made in the program ideology as evidence of a certain duplicity, or, more globally, as a failure of liberal pluralism to adequately confront issues of sexual identity:

Todd: 'I think Gene Roddenberry was this prototypical liberal—and I am not saying that in the most flattering terms. Just like the characters on *Star Trek*, he wanted to convince himself he was open minded and thoughtful and growing so he would do things to present that image and make superficial changes but when it came to something that really counted, really mattered, that wasn't going to go at all.'

In both versions, Roddenberry as *Star Trek's* "author" embodies certain myths about 1960s' activism and its relationship to contemporary social struggle.

To understand the intensity of the Gaylaxians' responses, we need to consider more closely what science fiction as a genre has offered these gay, lesbian, and bisexual fans. David, a member of the Boston group, described his early experiences with the genre:

I wasn't very happy with my world as it was and found that by reading science fiction or fantasy, it took me to places where things were possible, things that couldn't happen in my normal, everyday life. It would make it possible to go out and change things that I hated about my life, the world in general, into something that was more comfortable for me, something that would allow me to become what I really wanted to be. . . . Being able to work out prejudices in different ways. Dealing with man's inhumanity to man. To have a vision for a future or to escape and revel in glory and deeds that have no real mundane purpose. To be what you are and greater than the world around you lets you be.●

Lynne, another Gaylaxian, tells a similar story:

I wasn't very happy with my life as a kid and I liked the idea that there might be someplace else where things were different. I didn't look for it on this planet. I figured it was elsewhere. I used to sit there in the Bronx, looking up at the stars, hoping that a UFO would come and get me. Of course, it would never land in the Bronx but I still had my hopes.

What these fans describe is something more than an abstract notion of escapism—the persistent queer fantasy of a space beyond the closet doorway. Such utopian fantasies can provide an important first step toward political awareness, since utopianism allows us to envision an alternative social order which we must work to realize ("something positive to look forward to") and to recognize the limitations of our current situation (the dystopian present against which the utopian alternative can be read). Richard Dyer has stressed the significant role which utopian entertainment plays within queer culture, be it the eroticism and romanticism of disco, the passion of Judy Garland, the sensuousness of ballet and opera, or the plenitude of gay pornography.¹¹ Utopianism, Dyer writes, offers "passion and intensity" that "negates the dreariness of the mundane . . . and gives us a glimpse of what it means to live at the height of our emotional and experiential capacities."¹² The Gaylaxians describe their pleasure in science fiction both in terms of what utopia feels like (an abstract conception of community, acceptance, difference, fun) and what utopia looks like (a realist representation of alternative possibilities for sexual expression within futuristic or alien societies).

Science fiction represents a potential resource for groups which have had very limited stakes in the *status quo*, for whom the possibility of profound social change would be a

desirable fantasy. Many of the Gaylaxians argue that science fiction is a particularly important genre for gay and lesbian readers:

James: 'To me the purpose of fantasy and science fiction is to go where no one has gone before, to open our minds and to expand our intellect. The future is wider, bigger, larger and therefore that is a fertile ground for opening up possibilities that are now closed. I think it's the perfect genre to find a place where you can have your freedom because anything can happen here and anything is visible here.'

Science fiction offered these readers not one but many versions of utopia, sometimes contradictory or exclusive of each other, but that was part of the pleasure. Confronted with a world which seemed all too narrow in its acceptance of a range of sexualities, they retreated into a genre which offered many different worlds, many different realities, many different futures.

Dana: 'Science fiction allows us the flexibility to be ourselves.'

The historic relations between science fiction and gay culture are complex and varied. Eric Garber and Lyn Paleo's *Uranian Worlds* lists more than 935 science-fiction stories or novels which deal with gay and lesbian themes and characters, starting with Lucian's *True History* (AD 200) and ending in the late 1980s.¹³ Some of the stories they cite adopt homophobic stereotypes, yet they also see science fiction as a genre which was historically open to gay, bisexual, and lesbian writers who could express their sexuality in a disguised but potent form. As Garber and Paleo note, science-fiction fandom in the 1950s was closely linked to the emergence of homophile organizations, with fanzines, such as Lisa Ben's *Vice Versa* and Jim Kepner's *Toward Tomorrow*, amongst the first gay community publications in the United States. Writers like Marion Zimmer Bradley, Joanna Russ, and Samuel R. Delany were writing science-fiction novels in the 1960s which dealt in complex ways with issues of sexual orientation and envisioned futures which held almost unlimited possibilities for gays and lesbians.¹⁴ These writers' efforts opened possibilities for a new generation of queer authors, working in all subgenres, to introduce gay, bisexual, and lesbian characters within otherwise mainstream science-fiction stories. A key shift has been the movement from early science-fiction stories that treated homosexuality as a profoundly alien sexuality toward stories that deal with queer characters as a normal part of the narrative universe and that treat sexuality as simply one aspect of their characterization.¹⁵

Many of these new writers, such as J. F. Rifkin, Melissa Scott, Susanna L. Sturgis, and Ellen Kushner, have been actively involved with the Gaylaxians and have been featured guests at their national convention. The Boston group holds regular meetings where professional science-fiction writers do readings or where struggling amateurs share their writings and receive feedback. Reviews of new books by queer writers appear regularly in the group's newsletters, helping to alert members to new developments in the field.

For many of the Gaylaxians, fandom represented an immediate taste of what science-fiction's utopian future might feel like. Fandom was a place of acceptance and tolerance. Asked to describe what science fiction offered queers, their answers focused as much on fandom as on any features of science fiction as a literary genre. The gay men contrasted belonging to fandom to the alienation of the gay bar scene and particularly to their inability

to express their intellectual and cultural interests there. The female members contrasted fandom with the “political correctness” of the lesbian community, which they felt regarded their cultural interests as trivial since science fiction was not directly linked to social and political change. Belonging to the Gaylaxians, thus, allowed them a means of expressing their cultural identity (as fans), their sexual identity (as queers) and, for some at least, their political identity (as activists).

The conception of science fiction which emerges in such a context is highly fluid as a result of the group’s efforts to provide community acceptance for all those who shared a common interest in science fiction, fantasy, or horror. If the MIT students offered a fairly precise and exclusive conception of the genre, one which preserved their professional status and expertise, the Gaylaxians struggle to find inclusive definitions:

Betty: ‘Science fiction is almost impossible to define. . . . Everyone you ask has a different definition.’

Lynne: ‘It can be anything from hard science to fantasy.’

Dana: ‘The author can do all kinds of things as long as the work is stable within its own universe. It can be close to present Earth reality or it can be as far-fetched as an intergalactic war from Doc Smith.’

David: ‘It’s all out there! No matter what your vision of the future is it’s out there in science fiction and fantasy. It’s all available to us.’

Push harder, and one finds that science fiction, for these fans, is defined less through its relationship to traditional science than through its openness to alternative perspectives and its ability to offer a fresh vantage point from which to understand contemporary social experience:

John: ‘Science fiction doesn’t limit its possibilities. You can constantly throw in something new, something exciting. . . . Science fiction can be as outlandish as someone’s imagination.’

James: ‘My definition of science fiction would be something alien, either the future, the past, different cultures, different worlds, different realities. It would have to be different from our perspective.’

Many of these fans had been drawn to science fiction through *Star Trek* and saw its universe as fully embodying these principles. Nobody had expected the original *Star Trek* series, released in a pre-Stonewall society, to address directly the concerns of gay, lesbian, and bisexual fans. They had taken it on faith that its vision of a United Federation of Planets, of intergalactic cooperation and acceptance, included them as vital partners. Yet, when *Star Trek: The Next Generation* appeared, at a time when queer characters had appeared on many American series, they hoped for something more, to be there on the screen, an explicit presence in its twenty-fourth century. “Everybody had a place in his [Roddenberry’s] future,” explained one fan. “It didn’t matter if you were a man or a woman, white, black, yellow or green. If they can’t take it one step further and include sexual orientation! God, if they don’t have it under control in the twenty-fourth century, then it will never happen!” (James). Underlying this discussion lies a more basic concern: if *Star Trek* isn’t willing to represent gay and lesbian characters in the 1990s, when would it be able to do so? As they watched a series

of dramatic shifts in American attitudes towards gay and lesbian politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s, discussion of *Star Trek* provided them with one focal point for the group's discussion and comprehension of those changes, for talking about issues such as scientific research into the biological basis of sexual desire or efforts to abolish the ban on gays and lesbians serving in the United States military or the successes and setbacks of the Religious Right's campaign against Gay Rights legislation. Discussing *Star Trek* could provide a common ground for thinking through their conflicting feelings about this process of social transformation.

Where no [gay] man has gone before

Mr. Roddenberry has always stated that he would be happy to include a character of *any* special interest group if such a character is relevant to the story.

(Susan Sackett)¹⁶

Were Uhura and LeForge included because the fact they were black was relevant to a story? Was Sulu included because the fact he was Asian was important to the plot? Were Crusher and Troi and Yar included because the fact they were female was relevant to an episode? I do not think so. These characters were included because they were important to the *spirit* of *Star Trek*.

(Franklin Hummel)¹⁷

"We expected *Star Trek* to do it because we expected more of *Star Trek* than other series," one fan explained. They looked around them and saw other series—*LA Law*, *Heartbeat*, *Thirtysomething*, *Quantum Leap*, *Northern Exposure*, *Days of Our Lives*, *Roseanne*—opening up new possibilities for queer characters on network television, while their program could only hint around the possibility that there might be some form of sexuality out there, somewhere beyond the known universe, which did not look like heterosexuality. *Star Trek* was no longer setting the standards for other programs.

"Sooner or later, we'll have to address the issue," Roddenberry had told a group of Boston fans in November 1986, while *Star Trek: The Next Generation* was still on the drawing boards: "We should probably have a gay character on *Star Trek*."¹⁸ "For your information, the possibility that several members of the Enterprise crew might be gay has been discussed in a very positive light. It is very much an area that a show like *Star Trek* **should** address," acknowledged David Gerrold, the man assigned to prepare the program Bible for *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.¹⁹

What were the Gaylaxians to make of the absence of gays and lesbians in the program universe, of Roddenberry's silence on the subject, as season after season came and went? Steve K., writing in *The Lavender Dragon*, a fan newsletter, saw only two possibilities consistent with the fan community's realist reading of the series:

As a U.S. Navy veteran, I have had firsthand experience with the military's discrimination against gays and lesbians. It could be that the United Federation of Planets also bans homosexuals from serving in Starfleet. . . . That would explain the large number of never-married officers on board the Enterprise. Except for Dr. Crusher, none of the regular officers have been married (chiefs, e.g. Chief O'Brian, are non-commissioned

officers like sergeants). Does Starfleet have a huge closet? Still, this does leave the problem of civilian homosexuals. Since many of the episodes involve interaction with non-Starfleet characters, you would think that occasionally a gay or lesbian character would be somewhere in the 24th century. Has the Federation found a 'cure' for homosexuality?²⁰

Invisibility meant either that gays were closeted or that they had ceased to exist. Neither was an attractive alternative to a group, whose motto, after all, is "Out of the closet and into the universe."

If they had listened more carefully, the fans might have recognized the slippage in Roddenberry's original comments, from including gay people as *characters* to dealing with homosexuality as an *issue*. What the Gaylaxians wanted was to be visible without being an "issue" or a "problem" which the script writers needed to confront and resolve. What they wanted was to see gays and lesbians treated as any other character would be treated within the program narrative, defined in terms larger than their sexuality while acknowledging a broader range of possible identities than would be acceptable within the contemporary social climate. As Theresa M. wrote:

I want to see men holding hands and kissing in Ten-Forward. I want to see a smile of joy on Picard's face as he, as captain, joins two women together in a holy union, or pain across his face when he tells a man that his same-sex mate has been killed in battle. I want to hear Troi assure a crew member, questioning their mixed emotions, that bisexuality is a way to enjoy the best of what both sexes have to offer. I want to see crew members going about their business and acting appropriately no matter what their sexual orientation in every situation.²¹

Such moments of public affection, community ritual, or psychological therapy were common aspects of the program text; the only difference would be that in this case, the characters involved would be recognizably queer. The fans wanted to be visible participants within a future which had long since resolved the problem of homophobia. They felt this utopian acceptance to be more consistent with the program's ideology than a more dystopian representation of the social problems they confronted as gays, lesbians, and bisexuals living in a still largely homophobic society.

The program's producers would seem to agree, since their public responses to the letter-writing campaign often presuppose that queers would have gained tolerance and acceptance within *Star Trek's* future, yet they evaded attempts to make this commitment visible on the screen. Curiously, the producers never acknowledged the economic risks in representing homosexuality on contemporary television, risks that might, arguably, involve alienating potential segments of their viewing public, but rather, like the fans, sought to justify their actions on the basis of appeals to the program's liberal ideology. Perhaps a public recognition of the political and economic context of the program's production would too directly undercut the authorial myth of Roddenberry as a crusading producer, which, for their own reasons, they saw as essential to *Star Trek's* public image. The issue of gay identity on *Star Trek* was thus constructed by producers as a problem of representation rather than one of media access.²² One can identify a series of basic assumptions about the representation of gay identities which underlie the producers' responses to the letter-writing campaign:

(1) The explicit representation of homosexuality within the program text would require some form of labeling while a general climate of tolerance had made the entire issue disappear. As Roddenberry explained in a statement released to the gay newspaper, *The Advocate*, "I've never found it necessary to do a special homosexual-theme story because people in the time line of *The Next Generation*, the 24th century, will not be labeled."²³

(2) The representation of homosexuality on *Star Trek* would necessarily become the site of some form of dramatic conflict. As Richard Arnold, the man appointed to serve as *Star Trek's* liaison with the fan community, explained:

In Gene Roddenberry's 24th century *Star Trek* universe, homosexuality will not be an issue as it is today. How do you, then, address a non-issue? No one aboard the starship could care less what anyone else's sexual preference would be. . . . Do not ask us to show conflict aboard the Enterprise when it comes to people's choices over their sex, politics or religion. By that time, all choices will be respected equally.²⁴

The producers, in a curious bit of circular logic, were insisting that the absence of gays and lesbians in the *Star Trek* universe was evidence of their acceptance within the Federation, while their visibility could only be read as signs of conflict, a renewed eruption of homophobia.

(3) Representation of homosexuality on *Star Trek* would make their sexuality "obvious" and therefore risk offence. As Arnold explained,

Although we have no problem with any of our characters being gay, it would not be appropriate to portray them as such. A person's (or being's) sexual preference should not be obvious, just as we can't tell anyone's religious or political affiliations by looking at them.²⁵

The signs of homosexuality, if they are there to be seen at all, automatically become too "obvious" in a homophobic society while the marks of heterosexuality are naturalized, rendered invisible, because they are too pervasive to even be noticed.

(4) Representation could only occur through reliance on easily recognizable stereotypes of contemporary gay identities. With a twist, the group which the producers didn't dare to offend turns out to be not the religious right (which has often put pressure on producers to exclude gay or lesbian characters) but the gay fans who are demanding representation within the program: "Do you expect us to show stereotypical behavior that would be more insulting to the gay community than supportive?"²⁶ Arnold asked a room of 1,200 *Star Trek* fans at Boston's Sheraton Hotel: "What would you have us do, put pink triangles on them? Have them sashay down the corridors?"²⁷

(5) Representation of gay characters would require the explicit representation of their sexual practice. Arnold asked, "Would you have us show two men in bed together?"²⁸ Since a heterosexist society has reduced homosexuals to their sexuality, then the only way to represent them would be to show them engaged in sexual activity.

(6) Representation of gay characters and their relationships would be a violation of genre expectations. Adopting a suggestively feminine metaphor, Arnold asked, "Would you have us turn this [*Star Trek*] into a soap opera?" To deal with homosexuality as part of the character's lifestyle would be to transform (and perhaps, emasculate) *Star Trek* while to deal with heterosexuality as part of the character's lifestyle would be to leave its status as a

male-targeted action-adventure program unchanged. Any sort of concerted effort to respond to this logic requires an attempt to make heterosexuality rather than homosexuality visible, to show how its marks can be seen on the characters, the plots, and the entire environment:

Frank: 'How do we know any of the characters are heterosexual? How do you know? Because you see them interact with other people, especially in their intimate relations. *Star Trek* has done that over and over and over again. You know Picard is heterosexual. You know Riker is heterosexual. Why? Because they've had constant relationships with people of the opposite sex. This has been done systematically as character development. Why not this same development of a gay character?'

(7) As a last resort, having failed to convince the Gaylaxians with their other arguments, the producers sought to deny their own agency in the production of the program and their own control over its ideological vision. "Should a *good* script come along that allows us to address the problems that the gay and lesbian community face on the planet today, then it will very likely be produced."²⁹ But, in fact, there had been a script, called "Blood and Fire," written by David Gerrold, in the very first season of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* at a time when producers were desperately looking for material to keep the fledgling series on the air. Gerrold's script used Regalian Blood Worms as a metaphor to deal with the issue of AIDS and included a gay couple as secondary characters. David Gerrold explained:

All I had was a medical technician working with the doctor and a security guy. At no point do they do anything overt. But someone turns to them and says, 'How long have you two been together?' The other guy says, 'Since the academy.' That lets you know that they're gay, but if you don't know about gay people, like if you're under the age of 13, they're just good friends.³⁰

Gerrold's script went through multiple revisions before being scuttled. The producers have consistently insisted that their decision not to produce "Blood and Fire" was based on its merits, not its inclusion of gay themes and characters. Gerrold, who parted company with Roddenberry shortly after this incident, has repeatedly challenged this account, charging that the episode was never filmed because the producers were uncomfortable with his attempts to introduce the issue of homosexuality into the *Star Trek* universe: "People complained the script had blatantly homosexual characters. Rick Berman said we can't do this in an afternoon market in some places. We'll have parents writing letters."³¹

Gerrold told his story at science-fiction conventions, on the computer nets, and to lots and lots of reporters. Copies of the script have circulated informally among Gaylaxians and other fans. "Blood and Fire" became part of the fan community's understanding of the program history and was a key factor in motivating the Gaylaxians to adopt more aggressive strategies in lobbying for their cause. "Good scripts are accepted, and this script was deemed not to be a good script," said Ernest Over, an assistant to the executive producer.³²

The producers had said, repeatedly, in so many different ways, that the only way that queers could become visible within *Star Trek* was by becoming a problem, and so, gay, lesbian, and bisexual *Star Trek* fans became a problem for the producers. They organized a national letter-writing campaign; they posted notices on the computer nets; they went to the queer press and made their dissatisfaction with the producers' responses a public issue. Ernest

Over, himself a gay community activist, told *The Advocate* that the *Star Trek* office had received "more letters on this than we'd had on anything else."³³

In the midst of the publicity, just a few months before his death, Gene Roddenberry issued a statement: "In the fifth season of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, viewers will see more of shipboard life in some episodes, which will, among other things, include gay crew members in day-to-day circumstances."³⁴ An editorialist in the *Los Angeles Times* reported,

This season, gays and lesbians will appear unobtrusively aboard the Enterprise. . . . They weren't 'outed' and they won't be outcasts; apparently they'll be neither objects of pity nor melodramatic attention. Their sexual orientation will be a matter of indifference to the rest of the crew.³⁵

Leonard Nimoy, the actor who played Spock on the original *Star Trek*, responded that Roddenberry's decision was "entirely fitting" with the spirit and tradition of the series.³⁶

When the Gaylaxians sought confirmation of Roddenberry's statements, they received no response. When reporters from the *Washington Blade* called, they received only a tape-recorded message from executive producer Rick Berman: "The writers and producers of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* are actively exploring a number of possible approaches that would address the issue of sexual orientation."³⁷ Once again, "the issue of sexual orientation" had substituted for the promise of queer characters.

[. . .]

Q for queer?

What about non-human species homosexuality? A Klingon male in drag would surely be a highlight of the TV season. Or maybe a lesbian Vulcan, who logically decided that sex with men was unnecessary. Or even a Betazoid chicken hawk after the virginal Wesley Crusher. The ST:NG Enterprise has been the home of some homosexual stereotypes. Tasha Yar was at times the ultimate in butch female, not afraid of any man. Data is more anally retentive than even the *Odd Couple's* Felix Unger. And Worf sometimes wears more leather than an entire issue of *Drummer*.

(Steve K., *The Lavender Dragon*)³⁸

I'm sure we're just as strange to them.

(Deanna Troi, "The Outcast")

[. . .] As D. A. Miller writes, queer connotation has the

inconvenience of tending to raise this ghost all over the place. For once received in all its uncertainty, the connotation instigates a project of confirmation. . . . Connotation thus tends to light everywhere, to put all signifiers to a test of their hospitality.³⁹

The constant promise and deferral of a gay character colored the Gaylaxians' relationship to the series and invited them to constantly read a gay subtext into the episodes. *Star Trek* seemed always on the verge of confessing its characters' sexual preferences, only to back away yet again.

If the producers have trouble thinking of ways to make homosexuality visible within *Star Trek*, if they couldn't seem to find a "good script" to tell that particular story, the Gaylaxians have no trouble locating possibilities. Watch any episode with them and they will show you the spot, the right moment, for a confession of previously repressed desire to come out from hiding:

Lynne: 'Geordi realizes that the reason he can't seem to work things out with women is that he's gay. . . . Picard goes on shore leave and meets this great woman. Why can't he go on shore leave and meet this great man? It doesn't mean he always prefers men. He can mix it up a little. . . . And it [bisexuality] would probably flourish on board the *Enterprise*. They're real open minded there.'

Soon the entire group is participating within this carnival of outlaw signifiers, partaking of what Miller calls "the dream (impossible to realize, but impossible not to entertain) that connotation would quit its dusky existence for fluorescent literality, *would become denotation*."⁴⁰

For these fans, the text's silences about characters' sexuality or motives can be filled with homosexual desire, since, after all, in our society, such desire must often go unspoken. Straight fans, on the other hand, are apt to demand conclusive evidence that a character is homosexual and otherwise, read all unmarked characters as straight by default. What's at stake is the burden of proof and the nature of evidence within a culture where homosexuality most often appears within connotation rather than denotation. Such speculations cannot sustain direct challenge and often are not taken literally by those who advance them, but open up a fleeting possibility of imagining a different text existing in the margins of that which Paramount delivers.

Sometimes, the possibilities seem to cohere around a particular character, who appears to embody the richest potential for queer visibility, who builds upon the iconography and stereotypes of queer identity. Here, bids for character sexuality can be more strongly maintained since the text offers precisely the type of evidence that is most commonly presented within popular culture to indicate a character's potential homosexuality. Rumors surrounded the arrival of Tasha Yar as a character in *The Next Generation*'s first season. Maybe this is the queer character Roddenberry had promised: "Tasha Yar—an obvious bisexual character. . . . Considering what she went through as a child, she should be a lesbian" (Betty). Tasha Yar—tough, independent, security chief with short-cropped hair, from a planet where she was repeatedly gang-raped by men, able to fight against any and all adversaries, was the classic Amazon: "She could easily be conceived as being a lesbian" (David). But, as the fans are quick to note, she goes to bed with Data in the program's second episode, "The Naked Now": "When they decided to straighten her, they used an android. So we ended up heterosexualizing two perfectly wonderful characters. . . . Even if they had left the character alone and not heterosexualized Tasha Yar, we would have been farther ahead than we are now" (David).

The marks of heterosexuality, normally invisible, are made "obvious" by this interpretation, an act of violence committed against otherwise potentially queer characters, a reaction of homosexual panic which seeks to stabilize (or even to deny) their sexuality. Characters' sexualities do not remain unmarked for long within the world of *Star Trek* or, for that matter, the world of popular culture, which insists that characters be undeniably heterosexual even if their sexual preference is totally irrelevant to their narrative actions.⁴¹ "Data has been

assigned a sexual orientation, basically" (James). Data has been "heterosexualized." Yar has been "straightened."

Yet, again, how stable is that orientation? "Data is someone where bisexuality can be explored" (James). And, soon, the speculations are all open again:

James: 'Data is a scientist.'

David: 'Not only is he a scientist, he is an android and literally he could not have any qualms in the persona they have cast him. If he is fully functional, he's fully functional and would be able to function with another male.'

John: 'One of the primary roles of the Data character is to explore humanity, to learn about humanity. It would not only be plausible. It would be probable that he would want to explore all aspects of humanity including—'

All: 'A homosexual relationship.'

John: 'Having had a heterosexual relationship, he must be curious. He has this underlying curiosity about all aspects of humanity. He wanted to witness the marriage between O'Brian and his bride. He wanted to understand that institution. He must surely be interested in a homosexual relationship. Even interested in why prejudices—if they don't exist in the future—once existed against this type of relationship.'

Here, in a subversion of the producers' logic, a character can prove his interest in homosexuality by the insistence with which he investigates heterosexuality.

But there are more possibilities still:

John: 'I don't think they've ever approached Geordi's sexuality.'

Lars: 'Yes, they have.'

James: 'They've approached everyone's sexuality. . . .'

Lars: 'If they had an episode where Wesley seriously questioned and explored his sexuality—'

James: '—With Data.'

John: '—With Worf. What about the Klingons? Can't they conceivably be a homosexual race?'

James: 'I can't picture a gay Klingon.'

John: 'Historically, there have been many times when you've had extremely masculine warrior groups and there was a lot of homosexuality among them. The Greeks. The Romans. Ancient Japan. Ancient China.'

John moves beyond the terms of the text's own construction of character to evoke the discourse of gay history, itself just gaining a foothold within popular debates about sexuality but a powerful tool for challenging a straight society's ability to naturalize its own sexual categories.

And what about Q? That campy adventurer appears in Picard's bed in one episode and speaks enviously of that woman Picard is chasing: "If I had known this was a way I could get at you, I would have taken that form a long time ago." Could Q, who minces and swishes his way through every episode, be a Queen? Was Q, the outrageous shape shifter, Queer?

Dana: 'He's a flaming fag. He is and I love him. I think he's wonderful.'

Lynne: 'I think he's got a thing for Picard. I really do.'

The one point on which almost all of the Gaylaxians seemed to agree was that Q was possibly, though you can't be certain, queer, with the evidence residing as much in his evocation of subcultural codes of camp performance as in anything specifically said about his character within the series.

And that was precisely the problem which *Star Trek*'s producers hadn't foreseen. In refusing to demarcate a certain denotative space for homosexuality within the text, they left *Star Trek* open to wholesale reclamation. "They could have introduced a character a long time ago and it just comes out, two, three years later, that he's gay" (John). Soon, all of the characters are potentially queer—at least on the level of connotation:

David: 'A large percentage of the people who settled the west—the cowboys, the frontiersmen—pushed a path away from civilization because they were gay.'

James: 'Using that same analogy, it is not theoretically impossible that once we will start migrating into outer space, gay people will form their own outer space societies and colonies. I don't think that's far-fetched at all.'

Yes, it is "not theoretically impossible" that any or all of these characters could be bisexual. But, the double negative here is suggestive of the fans' insecurity about their own interpretive moves. The speculations can crumple almost as fast as they appear. At most, you can claim, we don't know for sure whether he or she is straight:

James: 'Q can be campy, campy to the campiest, but he would not be *the* homosexual character.'

Lars: 'No, No, No, No.'

David: 'I don't get any feelings of homosexuality from Q. Not at all. I don't get any feelings of heterosexuality from Q either. The best I could do would be to describe the character as asexual.'

John: 'It's more just plain fun, just the writers having fun.'

For a split second, the screen seemed open to all kinds of possibilities and there appeared to be gays and lesbians everywhere in *Star Trek*. Look again and all you see is "the writers having fun."

And so, for many, the experience has been one of tremendous frustration and disillusionment. Some hardcore members continue to write letters, hoping to make their case once again at a time when the production staff on *Star Trek* is undergoing another transition in the wake of Roddenberry's death or hoping that their concerns may surface and be better met within *Star Trek Deep Space 9*. For many others, the myth of *Star Trek* as a progressive alternative to commercial television seems to have dissolved into a new recognition of the ideological constraints on the representation of gay identities within mainstream entertainment.

Reconsidering resistant reading

Resistance is futile. You will be assimilated.

(*Science Friction*)⁴²

Cultural studies' embrace of the model of resistant reading is a logical response to theoretical traditions which spoke of readers only in terms of textually constructed subject positions. Resistant reading, as a model, addresses many important questions about the ideological power of the mass media and the relationship between "the viewer and the viewed." Resistant reading, however, only describes one axis of a more complex relationship between readers and texts. The reading practices characteristic of fandom are never purely and rarely openly resistant to the meanings and categories advanced by program producers. Often, as we have seen, the fans' resistant reading occurs within rather than outside the ideological framework provided by the program and is fought in the name of fidelity to the program concepts. The consummate negotiating readers, fan critics work to repair gaps or contradictions in the program ideology, to make it cohere into a satisfying whole which satisfies their needs for continuity and emotional realism. Fandom is characterized by a contradictory and often highly fluid series of attitudes towards the primary text, marked by fascination as well as frustration, proximity as well as distance, acceptance of program ideology as well as rejection. The fans feel a strong identification with the programs, the characters, the producers, and their ideological conceptions, even when they feel strong frustration with the failure of the producers to create stories they would like to see told.

As I have discussed the Gaylaxians with non-fan friends, they often demand to know why these fans don't simply walk away from *Star Trek*, shift their attention to some other text which more perfectly responds to their political agendas or gratifies their desires. Leaving aside the problems which all gay, lesbian, and bisexual viewers face in finding any commercially available text which explicitly acknowledges their sexual identities, this question fails to grasp the particular character of their relationship to the program. *Star Trek* has been a consistent presence in their lives for more than twenty-five years, a text which has offered them endless amounts of pleasure and fascination, even if it has not always delivered all they wanted from it. *Star Trek* continues to be important as a utopian space for their fantasies, still offering them a taste of "what utopia feels like" even if it refuses to show them what (*their*) utopia might look like.

A model of resistant reading cannot, therefore, accurately describe the group's relationship to such a series, nor can their engagement with *Star Trek* be reduced to the politics of the letter-writing campaign itself. Indeed, many group members were reluctant to engage in the letter-writing campaign for fear that it might tarnish their long-term relationship to the series and might politicize their relationship to fandom, a space they had sought out specifically to escape the more doctrinaire corners of the gay and lesbian community. Bob, for example, objected that the letter-writing campaign had "forced the issue" and, as a result, the episodes which had been produced were equally "forced." Resistant reading describes only one side of the ebb and flow of desire which links these viewers to the texts of television science fiction.

Moreover, we need to identify ways in which resistant reading is not necessarily a sufficient response to dissatisfaction with the images currently in circulation. As many writers have noted, resistant reading risks becoming a catch-all solution for all the problems within popular culture, a way of escaping the need for ideological criticism or research into the

political economy of media institutions. A model of resistant reading quickly becomes profoundly patronizing if it amounts to telling already socially marginalized audiences that they should be satisfied with their ability to produce their own interpretations and should not worry too much about their lack of representation within the media itself. Resistant reading can sustain the Gaylaxians' own activism, can become a source of collective identity and mutual support, but precisely because it is a subcultural activity which is denied public visibility, resistant reading cannot change the political agenda, cannot challenge other constructions of gay identity and cannot have an impact on the ways people outside of the group think about the issues which matter to the Gaylaxians. Slash, or K/S fiction, represents a long-standing tradition in the women's fan-writing community which poses ways of constructing homoerotic fantasies employing the series characters. Slash, as many writers have now noted, represents a powerful form of resistant reading, an active appropriation and transformation of dominant media content into forms of cultural production and circulation that speak to the female fan community's needs and interests. Slash has proven empowering to its female fan readers and writers, helping them to articulate and explore their sexual fantasies, bringing them together into a community across various barriers which isolate them. Slash, by translating politics into the personal, gave them a way to speak about their experiences and commitments. Some members of the Gaylaxians have embraced slash as a form which can also express their fantasies about the series and their desires for its future development. *Science Friction*, a *Star Trek: The Next Generation* slash zine distributed at the 1992 Gaylaxicon, specifically presented itself as a response to the failure of the letter-writing campaign: "Our motto is: If Paramount can't give us that queer episode, just make it so!"⁴³

For many group members, however, slash does not represent the appropriate response to this issue. The fantasy of slash is not their fantasy, does not speak to their desire for visibility and recognition. The circulation of slash within their subcultural community cannot adequately substitute for their lack of access to the media, since the aired episodes, even within fandom, enjoy an authority which cannot be matched by any subcultural production and since, as they often stress, their push for a gay character on the aired episodes is intended as much for the consumption of closeted gay teenagers or straight parents, friends, and co-workers as for the group itself.

Cultural studies' embrace of the model of resistant reading, then, only makes sense in a context which recognizes the centrality of issues of media access and media ownership. Resistant reading is an important survival skill in a hostile atmosphere where most of us can do little to alter social conditions and where many of the important stories that matter to us can't be told on network television. It is, however, no substitute for other forms of media criticism and activism. The Gaylaxians' reception of *Star Trek* points to the importance of linking ethnographic research on resistant readers or subcultural appropriations with a political economy of media ownership and control and with the ideological analysis of program content. If earlier forms of ideological analysis worked from the assumption that texts constructed reading subjects, this new mixture would assume that readers play an active role in defining the texts which they consume but: (a) they do so within a social, historical, and cultural context that shapes their relative access to different discourses and generic models for making sense of the program materials; (b) they do so in relation to institutional power that may satisfy or defer audience desires; and (c) they do so in regard to texts whose properties may facilitate or resist the readers' interpretive activities. The relationship between readers, institutions, and texts is not fixed but fluid. That relationship changes over time,

constantly shifting in relation to the ever-changing balance of power between these competing forces.

Notes

- 1 Franklin Hummel, "Where None Have Gone Before," *Gaylactic Gazette*, May 1991, p. 2. I am indebted to John Campbell for his extensive assistance in recruiting members of the Gaylaxians to participate in the interviews for this chapter. Interviews were conducted both in informal settings (members' homes) as well as more formal ones (my office), depending on the size and the needs of the groups. As it evolved, the groups were segregated by gender.
- 2 For more information on the Gaylaxian Network, see Franklin Hummel, "SF Comes to Boston: Gaylaxians at the World Science Fiction Convention," *New York Native*, October 23, 1989, p. 26.
- 3 Gaylaxians International, recruitment flier.
- 4 Theresa M., "Star Trek: The Next Generation Throws Us a Bone . . .," *The Lavender Dragon*, April 1992, 2: 2, p. 1.
- 5 The nineteenth-century word, Uranian, was coined by early German homosexual emancipationist Karl Ulrichs and used popularly through the First World War to refer to homosexuals. As Eric Garber and Lyn Paleo note, "It refers to Aphrodite Urania, whom Plato had identified as the patron Goddess of homosexuality in his Symposium."
- 6 Susan Sackett, executive assistant to Gene Roddenberry, letter to Franklin Hummel, March 12, 1991.
- 7 Mark A. Altman, "Tackling Gay Rights," *Cinefantastique*, October 1992, p. 74.
- 8 Franklin Hummel, Director, Gaylactic Network, letter to Gene Roddenberry, May 1, 1991.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 The analogy John and other Gaylaxians draw between the black civil rights movement of the 1960s and the queer civil rights movement of the 1990s is a controversial one. But it is hardly unique to these fans. This analogy has been part of the discursive context surrounding Bill Clinton's efforts to end the American military's ban on gay and lesbian enlistment.
- 11 Many of Dyer's most important essays on this topic can be found in Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1992). On Judy Garland and gay audiences, see Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986). For another central text in arguments about the politics of utopian entertainment, see Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text*, Winter 1979, pp. 130–48.
- 12 Richard Dyer, "In Defence of Disco," *Only Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 156. What Dyer describes here as "banality" is what fans refer to as "the mundane," while making a similar argument about the pleasures of fandom as a repudiation or movement away from "the mundane."
- 13 Eric Garber and Lyn Paleo, *Uranian Worlds: A Guide to Alternative Sexuality in Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1990).
- 14 Several of the writers associated with the original *Star Trek* series made important contributions to the development of gay and lesbian science fiction: Theodore Sturgeon,

who wrote "Amok Time" and "Shore Leave," two of the best-loved episodes, had been dealing with issues of alien sexuality and homosexuality in his fiction as early as 1957; David Gerrold, who wrote "Trouble with Tribbles" and was closely involved in the development of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, was the author of a 1973 science-fiction novel, *The Man Who Folded Himself*, which dealt with the auto-erotic and homoerotic possibilities of time travel; Norman Spinrad, the author of "The Domsday Machine," wrote stories which dealt, not always sympathetically, with alternative sexualities and had included gay characters in his fiction prior to his involvement in *Star Trek*.

- 15 Clearly, these newer representations of gay characters, rather than the older representations of the problem or issue of gay sexuality, set expectations about how *Star Trek* might best address the concerns of its gay, lesbian, and bisexual viewers.
- 16 Sackett, *op. cit.* Roddenberry has, at various times, acknowledged that he saw his inclusion of Uhura on the original series as a contribution to the civil rights movement, that he had added Chekhov in response to a *Pravda* editorial calling for an acknowledgment of Soviet accomplishments in space, and that he introduced the blind character, Geordi, on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* as a response to the many disabled fans he had encountered through the years. Given such a pattern, it was not unreasonable for the Gaylaxians to anticipate a similar gesture towards gay, lesbian, and bisexual viewers.
- 17 Hummel, *Gaylactic Gayzette*, *op. cit.*
- 18 Edward Gross, *The Making of The Next Generation* (Las Vegas: Pioneer Books) as reprinted in *Gaylactic Gayzette*, May 1991.
- 19 David Gerrold, letter to Frank Hummel, November 23, 1986.
- 20 Steve K., "Gays and Lesbians in the 24th Century: *Star Trek—The Next Generation*," *The Lavender Dragon*, August 1991, 1: 3, p. 1.
- 21 Theresa M., *ibid.*
- 22 The commercial success of programs like *Northern Exposure*, *LA Law*, *In Living Color* or *Roseanne*, all of which had previously included gay, lesbian, or bisexual recurring characters, might have substantially decreased the risk of including similar characters on *Star Trek*, though the industry's understanding of audience acceptance of queer visibility was shifting at the time this debate occurred.
- 23 "*Star Trek: The Next Generation*," *The Advocate*, August 27, 1991, p. 74.
- 24 Richard Arnold, letter to J. DeSort Jr, March 10, 1991.
- 25 Richard Arnold, letter to J. DeSort Jr, September 10, 1989.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 Mark A. Perigard, "Invisible, Again," *Bay Windows*, February 7, 1991, p. 8.
- 28 Richard Arnold, letter to J. DeSort Jr, March 10, 1991.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 Clark, p. 74; see also Gross, *op. cit.*; Altman, (1992) pp. 72–3.
- 31 Altman (1992), p. 72. Note that Berman or the other producers have never made similar arguments in their public statements about the controversy, always suggesting other reasons for their failure to introduce gay, lesbian, or bisexual characters into the series.
- 32 Clark, p. 74.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 Ruth Rosen, "*Star Trek* Is On Another Bold Journey," *Los Angeles Times*, October 30, 1991.

- 36 Leonard Nimoy, "Letters to the Times: Vision of *Star Trek*," *Los Angeles Times*, November 6, 1991.
- 37 John Perry, "To Boldly Go . . . These Are the Not-So-Gay Voyages of the Starship Enterprise," *The Washington Blade*, September 20, 1991, p. 36.
- 38 Steve K., *The Lavender Dragon*, August 1991, 1: 3, p. 2.
- 39 D. A. Miller, "Anal Rope", in Diana Fuss (ed.), *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1991), p. 125.
- 40 Miller (1991), p. 129.
- 41 The Gaylaxians note, for example, a similar pattern in the introduction and development of Ensign Ro in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*'s fifth season: Ro, like Yar, drew on iconography associated with butch lesbians, and appearing in the midst of the letter-writing campaign was read as the long-promised queer character. Within a few episodes of her introduction, however, the program involved her in a plot where the *Enterprise* crew loses its memory and Riker and Ro become lovers. As one Gaylaxian explained during a panel discussion of the series at Gaylaxicon, "Oops! I forgot I was a lesbian!"
- 42 *Science Friction* (Toronto, 1992).
- 43 "Editorial: Welcome to Science Friction," *Science Friction* (Toronto, 1992).