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Star Trek’s Temporal Cyborgs: Disability, Narrative, and Curative Time

Les cyborgs temporels de Star Trek : handicap, narration et temporalité curative

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Abstract

Cyborgs allow Star Trek to represent disability in the future without naming it. Speculative medical technology “cures” disabled bodies, yet the exaggerated visuality of the cyborg also emphasizes disability’s indelible presence. These cyborgs materialize the hegemony of curative time, the ableist compulsion to perceive disability as an untenable state of non-life and so demand its immediate cure at all costs. Cure in media often entails violent erasure in the form of character death, removal from the narrative, or obfuscation through cyborgism. However, cyborg characters as complex assemblages of technology and ideology have the capacity to signify multiply. The cyborg’s contentious nature discourages us from analyzing such characters within a binary framework of “good” or “bad” disability representations. This article instead proposes “curative narrative time” as a new critical analytic allowing disability media studies to examine the understudied temporal dimension of disability representation. In the case study of Star Trek, the concept of curative narrative time enables us to critique the franchise’s structural ableism without discrediting all the critical potential of its disabled cyborgs. Celebrating cyborgs like Geordi La Forge who refuse erasure of their disabilities, seeking out disability in cyborgs like Paul Stamets who are presumed able-bodied, and acknowledging the dis/ability ramifications of all characters becoming increasingly cyborg through embodied technologies allows us to assemble these fragments into a crip imagined future while interrogating the limits of the franchise’s contemporary paradigm of disability representation.

Les cyborgs offrent à *Star Trek* un moyen de représenter le handicap dans le futur sans jamais le nommer explicitement. Les technologies médicales spéculatives « guérissent » les corps handicapés, mais la visualité amplifiée du cyborg souligne en même temps la présence indélébile du handicap. Ces figures cyborgs matérialisent l’hégémonie d’une temporalité curative, c’est-à-dire une compulsion capacitiste qui consiste à percevoir le

handicap comme un état intenable de non-vie, et qui exige par conséquent une guérison immédiate, quel qu’en soit le cout. Dans les médias, la guérison s’accompagne souvent d’un effacement violent, que ce soit par la mort du personnage, son retrait du récit ou son occultation à travers le cyborgisme. Pourtant, les cyborgs, en tant qu’assemblages complexes de technologie et d’idéologie, possèdent une capacité de signification plurielle. Leur nature conflictuelle invite à dépasser une lecture binaire opposant bonnes et mauvaises représentations du handicap. Cet article propose plutôt la notion de « temporalité narrative curative » comme nouvel outil d’analyse permettant aux études médiatiques sur le handicap d’examiner la dimension temporelle, encore largement négligée, de la représentation du handicap. Dans l’étude de cas consacrée à *Star Trek*, la temporalité narrative curative permet de critiquer le capacitisme structurel de la franchise sans pour autant discréditer tout le potentiel critique de ses cyborgs handicapés. Célébrer des cyborgs comme Geordi La Forge, qui refusent l’effacement de leur handicap, repérer le handicap dans des cyborgs comme Paul Stamets, présumés sans handicap, et reconnaitre les implications de la frontière entre handicap et absence de handicap à mesure que tous les personnages deviennent progressivement cyborgs par l’intégration de technologies incorporées, permet d’assembler ces fragments en un futur *crip* imaginé tout en interrogeant les limites du paradigme contemporain de la représentation du handicap dans la franchise.

Keywords: Representation, Futurity, Technology, Utopia, Media Studies

Mots-clés

Représentation, futurité, technologie, utopie, études médiatiques

Introduction

In portraying disability, science fiction has historically favored erasure over engagement.[1] The absence of disability signifies the presence of advanced medical technology and (post)human improvement, factors which help define the sci-fi genre.[2] When disability does persist in these imagined futures, it is usually as synecdoche for dystopia, flattening disability from lived experience to signifier of negativity. These ableist fictions do ideological violence in the here and now, limiting our contemporary understandings of disability and reinforcing harmful ableist stereotypes.[3] The Star Trek franchise's imagined future has claimed since its inception to value "infinite diversity in infinite combinations,"[4] yet persistent failures throughout the various Trek series to live up to this ideal demonstrate commensurate contemporary failures to imagine marginalized identity outside of racist, sexist, homophobic, ableist frameworks. Particularly, Star Trek has limited its disability engagement almost exclusively to the containing figure of the cyborg. Cyborgs are a way to represent disability in the future without naming it, curing disability even as cyborgs emphasize and embody the continued presence of impairment and bodymind[5] difference.

Cyborgs in Star Trek are a temporal stop gap measure attempting to technologically suture a non-disabled past with an able future, effacing the messy disabled present in the process. This work is done through what I term "curative narrative time." This concept builds on Mitchell and Snyder's theory of narrative prosthesis, a disability media studies intervention that encourages scholars to move beyond merely evaluating depictions of disabled people as either so-called good or bad representation[6]. Narrative prosthesis

explains how disabled people can be present in a narrative only to further a plot, meaning that simply *representing* disability (even positively) does not equate to meaningful disability *engagement*, as the mere presence of impairment in no way guarantees political or social improvements for disabled people. Following this critical re-orientation, this article will develop Alison Kafer and Eunjung Kim’s “curative time”[7] to analyze the role of temporality in shaping disability narratives and explore what political work those ubiquitous cyborg representations actually do. Although Trek’s cyborgs are on their face technologies of violent normalization, the contentious nature of the cyborg forgoes such easy conclusions. Celebrating cyborgs like Geordi La Forge who refuse erasure of their disabilities, seeking out disability in cyborgs like Paul Stamets who are presumed able-bodied, and acknowledging the dis/ability ramifications of all characters becoming increasingly cyborg through embodied technologies allows us to assemble these fragments into a crip imagined future while interrogating the limits of the franchise’s contemporary paradigm of disability representation.

Cure and Representation

This article understands disability through Kafer’s political-relational model, where disability is not an inherent or discrete quality of bodies but instead stems from the interaction of bodies and (social, physical) environments, such as ableism and inaccessible architecture.[8] Disabled community is consequently not determined by degree of bodily similarity but by shared experiences of marginalization as well as choices to create coalition and culture. This model of disability allows us to perceive how cyborgs,

androids, and aliens with “super-powers” can and indeed should be understood intersectionally within an ideology of ability, since to fully critique ableism, we must articulate the ideological operations at play in depictions of super-ability as well as dis-ability.[9] These super-abilities are also often born of ableist curative practices, such as though the incorporation of cyborg technology into the disabled body. Kim argues that cure “often creates or reshapes disability” and moreover “does not eliminate the stigma” associated with disability.[10] Thus, characters like cyborgs in Star Trek who are apparently “cured” of their disability through technology are still disabled “owing to their history of disability, shared experiences and communities, and newly created differences [via cure].”[11] In examining these ideologies of cure and ability, we can usefully locate many characters in science fiction as disabled even when their experiences are not always explicitly named as such.

The term “cure,” as used here, indicates a violent compulsion to align bodies to normative standards; it is not mobilized to judge any disabled individual’s choices in regard to medicine or bodily change. Cure individualizes systemic inequity and displaces it onto marginalized bodies. The ideology of cure is not just ableist but racist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic, as it is rooted in violent ideals of the normal and natural.[12] Curative logics themselves index characters’ potential legibility as disabled. That is, the mechanism of curative erasure can alert audiences that disability is haunting the narrative even as cure hastens to close this gap. Temporal analysis allows us to make legible and interrogate such moments of disabled narrative rupture.

Disability activists point out that all ability is temporally limited because will we all become disabled if we live long enough[13]. Inequitable forces of racism, sexism, and classism can speed up disablement for multiply marginalized folks and slow the tide for those with protective privilege.[14] Curative time describes “a curative imaginary, an understanding of disability that not only expects and assumes intervention but also cannot imagine or comprehend anything other than intervention.”[15] Curative time is folded, insisting “on making the present disappear by replacing it with the normative past, simultaneously projecting onto it a specific kind of normative future.”[16] In curative time, the disabled present is deferred at all costs in favor of a cured future. This resonates with the queer critique of chrononormativity: “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity.”[17] The normative flow of time constrains imaginative possibilities and banishes non-normative people and practices out of time.

Curative time in Star Trek curtails the franchise’s potential to forgo the shallow stereotypes of narrative prosthesis and instead create meaningful disability representation. As Sami Schalk argues, “representation matters,”[18] yet as Kristen Warner clarifies, “representation” is not just a question of quantity but quality.[19] The good/bad representational dyad fails to grapple with the affective dimension of diversity onscreen, where the flat presence of mere visual representation allows the industry to avoid the real labor of developing culturally relevant and complex characters. Warner terms this “plastic representation…a combination of synthetic elements put together and shaped to look like meaningful imagery, but which can only approximate depth and substance because ultimately it is hollow and cannot survive close scrutiny.”[20] This concept allows us to

understand why characters that apparently provide diverse visuality may still fall short of meaningfully engaging with the specificity and depth of actual marginalized experience. Plastic representation’s metaphor of manufacture is exceptionally well-suited to studying the cyborg as a prosthetic figure of techno-marvel deployed to signify non-specific Otherness while obscuring its apolitical hollowness. The lens of temporality applied in this article allows us to not just locate instances of plastic representation but interrogate the ideological framework that encourages the plasticity of disability representation in Star Trek.

Cyborgism and/as Disability

Virtually all disabled Star Trek characters are cyborgs. In this universe, the normative impulse to “cure” injury and disability is usually answered by medical technology, resulting in various forms of cyborgism. Therefore, these disabled people are cyborgs because they have technology embedded intimately with/in their bodies, and these cyborgs are disabled because they are treated as non-normative and consequently face ableism. The traits “disabled” and “cyborg” are mutually constitutive of these characters, an inescapable constraint wherein disability is not permitted to exist outside the cyborg, but also where all cyborgs are consequently haunted by disability. Star Trek’s commitment to changing people into cyborgs instead of making ships, environs, and equipment more accommodating for people’s diverse embodiments demonstrates a harmful mindset that believes disabled bodies are the “problem” to address, not ableism and inaccessibility.

Shiny cyborg tech can directly dehumanize disabled characters through an unproblematized association of disabled people with unfeeling machinery. The cyborg’s ubiquity in fiction can also obscure the financial privilege required to access such expensive and cutting-edge technologies in our real world.[21] Further, cyborg ascendance denies disability justice in favor of a neoliberal insistence that access will become unnecessary if the body is re-made to fit norms. Thus, Star Trek’s cyborgs are not Donna Haraway’s iconic boundary-crossing paragons of coalitional politics.[22] They’re instead largely depicted as broken organic beings requiring technological “fixes” for physical problems. Their bodies illustrate the threat of boundary-crossing and contain it in the same motion, as these cyborgs are either assimilated into normative humanity through technological cure or define boundaries through their exclusion into the incurably non-human and monstrous.

Clear constraints—the possession of extra-human ability, only an attractively aestheticized technological nod to visual difference, and a character’s expressed desire to attain normative humanity—determine what kind of disabled characters are permitted onscreen. Productivity especially drives the implementation of these so-called cures. Only characters whose cyborg disabilities can be made valuable to the normative human purposes of Starfleet are allowed to remain in the franchise. For example, Discovery introduced the idea that Spock (one of the most famous Trek characters of all time) is dyslexic[23] only so his disability could be revealed as the key to understanding a mysterious cosmic puzzle. The issue here is not that disability is viewed as positive. In fact, it would be heartening to see what Bauman and Murray term “disability gain”[24] portrayed on television,

demonstrating how non-normative bodyminds are valuable just as they are. Rather, the problem arises in the temporal pattern of disability representation across more than fifty years of Trek: disability is not allowed to exist unless it provides this immediate, normatively comprehensible gain and is erased after outliving its narrative usefulness.

The few cyborg lead characters of Star Trek illustrate these limitations. Seven of Nine (a white woman Voyager character recovering from long-term trauma and non-consensual cyborgization) and Geordi La Forge (a Black male blind Next Generation character who uses special VISOR technology to perceive the world visually) both asymptotically approach organic normative able humanity and have convenient super-abilities, granting them access to regular-character status. Their non-disabled futures are imaginable, if technically not present. Characters whose disabilities don’t produce super-powers, whose visual difference cannot be contained to a fashionable techno-accessory, and/or who refuse to desire normativity are excluded from this questionable protection. They’re “incurable,” placed “in a condition of a ‘nonlife’—without a future and denied meaning in the present.”[25] To resolve this temporal paradox on a textual level, these disabled characters are killed (Strange New Worlds’ Hemmer), written off (Discovery’s Nhan), or narratively incarcerated within one-off episodes (Dr. Miranda Jones, Riva, Emory Erickson, and Aurellio to list just a handful across series).

Cyborg status frequently overshadows other aspects of characterization, as the plasticity of the cyborg is used to paper over difference rather than attend to critical intersections of race, class, and gender. For example, the franchise problematically

asserts a “post-race” utopia where race is no longer a salient social characteristic, doing so by situating normative whiteness as the status quo and forcing non-white racial difference to assimilate to this norm.[26] This reduces non-white characters’ significatory capacities. For instance, Geordi is largely overdetermined by his cyborg nature, his stories focusing on his non-normative technological embodiment at the expense of exploring other aspects of his intersectional identity as a specifically Black, male cyborg. A critical race and disability lens reveals how Geordi’s techno-cure harkens back to histories of slavery wherein black bodies were translated into technology for capitalist production,[27] yet Trek’s “colorblind”[28] policy refuses such a reading. Cyborg hegemony can work to obscure violent histories, such as when Geordi confronts a eugenic human splinter group populated by exclusively able-bodied but racially diverse individuals. This erases the centrality of racism to eugenic ideology while also quietly reinforcing the apparently commonsense nature of ableism, despite Geordi’s protest that disabled people “have something to contribute” [29] (reinforcing productivity as the framework for inclusion). Denying the raced and gendered particularity of disabled cyborg characters’ positionality allows whiteness, masculinity, and ability to remain the unmarked norm in Star Trek’s cyborg politics, even when non-white, non-male, disabled characters are present. Furthermore, the cyborg-as-Other allows Star Trek to cast almost exclusively able-bodied white male actors yet still tell stories of alterity. Diversity without diversity.

Curative Narrative Time

Star Trek may imagine the future but the franchise reflects the biases and contexts of the creators’ present(s). The original 60s show tried to pursue equitable racial politics, but women were still required to wear mini-skirts and not allowed to captain starships. The 2020s *Strange New Worlds* has many women on the bridge (in pants!) but has yet to introduce an unambiguously queer character. Futuristic technology is not matched by equally radical social imagination. Specifically, Trek values normative temporality[30]: characters enter monogamous straight relationships, raise children in nuclear families, and carry on 9-to-5 careers all according to strict schedules and norms of gender, race, and ability. The only regular disruption to this timetable is the more powerful chrononormative force of narrative convention. Main characters are rarely promoted, for example, because it would disrupt the established rhythms and cast of the show. Textual temporality is constrained by elements outside the narrative universe. Star Trek therefore enacts curative time on two intersecting temporal levels. “Narrative time” in this paper will refer to time as it operates within the fictional universe of Star Trek, including the futuristic setting and time as the characters themselves experience it. “Meta-narrative time” will refer to time as it functions outside of the show, such as the real-world time between *The Original Series (TOS)* airing in the late 60s and *Discovery* airing in the late 2010s, as well as structural time, such as the length of an episode or a season cut short by the COVID-19 pandemic shut-down.

Temporality reveals why Trek’s cyborgs do little to trouble normative ideologies: they are rarely presented as a genuine way of living but instead as a medical bridge to a real

or better life. Cyborgs framed as a stop-gap embodiment prevent meaningful engagement with disability as a lived identity rather than a temporary medical problem. Under the auspices of curative narrative time, technology sutures the lost, organic, allegedly non-disabled past into the imagined, presumed-cured future to avoid the untenable disabled present. Yet, cure transforms and creates disability in its attempts to erase it, making disability visible in every curative action and even creating new disabilities. For example, the interface of Geordi’s VISOR with his body creates chronic pain and his cyber-systems render him vulnerable to computerized brainwashing. The spectacularized vulnerability and fluctuation of the cyborg body obscures the fact that able bodies are also variable and vulnerable, shoring up through contrast the able-body as the impervious and eternal norm. Curative time is thus deployed *and* disrupted by cyborgs, who signify attempts to cure and erase disability while remaining indelibly disabled figures themselves.

The two televised versions of Captain Christopher Pike bookending the earliest and latest incarnations of Trek aptly demonstrate how curative narrative time deploys the cyborg to suture the able-normative past and future over the disabled present. The first Pike, introduced in *TOS* as the captain of the Enterprise preceding Kirk, was apparently able-bodied until becoming disabled in the process of saving young cadets from a dangerous radiation leak. In “The Menagerie,” Pike is the embodiment of tragic loss, depicted as an intensely scarred quadriplegic unable to communicate except through the “yes” or “no” of a single blinking light affixed to the front of his mentally-controlled assistive device. This machine is bizarrely limited and limiting, a threatening black plastic prison that cages his entire body save the head, only shown moving slowly and

imprecisely. This object is worth lingering over, its antiquated and dehumanizing technology at odds with humanity’s evident technological aptitude in Trek’s future. Such a lack of resources and imagination—as if sign language, braille, and even morse code were not common enough contemporary alternatives to spoken English that the showrunners could have based Pike’s assistive technology on—is utterly baffling. That is, until one accepts that the point of this episode is to illustrate the self-evident horrors of living a disabled life, not to actually imagine disabled life in the future. This Pike is ultimately placed on a special planet where he can live out his life inside an alien-crafted illusion of ability, “unfettered by his physical body.”[31] Thus, Pike’s able-bodied past was messily painted onto his disabled present, allowing an illusory non-disabled future that could be mentioned but not lived on-screen, as Pike never returns in *TOS*. His incurably disabled body is literally banished to a non-place, a non-time, a fleeting mirage of the past in place of a present apparently too terrible to contemplate.

In Pike’s most recent “present,” that is, the contemporary portrayal of Pike introduced in *Discovery* and now helming *Strange New Worlds*, he remains an able-bodied authority figure. However, this Pike is haunted by the meta-textual specter of his *Original Series* “past” in a textual nightmare-vision of his future disablement. Through the use of an alien time crystal, Pike glimpses fragments of his own future, shot largely in the style of a horror movie.[32] In the vision, an ominous, clunky wheelchair clearly based on *TOS’* oppressive design emerges out of focus from the shadows behind Pike. The figure in the machine is revealed as a mass of scar tissue, his expression twisted in agony, imprisoned

inside his claustrophobic, useless “assistive” device. The scene ends with both the real and imagined Pike screaming. This terror of a disabled future is Star Trek’s present.

However, Pike’s speech following this vision of horror offers an interesting if immediately deferred moment of crip futurity. Pike is forced to confront his disabled future but he chooses to let his “fate be sealed, forever”[33] in exchange for ownership of this potentially universe-saving time crystal. He declares that he is a “Starfleet captain…I’m not going to abandon the things that make me who I am because of a future that contains an ending that I hadn’t foreseen for myself.” This speech bears striking parallels to Kafer’s description of living in curative time: “we lost what we had in the past, we exist in a present consumed by nostalgia for that loss, and we face futures far unlike the ones we had previously imagined.”[34] These parallels signal how Pike *almost* pushes past his television show’s ableist narrative conventions, trying to accept what he saw—incurable disability—as an imaginable future. He seemingly refuses the framing of disability as dehumanizing horror and recognizes it instead as an unexpected but not unacceptable version of the same person he has always been: a Starfleet captain who believes in “service, sacrifice, compassion and love.”[35] However, whether he imagines his disability as a life or death is unclear. He calls this vision “a future,” indexing the potential for crip life, and in his next breath names this “an ending” that he hadn’t imagined as his own. Thus, despite a moment of imagining a disabled future, Pike remains trapped by the equation of disability with the end of—if not his life—then his career, a fate potentially worse than death. In this, we are returned to the most base and oppressive stereotypes of disability.

In all of Pike’s futures, disability is rejected. *TOS* Pike chooses an able-bodied fantasy life and *Discovery*’s Pike remains able-bodied and haunted by the threat of disability, though potentially open to other possibilities in the course of the ongoing show *Strange New Worlds*. Will that series continue to postpone his seemingly inevitable disablement? Will it conclude with it? Would it, could it, possibly embrace a disabled captain of the Enterprise? As the series takes place in a slice of time before *TOS* but within the same canon, Pike’s future has likely already been written, and his disabled life cast aside. Although we may hope for better, I suspect that Pike will only be allowed to lead his own TV show for as long as his disabled future can be deferred.

Curative Meta-Narrative Time

If disability cannot be technologically cured and therefore largely ignored in the long run, then curative meta-narrative time insists that it only be permitted to exist for the length of an episode, after which the character must die or be otherwise ejected from the narrative space. Any number of Trek episodes and characters illustrate this trend. Main characters like Tuvok, Worf, and Deanna experience single episodes of disability cured by technological and cosmic intervention before the end credits roll.[36] Recurring but minor disabled cyborg characters like Icheb and Hugh are brutally murdered, their violent ends cast as inevitable due to their unacceptably cyborg existence.[37] Guest characters like the disabled women Melora and Sarina who reject the narratives of medical cure and heteronormative romance forced upon them are shuttled away before the forty-minute mark, never to return.[38]

Geordi, the franchise’s best known disabled lead character, often has his disability treated as merely “cosmetic”[39] rather than as a meaningful part of his identity. He occasionally loses his VISOR and becomes “truly” blind, but never for more than an episode, which are merely ableist cure narratives in miniature. Other disabled cyborg recurring characters like *Discovery*’s bridge officers Detmer and Airiam are sidelined narratively and literally, occupying only the fringes of the screen’s composition. Airiam especially is not legible as disabled, merely a non-organic being providing flat visual diversity in background shots, occasionally offering expository information but not gaining any character development for herself. That is, until the episode that suddenly and dramatically reveals the backstory of her disablement. After the narrative consumes Airiam’s non-disabled past, her disabled present catches up to the only future she is allowed: to be killed and literally ejected out of the story via an airlock.[40] Disabled characters and storylines are disposable, only fit for an hour’s television.

This structural refusal to engage long-term with disability is part of an extensive history of deploying disability as a narrative prosthesis to the exclusion of depicting disability as a real and meaningful lived experience.[41] Star Trek illuminates one television-specific version of this temporal narrative prosthesis—curative meta-narrative time—in the form of the “special” episode. Disability is reduced to a plot device, fitting perfectly into the episodic TV framework Sconce describes: “a passing ‘extraordinary circumstance’ to motivate temporary and often quite dramatic character deviation” within the monotony of standardized repetition.[42] In this framework, disability cannot be long-term or mundane, even though in reality it is usually both. These episodic interruptions to the able-norm

"inject striking difference into usually staid repetition, all without long-term diegetic consequences."[43] This insistence on disability being only momentarily legible and without extended narrative effects precludes actual interrogation of the structural conditions of ableism. Framing disability as an episode-motivating and morally intriguing "extraordinary circumstance" reduces ableism to a simple issue that can be resolved in under fifty minutes, or worse, minimizes disability itself into a narrative obstacle to be overcome by the third act. Making disability "special" removes it from the realm of the ordinary and makes it structurally, temporally incompatible with regular narrative inclusion.

Stories that meaningfully engage disabled experience necessitate recognizing the ideology of ability. For Trek, telling a story addressing ableism would require acknowledging the franchise's continuing ableism, disrupting the illusion of the Federation as futuristic utopia. Trek can only maintain this illusion by ignoring ongoing ableism (and racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.) and concomitantly erasing the interpersonal and community bonds formed as a result of surviving these oppressions. In other words, Star Trek imagines that if identity-based discrimination no longer exists, then meaningful community based on shared identity need not exist. Or rather, *must* not exist, because the franchise ultimately predicates equality on homogeneity. Non-white, non-male, non-straight, and non-able cultures have been definitionally written out of this future, marginalized groups paying the price for maintaining the pretense of utopia. In this context, ableism can only be safely acknowledged if cloaked in science fiction metaphor—as guest character Melora is disabled by the disjuncture between her alien species' particular physiology and Federation-standard gravity—or if perpetuated by non-Federation people—

as Geordi faces discrimination from the excommunicated eugenicists. To do otherwise would be to recognize that this utopia is no such thing.

With everyday non-dramatic disabled life, anti-ableist storytelling, and disability community structurally disavowed, Star Trek cannot write disability outside of temporary injury, pain, and medicalized cure. Disability in the long term is unimaginable as anything other than institutionalization and consequent forgoing of duty and isolation from the primary storyline—things not worth more than a single B-plot’s worth of time. That means that we don’t get to actually see disabled lives or disabled living, obvious yet unmet requirements for imagining a disabled future. Since the majority of disabled characters are killed or written off and the remainder are pressed into normative service, we very literally do not have the opportunity to perceive disabled lives as ongoing. Those few characters with disabilities that remain have their disabilities shunted aside and hidden behind technology so that all the frustrating, pleasurable, complicated realities of disabled life are obscured with them.

Crip Futurity and Cyborg Politics

One rare glimpse of ongoing, ordinary disabled life in Trek appears in the early *Next Generation* episode “Code of Honor.” We see Geordi shaving in his quarters with his VISOR off, navigating his space comfortably without sight as he discusses the nature of humor with his good friend, the android Data. This is a fantastic, life-affirming, intimate fragment of crip futurity and friendship. It demonstrates a non-spectacularized or medicalized view of disabled life and gestures to crip cyborg politics as a physically disabled human helps

an emotionally disabled android navigate the complications of normative human sociality. It’s also a scene set within an utterly racist episode that violently Others an alien species played entirely by Black actors, epitomizing Star Trek’s one-dimensional understanding of identity and consequent failure to imagine intersectionally marginalized experience.

Geordi is the first non-white cyborg to be a regular in any Trek series, one of only a handful of non-white cyborgs to ever even have a speaking role. As a regular character whose disability is never cured, Geordi is uniquely positioned to resist curative narrative and meta-narrative time and defy some of Star Trek’s most common patterns of cyborg ableism. He’s not a discarded one-off guest star or a one-dimensional stereotype. He consistently identifies as disabled, refusing the illusion of techno-cure that obscures the disability experiences of characters like Seven, or the exceedingly brief temporality of Spock’s legibility as disabled in only a handful of *Discovery* episodes mentioning his dyslexia. Geordi’s disability is accommodated by his VISOR but his cyborg embodiment does not hew to a normative appearance, as evidenced by other characters’ presumptive comments that he must want to get rid of his prosthetic to look “more normal.”[44] Geordi remains the definitive disabled Star Trek character.

Although there are undoubtedly problems of tokenization with Geordi, his long and full life—spanning more than thirty onscreen years from *TNG* to the final season of *Picard*—transcends these boundaries. Geordi thrives on the Enterprise with a successful career and close friendships, as well as a rich characterization of generosity, ingenuity, empathy, curiosity, and humor. Geordi acts as insistent proof that disability can, will, and

must exist in Star Trek’s future. This illustrates the power of long-term disability storytelling to achieve greater-than-plastic representation. In contrast, a brief narrative like “Melora” only touches on disability politics to set them aside, keeping disability from affecting the larger discourse of the Trek universe through containment to the special episode. Geordi refuses to be isolated to a single disability-focused episode or a lonely cyborg existence, sharing friendship and allyship with other marginalized beings such as Data and the ex-Borg drone Hugh. In this, Geordi’s warmth and friendship across alterity produces cyborg politics that push the cyborg concept beyond crossed boundaries of skin/tech to create coalition among marginalized non-organic and non-human lifeforms.

What of disability in Star Trek beyond LeVar Burton’s powerful portrayal of Geordi? Where else can we find crip futurity in this supposedly diverse universe? Instead of seeking disability where it is explicitly named, producing a dataset almost exclusively of medicalized cure narratives, this final section traces cyborg linkages beyond chrononormative bursts of dramatic injury to bind together hidden fragments of crip futurity. Specifically, I invert the disability/cyborg relationship of Trek: rather than rendering all disabled people cyborgs, let us take as our starting point that all cyborgs are disabled. This reorientation disrupts the cyborg’s paradoxical boundary-enforcement and induces messier, more radical understandings of ability and disability, the human and the non-human.

The cyborg is associated more strongly with disabled bodies than able ones.[45] For example, wearing glasses and taking medication are common in our time, and Trek

characters like Picard have artificial internal organs, yet such people and characters are not conventionally understood as disabled or cyborg in real or fictional contexts. Conscripting the cyborg to "an anti-ableist politics means refusing its reduction to the disabled body,"[46] so we must analyze how unmarked able bodies are still positioned within a system of dis/ability valuation. Particularly, examining how apparently able bodies intersect with cyborg technologies can expose assumptions of what "normal" bodies are supposed to look like and be able to do. For example, in *Discovery*'s imagined future, all Starfleet personnel are equipped with small badges worn on their clothes that allow them to communicate, check data, control systems, and transport from place to place independently. Could these be considered assistive devices? Do they render everyone a little more cyborg, and therefore, a little more disabled? Or do they simply raise the bar for what an "able" body is supposed to be capable of doing?

Paul Stamets, a white gay engineer and regular on *Discovery*, doesn't initially read as (physically) disabled.[47] However, he becomes a cyborg in *Discovery*'s first season when he modifies his DNA and adds techno-shunts to his forearms in order to interface with his ship's unique extra-dimensional propulsion system known as the spore drive.[48] His cyborg relationship to Discovery's spore drive physically, mentally, and emotionally ties him into technological and interdimensional planes of existence not available to others. Multiple kinds of disabled experience intersect here. The hegemonic interpretation is that Stamets was both disabled and made cyborg by medically incorporating technology into his body in order to operate the propulsion system, as he describes the shunts as a painful assistive technology that impairs him physically and socially. This reading tracks with an ableist

temporal cure narrative since Stamets later removes those shunts with relief, saying he “hated those things,”[49] and appears once again physically normal.

From a crip perspective, Stamets is disabled and cyborg because he’s experiencing the world in a way that’s somatically non-normative. Although it is confusing and painful at first to interface with the drive, he gains valuable insight through perceiving the world from this different, interdimensional perspective. This is disability gain, rejecting loss narratives and instead valuing unique knowledge born of disabled experience, and “crip technoscience,” ingeniously reconfiguring the inaccessible physical world.[50] Emphasizing both the barriers and the benefits of this non-normative embodiment illuminates the crip potential of cyborgs. Stamets chooses to remove the shunts in his arms but continues to work with the drive via a less painfully invasive assistive device—modifying the environment to be more accessible, rather than forcing his body to adapt to normative expectations. Later on in the series, all of the bridge crew gain access to “programmable matter” that allows them to adapt their station’s physical layout to their particular needs and desires. The cyborg frame reveals an obscured disability connection between these technologies: Star Trek is helping us imagine a world of disability justice where society privileges changing environments to be accessible for diverse bodies rather than insisting everyone conform to the same interfaces and environs.

Tracing disability through technologies rather than impaired bodies usefully illuminates the ideology of ability where it is occluded in our imagined futures. The cyborg is not “innocent,”[51] as for instance, Stamets’ spore drive was directly born of military

purposes. Yet, the drive also allowed for beautiful, spiritually meaningful connections to other realms of life. This reflects the conflicted histories and priorities of our real world, as disabled people struggle to navigate the violence of the medical-industrial complex while professional medicine is often a prerequisite to survival. For Stamets, his unique dis/ability involves the demand to constantly be “able” to pilot the ship using the dangerous spore drive, thus changing the context of what defines “ability” (able to interface successfully with the technology) and what defines “disability” (too exhausted or sick to stand the strain of piloting) for him personally. From this perspective, Stamets becomes legible as a fascinating queer-disabled cyborg with much to tell us about the crip valuation of different bodies, sensory experiences of the universe, and contentious relationships to technology—if we take the time to recognize him as such.

Science fiction can shape real futures. The ubiquity of cyborgs in franchises like Star Trek discourages attending to environmental disability accommodation and social change, instead concentrating our imaginative resources around the pursuit of individual medico-technological intervention. Therefore, in order to imagine more just futures, we must first critique the ableist narratives which permeate our media landscape. To that end, this article has developed the concept of curative narrative time to address how the cyborg figure folds disabled characters into temporally contained stories, using technology to obscure the long-term politics of their disabled lives. Practices like the lone “special” disability-centric episode reveal curative time as the controlling trope of disability in Star Trek. The franchise illustrates how this temporal ableism operates at structural levels of narrative and metatext to restrict disabled potential. However, audiences can still apply

critical reading practices to negotiate valuable crip insight from these ableist texts. If Star Trek wishes to live up to its reputation for progressive storytelling, it must examine its temporal constraints and strive to imagine disability beyond sickbay and singular episodes.

Endnotes

[1] Kathryn Allan, “Introduction: Reading Disability in Science Fiction,” in *Disability in Science Fiction*, ed. Kathryn Allan (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2.
[2] Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Indiana University Press, 2013), 3.
[3] Sami Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined* (Duke University Press, 2018), 3
[4] *Star Trek: The Original Series*, season 3, episode 5, “Is There in Truth No Beauty?”, directed by Ralph Senensky, written by Gene Roddenberry, Jean Lisette Aroeste, and Arthur H. Singer, aired October 18, 1968, NBC.
[5] Margaret Price names the “bodymind” to index how the “body” and “mind” are materially and experientially inseparable. Margaret Price, “The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain,” *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 268–84.
[6] David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, “Narrative Prosthesis,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 5th ed., edited by Lennard Davis (Routledge, 2016), 222–35.
[7] Kafer theorized the idea of curative time and Kim developed it further. Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Eunjung Kim, *Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea* (Duke University Press, 2017).
[8] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip,* 4.
[9] Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined*, 18.
[10] Kim, *Curative Violence,* 11.
[11] Kim, *Curative Violence,* 11.
[12] Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Duke University Press, 2017), xvi.
[13] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (Columbia University Press, 1997), 14.
[14] Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*, (Duke University Press, 2017), xvi.
[15] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip,* 27.
[16] Kim, *Curative Violence*, 4.
[17] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds* (Duke University Press, 2010), 3.
[18] Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined*, 2.
[19] Kristen Warner, “Plastic Representation,” *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2017).
[20] Warner, “Plastic Representation.”
[21] Donna Reeve, “Cyborgs, cripples and iCrip: Reflections on the contribution of Haraway to disability studies,” in *Disability and Social Theory: New Developments and Directions,* edited by. Dan Goodley, Bill Hughes, and Lennard J. Davis (Palgrave Macmillain, 2012), 96.
[22] Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s,” in *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*, edited by. Kath Woodward, Gill Kirkup, Fiona Hovenden, and Linda Janes, (Routledge: 2000).
[23] *Star Trek: Discovery*, season 2, episode 11, “Perpetual Infinity,” directed by Maja Vrvilo, written by Alan McElroy and Brandon Schultz, aired March 28, 2019, Paramount Plus.
[24] H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray, “Deaf Gain: An Introduction,” In *Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity,* ed. Joseph J. Murray and H-Dirksen L. Bauman, (University of Minnesota Press: 2014), xxiii.
[25] Kim, *Curative Violence*, 7
[26] Allen Kwan, “Seeking New Civilizations: Race Normativity in the *Star Trek* Franchise,” *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 27, no. 1 (February 2007), 59.

[27] Isiah Lavender, “Ethnoscapes: Environment and Language in Ishmael Reed's Mumbo Jumbo, Colson Whitehead's The Intuitionist, and Samuel R. Delany's Babel-17,” *Science Fiction Studies* 34, no. 2 (2007), 187.
[28] Warner, “Plastic Representation.”
[29] *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, season 5, episode 13, “The Masterpiece Society,” directed by Winrich Kolbe, written by James Kahn and Adam Belanoff, aired February 8, 1992, syndication.
[30] Jack Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place*, (University Press: 2005).
[31] *Star Trek: The Original Series*, season 1, episodes 11 and 12, “The Menagerie,” directed by Marc Daniels and Robert Butler, written by Gene Roddenberry, aired November 17 and 24, 1966, NBC.
[32] *Star Trek: Discovery*, season 2, episode 12, “Through the Valley of Shadows,” directed by Douglas Aarniokoski, written by Bo Yeon Kim and Erika Lippoldt, aired April 4, 2019, Paramount Plus.
[33] “Through the Valley of Shadows.”
[34] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip,* 44.
[35] “Through the Valley of Shadows.”
[36] See these episodes, respectively: *Star Trek: Voyager*, season 4, episode 9, “Year of Hell, Part II,” directed by Michael Vejar, written by Brannon Braga and Joe Menosky, aired Nov 12, 1997, UPN. *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, season 5, episode 16, “Ethics,” directed by Chip Chalmers, written by Ronald D. Moore, aired March 2, 1992, syndication. *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, season 4, episode 10, “The Loss,” directed by Chip Chalmers, written by Hilary Bader, Vanessa Greene, Alan J. Adler, aired December 31, 1990, syndication.
[37] See these episodes, respectively: *Star Trek: Picard*, season 1, episode 5, “Stardust City Rag,” directed by Jonathan Frakes, written by Kirsten Beyer, aired February 20, 2020, Paramount Plus. *Star Trek: Picard*, season 1, episode 7, “Nepenthe,” directed by Douglas Aarniokoski, written by Sam Humphrey and Michael Chabon, aired March 5, 2020, Paramount Plus.
[38] See these episodes, respectively: *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, season 2, episode 6, “Melora,” directed by Winrich Kolbe, written by Evan Somers, Steven Baum, Michael Piller, and James Crocker, aired October 31, 1993, syndication. *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, season 7, episode 5, “Chrysalis,” directed by John Wastaferro, written by Jay Chattaway, aired October 26, 1998, syndication.
[39] Hanley E. Kanar, “No Ramps in Space: The Inability to Envision Accessibility in Star Trek: Deep Space Nine,” in *Fantasy Girls: Gender in the New Universe of Science Fiction and Fantasy Television*, ed. Elyce Rae Helford, (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.: 2000), 250.
[40] *Star Trek: Discovery*, season 2, episode 9, “Project Daedalus,” directed by Jonathan Frakes, written by Michelle Paradise, aired March 14, 2019, Paramount Plus.
[41] Mitchell and Snyder, “Narrative Prosthesis,” 205.
[42] Jeffrey Sconce, “What If?: Charting Television’s New Textual Boundaries,” in *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, ed. Jan Olsson and Lynn Spigel, (Duke UP: 2004), 102.
[43] Sconce, “What If?”
[44] *Star Trek Generations*, directed by David Carson, Paramount Pictures, 1994.
[45] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 120.
[46] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 126
[47] Some audiences read Stamets as strongly coded as Autistic, but as with other Trek characters commonly read as neurodiverse, there is no canonical confirmation of this disability identity.
[48] *Star Trek: Discovery*, season 1, episode 8, “Si Vis Pacem, Para Bellum,” directed by Jean Scott, written by Kirsten Beyer, aired November 5, 2017, Paramount Plus.
[49] *Star Trek: Discovery*, season 3, episode 6, “Scavengers,” directed by Douglas Aarniokoski, written by Anne Cofell Saunders, aired November 19, 2020, Paramount Plus.
[50] Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch, “Crip Technoscience Manifesto,” *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 5, no. 1 (2019), 3.
[51] Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs.”

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