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Expendable Appendages: Exploring Medicine as a Final Frontier in *Star Trek*: *Lower Decks*

Membres sacrifiables : explorer la médecine comme ultime frontière dans *Star Trek : Lower Decks*

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Abstract

Disability representation in science fiction often shows the limits of human imagination by either not imagining disability in the future at all or accommodating it in liberating ways. In *Star Trek*, medicine, and by extension, disability, as a "Final Frontier" is often depicted in a serious light, and while this has led to numerous thought-provoking explorations into the future of disability through live-action portrayals, *Lower Decks* has injected a needed element to these narratives: levity. While comedy seems out of place in relation to disability in many people's minds, disability activists have sought to strip their identity of its taboo status and association with brokenness and vulnerability, meaning humor is a reasonable avenue for dismantling such negativity. *Lower Decks* poses the question: How might people's ideas about bodily integrity change with advanced medicine and unquestioned accommodations? As evidenced by the series' storytelling, anxieties about the body that exist due to ableism and unequal access to medicine disappear and people are bolder about not just risking life but risking limb as well. Utilizing a disability studies framework that builds on previously established disability models and theorizing about the future of disability culture in a utopian Starfleet society, this essay asserts that *Lower Decks* offers a glimpse of how humanity's relationship with the body transforms when disability no longer generates grief and fear but is instead treated as a part of human diversity.

La représentation du handicap dans la science-fiction met souvent en évidence les limites de l’imagination humaine. Le futur y est soit envisagé comme dépourvu de handicap, soit présenté comme un espace où celui-ci est intégré de manière émancipatrice. Dans *Star Trek*, la médecine, et par extension le handicap, considéré comme une « ultime frontière », sont souvent abordés avec sérieux. Cette approche a permis de nombreuses explorations stimulantes de l’avenir du handicap à travers des œuvres en prises de vue réelles, mais *Lower Decks* introduit dans ces récits une dimension essentielle, celle de la légèreté. Même si la comédie peut sembler incongrue dans l’esprit de bien des gens lorsqu’il est question du handicap, les militantes et militants pour les droits des personnes handicapées cherchent depuis longtemps à libérer leur identité de son statut tabou et de son association à la défaillance et à la vulnérabilité. L’humour devient alors une manière pertinente de déconstruire ces perceptions négatives. *Lower Decks* invite ainsi à réfléchir à l’évolution possible des conceptions de l’intégrité corporelle dans un contexte où la médecine est extrêmement avancée et où les accommodements ne sont jamais remis en question. La narration de la série montre que les angoisses corporelles, nourries par le capacitisme et par l’accès inégal à la médecine, s’estompent progressivement. Les individus deviennent plus audacieux et se montrent prêts non seulement à risquer leur vie, mais aussi leurs membres. En mobilisant un cadre théorique en études du handicap fondé sur des modèles établis et sur des réflexions portant sur l’avenir de la culture du handicap dans une société utopique de la Flotte stellaire, cet essai soutient que *Lower Decks* offre un aperçu de la manière dont la relation entre l’humanité et le corps se transforme lorsque le handicap cesse d’être associé à la peine ou à la peur et est plutôt traité comme une composante de la diversité humaine.

Keywords: crip futurism, animation, embodiment

Mots-clés : Futurisme *crip*, animation, corporéité

Introduction

Star Trek: Lower Decks represents a new relationship to disability within the franchise, one that explores the full extent of how humanity's relationship to its own embodiment shifts when fully accounting for the possibilities of advanced and freely available medical care in a post-scarcity society. In the *LD* episode "Much Ado About Boimler," the show critiques Starfleet's often-overlooked treatment of its severely wounded and medically anomalous lower ranking officers and personnel by placing Ensign Boimler in a bizarre medical limbo, where his faith in the system is shaken by perceived neglect and isolation. The episode begins like many in the *Trek* franchise, with Starfleet officers performing routine duties. Boimler, eager to impress his superiors and earn a promotion, volunteers to help his friend Ensign Rutherford with an engineering task meant to improve transporter efficiency. A malfunction leaves Boimler slightly "out of phase" with reality, emitting a loud buzzing noise. Despite efforts to reverse the effects, all the *Cerritos* crew can do is "turn down" the buzzing. As a result, Boimler is transferred to Division 14, a secretive branch of Starfleet Medical that handles bizarre and seemingly unsolvable medical anomalies. He is taken aboard a dark, foreboding ship intended to take him to "The Farm:" a medical spa on Endicronimus V. Once aboard, Boimler meets other officers who have encountered similarly strange anomalies—some of whom claim to have been on the ship for months. Their stories, particularly from one ensign who has been bifurcated by age (one side very young, the other side very old), lead Boimler to fear that Starfleet has abandoned them entirely, and that "The Farm" is a myth meant to placate forgotten crew members.

In the end, despite some challenges, Boimler and the other officers find the care they were promised at a top-of-the-line medical facility. "The Farm" shows off an interesting array of disability representations from across the franchise, including patients wreathed with leis sitting in Pike's infamous hoverchair and one of Janeway and Paris's lizard babies. Institutions like "The Farm" no longer carry the burden of painful history where patients were abused and exploited in *Star Trek*'s post-scarcity society. With advanced, free medicine, medical institutions can finally serve their true purpose of healing people with treatments that preserve patients' dignity. Boimler's fear certainly should feel familiar to us, as it is a twentieth/twenty-first century mindset. When put into the greater context of Boimler's twenty-fourth century post-scarcity lifestyle, however, we find his fears unfounded. With a resolution that flips the script on expectations about disability, this episode of *LD* reorients its twenty-first century audience's relationship to disability away from traditional narratives and toward an acceptance of disability culture.

Disability Models in Science Fiction

Science fiction often has major shortcomings concerning disability futures. Ironically, in a genre that bursts with new technological ideas–ones that inspire people to build that technology in real life–science fiction writers tend to lack imagination when it comes to creating a future that does not involve eliminating disability entirely. As Alison Kafer reflects on disability futures, "The only culturally acceptable—culturally recognizable—future in this context is a curative one, one that positions a medicalized cure as just around the corner, as arriving any minute now."[1] It is just this technological fascination that often leads to the erasure of disability as an identity in science

fiction narratives. Rather than focusing on how future social norms have changed to accept disability, science fiction "narratives involving people with disabilities inevitably also feature technology as either curing or attempting to contain their unruly bodies."[2] Science fiction generally reflects the culture of the time in which it was produced; for much of the genre's history, this meant that the disabled body was either monstrous or "a figure of prosthetic awe and medicalized prowess."[3] *LD* presents a new perspective by weaving the disabled experience into the fabric of futuristic society, not as monstrous, but as mundane. By studying disability narratives in *LD* compared to the rest of the *Trek* canon, we find a difference in how the future appears when the social goal is to dismantle the stigmatization of disability rather than eliminate disability itself. The ethos of *LD* exemplifies a future in which unquestioned accommodations are freely given, able-bodiedness is optional rather than compulsory, and the body is malleable.

In its utopian fiction, *Trek* grapples with questions about disability that are difficult to parse out in the limited context of the twenty-first century and its inheritance of ableism. As Kafer explains, "How one understands disability in the present determines how one imagines disability in the future; one's assumptions about the experience of disability create one's conception of a better future."[4] Because the medical model wherein disabled people are expected to desire normalization is so pervasive, nondisabled people imagine a better future to be one without disability. Even though *Trek* before *LD* did imagine a future with disability, and often produced well-rounded disabled characters, the franchise still contains vestiges of the medical model by including cure narratives. *LD* is the first iteration of the franchise to reimagine the human relationship to disability by accounting for how our relationships to our bodies may shift when all of our needs are met. The series asks us what is beyond not just the medical model, but the social model as well. How will the human relationship to the body and disability change when Susan Wendell's ambitious scenario of a "fully accessible society" wherein disability as a social

construct has been eliminated comes to fruition.[5] After all, *Trek*'s timeline comes after two major events related to disability history: the Eugenics War and a move toward universal access to medicine (at least within the Federation). By the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth centuries when *Trek* takes place, the Eugenics War is over and widely acknowledged as a stain on human history. Furthermore, medicine is so advanced that limbs can be easily replaced and vaccines can be generated in a single-episode arc. *LD* examines how humanity's entire orientation toward disability will undoubtedly shift in an advanced civilization when the fight for rights is presumably over. If anything, *Trek* shows us a society where structural barriers have been removed, and *LD* in particular plays with the possibilities of how social attitudes change as well.

The twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth centuries represented in *Trek* illustrate what could come to pass with a widespread understanding of the political/relational model of disability put forward by Kafer. Within this model, "disability no longer resides in the minds or bodies of individuals but in built environments and social patterns that exclude or stigmatize particular kinds of bodies, minds, and ways of being. . . . The problem of disability is solved not through medical intervention or surgical normalization but through social change and political transformation." Though the franchise has produced some controversial representations of disability throughout the years, *Trek* generally has a reputation for treating disability topics with seriousness and respect in a manner that aligns with the first part of Kafer's definition. However, the franchise has not consistently curbed its impulse toward normalization until *LD*, as outlined below. Geordi LaForge shows the tension between normalization and acceptance as he is tempted toward cure in multiple episodes and exhibits disability pride in others.

Geordi, who serves as the Chief Engineer of the U.S.S. Enterprise on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, is portrayed as a character whose identity is both defined by and transcends his

disability. Born blind, Geordi wears the iconic VISOR (Visual Instrument and Sensory Organ Replacement), which allows him to see the world in a way that is drastically different from most people. While his blindness is a major part of his character and not intended as the focal point of his overall arc, Geordi's portrayal often reflects challenges the franchise faces when it comes to depicting disability. On one hand, his reliance on the VISOR is often portrayed in a way that empowers him, as seen in the *Next Gen* episode “The Enemy,” where the VISOR allows Geordi to detect energy signatures, giving him a significant advantage in situations where sighted characters struggle. On the other hand, the technology of the VISOR sometimes carries a sense of otherness, where Geordi is depicted as somewhat removed from typical human experiences, raising questions about how disability and technology intersect in terms of identity. For example, in the *Next Gen* episode “The Mind’s Eye*,”* Geordi’s disability by way of his VISOR is used against him in a truly unique way: Romulans hack into his literal vision. This kind of attack could not happen to other crew members and is another way that the VISOR isolates Geordi’s experience.

While the VISOR gives Geordi enhanced abilities, it also represents the idea that disability needs to be corrected according to the medical model. Although it allows Geordi to function in a world not necessarily built for blind people, the device is still portrayed as an object that "fixes" his blindness, meaning the option of embracing blindness as a valid form of human experience for the character remains unexplored. Moreover, *Next Gen* emphasizes the push of normalization by putting Geordi in situations where he must excuse even his use of the VISOR. This push is an example of compulsory able-bodiedness wherein a culture “assumes in advance that we all agree: able-bodied identities, able-bodied perspectives are preferable and what we all, collectively, are aiming for. A system of compulsory able-bodiedness repeatedly demands that people with disabilities embody for others an affirmative answer to the unspoken question, Yes, but in the end, wouldn’t you rather be more like me?”[6] It is understandable for Romulans and eugenically-minded

colonists to have a culture that makes able-bodiedness compulsory but having other Starfleet officers assume that Geordi would want a cure seems at odds with a culture that otherwise practices disability acceptance. Overall, Geordi exemplifies how *Trek* approached disability before *LD*: a blend of thoughtful representation and occasional problematic tropes. His character is a testament to the show's commitment to addressing disability with respect, while also revealing the complexities and limitations that come with translating such experiences into science fiction narratives.

Accommodations, Accessibility, and Acceptance: (Un)remarkable Disability in *Trek*

LD refines the franchise’s stance regarding disability through its background worldbuilding, exemplifying how disability is integrated into everyday life. Scanning the background for remarkable extras is an entertaining way to gain insight about Starfleet culture. Viewers alert to the background of *Next Gen* are rewarded with male Starfleet officers garbed in the elusive skant (later explicitly mentioned in *LD*). The skant as a “skirt design for men,” according to Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens, “was a logical development, given the total equality of the sexes presumed to exist in the 24th century.”[7] Background worldbuilding in *LD* demonstrates the equality of disabled people in the twenty-fourth century by representing them in a variety of scenarios.

The inclusion of severely disabled people using the same clunky hoverchair as Captain Pike is a noteworthy example of this background worldbuilding. The hoverchair Pike uses in parts one and two of “The Menagerie” in *The Original Series* is a prime example of a lack of imagination regarding disability futures. Though a hoverchair is not limited by architecture like a regular wheelchair, imagining communication through beeps rather than, say, a robotic voice, is an oddly reductive choice. *LD* may not revise the hoverchair narrative to integrate twenty-first century

advancements in communication technology, but the series does show the range of mobility available to severely disabled people through these devices outside of what the audience experiences with Pike’s story. In addition to the “Much Ado about Boimler” episode described above, a hoverchair user appears during a chase scene on DS-9 in the episode “Hear All, Trust Nothing.” The presence of a hoverchair user on a space station, moving with apparent independence, is more radical than one may assume because of the history of how nonspeaking disabled people are treated. If disabled people’s autonomy is generally disregarded due to ableism, then nonspeaking disabled people are at an even higher risk of being stripped of their independence because of their inability to communicate in a normative fashion to advocate for themselves. Adding more hoverchair users to the *Trek* canon, even through a brief glimpse in the background, mitigates some of the negativity inherent in Pike’s representation as a disabled character. As Christine Selinger asserts in her analysis of Pike’s character, “The portrayal of disability in Pike’s narrative is that disabled people are objects for amusement or pity, who hold no agency in their own lives and are incapable of making decisions.”[8] Without sophisticated communication technology, nonspeaking disabled people are beholden to their caregivers who may not have their best interest in mind. The result of this is often institutionalization. The festive atmosphere of The Farm allays concerns that this futuristic facility follows the history of traditional institutions, but “Much Ado about Boimler” still places hoverchair users in a seemingly dependent position. An independent hoverchair user on DS-9 maintains the idea that even those on The Farm are “individuals and citizens rather than as dependents, clients and patients.”[9] Furthermore, this inclusion reframes how Pike may have lived between his disablement and narrative resolution.

In this way, *LD* brings another important aspect of the political/relational model into sharp focus. That is, the overall thrust of disability representation in *LD* coincides with Kafer’s perspective on medical intervention. One of the reasons the disability community has generated its own

models of disability, like the original social model or Kafer's response with the political/relational model, is to counteract the entrenched medical model that limits disability to a personal, individual problem to be solved through medical intervention and normalization. However, as Kafer's work attests, it is inadvisable for the disabled community to distance itself too much from the medical model when access to medical care is necessary to uphold one's quality of life. Rather than rejecting or endorsing medical intervention, Kafer's political/relational model acknowledges "that medical representations, diagnoses, and treatments of bodily variation are imbued with ideological biases about what constitutes normalcy and deviance. In so doing, it recognizes the possibility of simultaneously desiring to be cured of chronic pain and to be identified and allied with disabled people."[10] Based on the examples of disabled people's autonomy over their own medical choices presented in this essay, *LD* both distances itself from "ideological biases" that center nondisabled perspectives and affirms characters that seek to identify as disabled.

Establishing acceptance as the norm, humanity can then move on to an exploration of disability culture as produced through a respect for disabled people's autonomy. Romel W. Mackelprang, et al. gestures toward another model consistent with disability culture by including disability within the realm of human diversity. Within the diversity model of disability, Mackelprang, et al. "contend that (a) people live with impairments and (b) disability arises in inaccessible or discriminatory social and societal contexts. [The authors] add a third dimension to d/Disability that includes history, positive d/Disability identity, and Disability culture. . . . [They] celebrate d/Disability as an important piece of the great mosaic of diversity that makes up our society."[11] Applying this to *Trek*, the franchise has established the first two dimensions of the diversity model by acknowledging the interrelation of impairment and social inequality in its disability narratives, while *LD* has built on this framework to include the third dimension. To extend this application further, the admiration that the ensign protagonists show toward the characters that came before

them indicate that *Trek* before *LD* establishes the history–including disability history–that the series draws from to bolster disability culture. Susan J. Peters provides a definition of disability culture that aligns with Starfleet values aboard the *Cerritos*, including characteristics like "acceptance of difference, tolerance for ambiguity, and 'dark' humor."[12] *Trek* has demonstrated the first two qualities of disability culture in previous series but has only tapped into dark humor regarding disability recently in *LD*. Humor about severe bodily injury may seem shocking, but this lighthearted approach to physical disabilities[13] brings something new to the *Trek* franchise that other series do not. Humor is a crucial addition to balance out the overabundance of tragedy and pity found in most disability narratives. Furthermore, the series undercuts what is essentially body horror through humor in many of the disability narratives discussed later in this essay. This of course begs a question: what exactly does it mean to be disabled in such a technologically advanced society?

Optional Able-Bodiedness and the Freedom of Choice

In addition to contemporary disability models, scholars have begun to theorize about disability futurism, a future wherein disability is not "solved" by technology. As Ashley Shew attests, disabled people are generally left outside of the conversation about the future of technology, especially assistive technology. In disability futurism, technological accommodations are the purview of not just scientists and doctors, but also the disabled users that are meant to interface with the technology.[14] This form of disability futurism is demonstrated in *LD* by the variety of assistive devices spread ubiquitously in the background, creating an atmosphere supportive of disability culture. To illustrate, we return to Geordi as a historical example. Though Geordi is never cured of his blindness, he does receive a higher-tech (that is, less obtrusive) prosthetic to replace his VISOR. We presume that no disabled person could seriously fault *Next Gen* for this choice because

the upgrade had real-life implications for the actor, LeVar Burton. Burton experienced headaches when filming because of the pressure that kept the VISOR attached. In a way, the actor was disabling himself to, as Rick Berman told Burton, “[establish] in the minds of the audience the technology of the twenty-fourth century.”[15] Only one other character in live-action *Trek* uses a VISOR: a transporter operator in *Discovery*. However, the *Cerritos* alone has two officers with VISORs, plus a teddy bear Boimler gives his girlfriend in “Cupid’s Errant Arrow.” Rare disability representation in *Trek* as a whole becomes pervasive–even casual–in *LD*. It is even possible that the background characters with VISORs chose this technology out of admiration for their Starfleet role model, Geordi La Forge.

Regardless, the fact that some Starfleet officers still use VISORs when ocular implants exist show that the most sophisticated technology may not appeal to every disabled person. This is in keeping with Shew’s argument about technoableism. Shew criticizes twenty-first century imaginings of future technology because discussions of disability in this context do not involve actual disabled people in the conversation. According to Shew, disability futures regarding technology are consequently fraught because “nondisabled people believe–and expect us to believe–that technology will ‘solve’ the problem of our disability and save us, or those like us, in the future. Yet these expectations often don’t match our circumstances. They confine us.”[16] Under the impulse of normalization in a post-scarcity society that does not include disabled people’s voices, bulky VISORs would likely be phased out in favor of ocular implants as a less noticeable prosthetic. The presence of supposedly outdated tech in a society that freely provides accommodations is indicative of autonomy, of agency that is demonstrated through disabled people’s choices of their own prosthetic technology outside of normative expectations of advancement. Geordi’s story arc included new implants for good reason, so the officers in the background of *LD* are a neat way to preserve the character’s original intent of refusing a cure. When disabled people are offered

unquestioned accommodations, they can choose their own path based on what they want rather than what they may have to tolerate out of necessity.

The animated series is in a unique position to make disability culture commonplace because it can sidestep the limitations that often appear in live action. Representing futuristic accommodations without harming the actor is one affordance in animation. Another affordance is limiting the economic impact of disability representation, such as the material required to make prosthetics, fabricate mobility devices, or simulate scarring. Animating disability versus physical perfection does not cost extra; *Trek* may have post-scarcity societies, but twenty-first century Earth does not and are constrained as a result. Through animation, *LD* can imagine disability futures in a way that aligns with Shew's argument. Shew explains as follows:

> *The future is disabled, cosmically.* Even with hopeful futures like space travel and adventure, we can expect the production of disability. Space is already disabling for humans. Just as the built environment on Earth is not suited for disabled bodies, space as an environment is not suited to *any* human bodies. . . . [This reality is] absent from futurist writing about technology, which is framed as simply magicking away the disabling effects of space travel.[17]

Though some technology in *Trek* does "magic away" the hard realities of space travel, such as bodily stress from pressure/atmospheric changes with artificial gravity,[18] the franchise as a whole does not eliminate disability writ large. As previously established, numerous human disabilities appear on *Trek*, such as visual impairments or limb loss. Because *LD* includes disability in the background and not just one-off episodes or sporadic characters, the series exemplifies Shew's declaration that "the fact is that in the future, we can expect more disability, not less. We should expect both more ways to be disabled and more people existing with disabilities."[19]

Malleable Bodies: Pushing the Final Frontier of Medicine

LD takes the idea that "*The future is disabled, cosmically*" to its furthest extent within the *Trek* franchise, again, due to its animated medium. In addition to removing material constraints posed by props and makeup, animation also creates distance from the grisly nature of injury, meaning the bodily harm characters experience can be even more outrageous. At the same time, however, the discomfort that might otherwise occur in response to injury is dissipated through the characters' own unconcern for their own bodily integrity, and even through dark humor. In the *LD* episode, "Something Borrowed, Something Green," Mariner experiences multiple injuries, with one of the more notable examples being when she is repeatedly stabbed by knives. This first happens in the Slit Throat nightclub scene, when a knife is thrown at Tendi but hits Mariner in the shoulder instead. Mariner pulls the blade out and casually shakes it off, placing the knife in a jar. This is followed by another instance when, in the Orion pheromone dungeon, Mariner is once again stabbed by a knife that was randomly thrown into a crowd of people. She seems somewhat frustrated about the coincidence but is generally unfazed, as the injury comes during a tense moment in the scene. She is even hit a third time later in the episode while exploring a starship junkyard, following the comedic rule of threes.[20]

By being irreverent about disability, *LD* capitalizes on how human attitudes change with openly available futuristic healthcare more than any previous series. Consider how *Trek* characterizes Starfleet healthcare. Highly trained doctors are nearly always available and are likely able to tailor care according to gender and race better than twenty-first century medical practitioners given that the field has grown to include alien races. Replicators can immediately produce needed medical supplies, eliminating supply-chain issues. Barriers to accessing healthcare are

environmental, not financial–that is, a character may be trapped on a planet and transporters are down, but the ship's doctors are already preparing for their patients and care is not withheld due to medical debt. One can imagine that many fears about acquired disabilities would be allayed with not only such advanced medicine, but such freely available care. Yet this is not the case with *Trek* before *LD*. Rather, *Trek* tends to adhere to what “critics of utopian thinking have long argued,” as Kafer states, that “the futures we imagine reveal the biases of the present.”[21] Though *Trek* is very insightful when they engage with disability narratives, “the biases of the present” are evident with the seriousness with which showmakers approach these narratives. A case in point is the difference between how *Deep Space 9* and *LD* treat limb loss.

During *DS-9’s* Dominion War Saga, young Ferengi Ensign Nog struggles with the emotional and psychological aftermath of losing his leg during the battle at AR-558. Despite extensive medical treatments, plus a full assurance by modern medicine that a new biosynthetic leg can be provided, he remains deeply affected by his trauma, exhibiting signs of depression and withdrawal. Nog’s resistance to traditional counseling and physical therapy allows him to explore patient-driven options, as is encouraged by Starfleet Medical. This leads him to isolate himself in a holosuite, where he forms a deep friendship with the holographic singer Vic Fontaine. During a particularly impactful moment, Nog exclaims to Vic, "Bashir is telling me he has to cut my leg off. I couldn't believe it. I still can't believe it. If I could get shot, if I could lose my leg, anything can happen to me, Vic."[22] Nog’s trauma causes him severe mental and emotional pain, sending him deeper into the holosuite fantasy. Over time Vic’s unconventional advice, which focuses on offering Nog a sense of purpose and solace totally separate from the dangers of war, eventually helps Nog confront his fears about

his injury. While Nog's story is valuable for its engagement with the realities of bodily fragility, it still follows the trend of associating disability with tragedy.

In contrast, replacing a limb is treated like an everyday medical procedure in the *LD* episode "Caves." In this episode, the four protagonists share their experiences being trapped in other caves in a play on a *Trek* trope. Mariner tells a story of when she was trapped with members of Delta Shift, the main cast's rivals from the night shift. To boost their combadge signals, the crew needs to gain access to pergium, which they find in the cave. However, this pergium emits a strong chroniton field that rapidly ages anyone who gets close. Mariner and Ensign Amadou fight to see who gets to harvest the pergium, and when they discover that they are too old to make it before their bodies deteriorate from age, they rely on young Asif to help. As Asif struggles towards the pergium, his leg, which has been injured in a shuttle crash, rapidly ages and heals badly, eventually rotting off entirely. Brushing off his complaints in her rush to escape the cave, Mariner tells him that the ship's doctor will grow him a new leg when they return to the ship. Mariner's flippant response and the dark humor pervading the scene demonstrates a lack of fear concerning disability that is possible with a post-scarcity medical system. While Ensign Asif may be put on the same trajectory as Nog, the overall effect of Mariner's story is that sacrificing a limb is worthwhile when saving the group's life by escaping the cave.

This is not to say that one storyline about limb loss is better than the other. Nog's experience is an important representation of the adjustment period needed after acquiring a disability; additionally, the episode engages with the realities of PTSD in a meaningful way. It is also possible to construe Mariner's response as so flippant as to be ableist. Even as *LD* imagines a future wherein disability does not generate the fear it does today, the irreverence may not translate well without the

overall context of how societal attitudes change as a result. Outside of ableism, Mariner may be displaying a difference in attitude between an experienced Starfleet officer and a new cadet, one that is consistent with new ideas of the body after the Eugenics War. The character has a variety of past experiences that have shown her how far she can push her body, likely leading her to treat serious bodily harm like we would treat a scrape because of her trust in the medical system. When Asif reaches Mariner's age, he may well adopt the same attitude as her toward medical care and bodily injury, meaning the seriousness with which we approach disabling injury may not be applicable in the realm of futuristic medicine. Nevertheless, the *LD* "Caves" episode is refreshing because it does not associate limb loss with tragedy. Seriousness is a reasonable response to disability in the twentieth and twenty-first century contexts, but *LD* questions this reaction when considering the implications of futuristic, accessible medicine.

LD pushes the limits of these implications further by its irreverence toward not only incidental, but intentional disablement. Nowhere is this more apparent than the episode, "I Have No Bones, Yet I Must Flee." Ransom, Mariner, and Ensign Gary visit a menagerie to negotiate the release of humans whom the alien keeper has accidentally captured. While the Starfleet crew is touring the facilities, the vicious (and cute) bone-drinking moopsy escapes and wreaks havoc on the other creatures of the menagerie. When the moopsy pounces on the alien keeper, drinking his bones, the crew uses this as a distraction to trap the creature. This quickly backfires as they realize they have trapped the moopsy in the control room. Not only does the crew have no access to the systems, the moopsy then playfully rolls across the control panel, catapulting the entire menagerie out of orbit toward the planet below. Mariner immediately volunteers for the Starfleet tried-and-true method represented throughout the franchise: to risk her life for the rest of the crew. Typically, the narrative

would play out with a race against the clock and implausible feats that would still somehow end with everyone escaping death. Instead, Ransom stops Mariner in a move that rhetorically asks, "Why risk life when you can risk limb instead?" He challenges Mariner to punch him in the face, which dislodges a tooth and reveals his plan. Mariner proceeds to knock out Ransom's teeth to leave a trail for the moopsy to follow back to its habitat. The crew regains control of the menagerie and returns to the *Cerritos* where Dr. T'Ana replaces Ransom's teeth, good as new.

As horrifying as this episode may seem, it demonstrates a marked shift in humanity's relationship to embodiment to devise such an escape method. At first, Ransom's characterization as the epitome of a musclehead seems to fit within normative expectations of the human body. In fact, in "The Least Dangerous Game," Ransom saves Billups and Rutherford from being tossed into a volcano by impressing a health-obsessed culture with his physique. This hardly seems like the type of character to willingly injure himself unless he has a different relationship with his embodiment than a twenty-first century audience would expect, given how our own systems are beholden to uncertain medical care and eugenic undercurrents. The extremity of injury and its relationship to embodiment follows the future Susan Peters anticipates for disability culture. Peters ponders how disability culture might change when socially constructed disability is mediated through accommodations and acceptance: "Definitions of disability culture and the processes of enacting this culture (identifying as Disabled, or not) suggest a future in which *embodiment* (the experience of disability) may be a more effective way of understanding impairment than attempting to refine or develop universal descriptions and categories of impairment."[23] Reorienting focus toward embodiment shows how Mariner and Ransom fit within the possible future of disability culture. When focusing on embodiment, the visceral experience of shuttling between extreme impairment

and peak physical appearance means *LD* characters like Ransom and Mariner experience a wide range of embodiments, bringing with it an understanding of disability along the way, regardless of their return to normativity in the end. While Ransom returns to his musclehead persona, not everyone goes back to their normative embodiment either; Ransom's medical intervention is more an expression of personal choice than a result of compulsory able-bodiedness. Mariner herself keeps her scars as mementos of her experiences, as revealed in "Temporal Edict" when she confronts Ransom about playing things safe, just before he stabs her in the foot in another instance of risking limb instead of life. In *LD*, the body becomes a means toward an end, rendering any threat of ostracization through disablement irrelevant and able-bodiedness optional.

Conclusion

Through these various examples, it is clear that *Star Trek: Lower Decks* challenges traditional narratives about disability often found in science fiction by offering a projection of the future where difference is not only accepted but normalized. As with other iterations of the franchise, *LD* can only give us one facet of how disability is understood in the future. In one sense, *LD* does much to counteract the tragic tinge or medicalization of earlier storylines. In another sense, the ability to heal and return to status quo so quickly can be construed as ableist in and of itself because able-bodiedness is so easy to achieve. This conundrum goes beyond *Trek,* however, and touches on something we have to grapple with as society's medicine and technology improve. As Eli Clare reminds us, "Many medical technologies shift over time, moving from imaginary to real, ambiguous to reliable. Through these transformations, the ways we choose—or are forced—to engage with the ideology of cure often evolve."[24] As new technologies arise, like the cochlear implants Clare mentions as an example, the disabled community has to reconcile their identity alongside the shift.

This is where we enter hypothetical territory because it is difficult to imagine a world without the pressures we experience now. With the primacy of the able body in our current world, the pressure toward cure is ever-present, leading Clare to admit that if a cure for cerebral palsy existed, "the pill would come with pressures, temptations, and unknowns, to which I have no idea how I'd respond."[25] Even so, we can hypothesize how the pressures toward cure would be different in a Starfleet utopia. One difference is the shift in stance toward embodiment mentioned earlier.

A shift in values surrounding the body during the Eugenics War plus advanced medicine and a post-scarcity society combine to offer humans an unadulterated ability to choose their embodiment. Our current ability to choose is curtailed by factors including the costliness or risk of medical treatment and our technological limitations. Plus, as Clare points out, societal pressures can sway our decision making. By normalizing disability, *LD* shows that even in a utopian future, some people choose a disabled embodiment. In a move that deserves an essay of its own, Rutherford exemplifies the malleability of the body and the fluidity of future disability when he removes his implant technology in the series finale. The implant amplified his skills, so by removing it, is Rutherford claiming a disabled identity? Or did he claim a disabled identity when he became a cyborg in the first place? Either way, he had a choice in embodiment. Ultimately, we cannot know that ableism does not exist in *LD* despite its radical reorientation of embodiment because "when the question of possibility comes up in science fiction, the author can only reply that nobody knows. We haven't been there yet. Science fiction *hasn't happened*."[26] We do not know exactly how the franchise will deal with the Eugenics War to represent such a drastic social shift, but the availability of choice shows that normativity does not exert the pressure that it does today to discourage people from claiming a disabled identity.

Trek before *LD* built a history where characters affirmed their disabled identities to challenge the medical model of disability and move toward the political/relational model. By presenting a society in which advanced medical technology is fully accessible, the series allows for a much wider and more creative imagining of accommodation and disability that embraces disability culture. *LD* redefines the idea of able-bodiedness in a post-scarcity society, showing a shift in perspective that underscores the franchise's enduring commitment to imagining a more just and equitable future for all. Instead of focusing on eliminating disability, *LD* embraces the idea that the future of medicine and society lies in ensuring accessibility and inclusion for all, offering a hopeful and forward-thinking possibility for how we can navigate disability in our own world.

Endnotes

[1] Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Indiana University Press, 2013), 44.
[2] Kathryn Allan, "Reading Disability in Science Fiction," in *Disability in Science Fiction,* ed. Kathryn Allan (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2.
[3] Allan, "Reading Disability in Science Fiction," in *Disability in Science Fiction,* 7-8.
[4] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip,* 2.
[5] Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body* (Routledge, 1996), 68.
[6] Robert McRuer, "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence," in *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, ed. Gail Weiss, et al. (Northwestern University Press, 2019), 93.
[7] Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens, *The Art of* Star Trek (New York: Pocket Books, 1995), 88.
[8] Christine Selinger, "Where No (Disabled) Person Has Gone Before: A Content Analysis of Star Trek through the Portrayal of Christopher Pike," *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* (2024): 15, https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2024.2336791.
[9] Romel W. Mackelprang, et al., *Disability: A Diversity Model Approach in Human Service Practice*, 4th edition (Oxford University Press, 2022), 150.
[10] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip,* 6.
[11] Mackelprang, et al., *Disability: A Diversity Model Approach in Human Service Practice*, 4th edition, xvi.
[12] Susan J. Peters, "Disability Culture," in *Encyclopedia of Disability, vol. I*, ed. Gary L. Albrecht (Sage Publications, Inc., 2006), 415.
[13] We specify physical disability here because *Star Trek* is full of positive narratives about autism, such as Vulcans as an entire alien race and Data as an android.
[14] Ashley Shew, *Against Technoableism: Rethinking Who Needs Improvement* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2023), 8-9.
[15] Edward Gross and Mark A. Altman, *The Fifty-Year Mission: The Complete, Uncensored, Unauthorized Oral History of* Star Trek (St. Martin's Press, 2016), 358.

[16] Shew, *Against Technoableism,* 8.

[17] Shew, *Against Technoableism,* 119.

[18] For those who would like a narrative that represents the bodily stress of space travel through hard sci-fi, read or watch *The Expanse*.

[19] Shew, *Against Technoableism,* 114.

[20] *Lower Decks*, Season 4, Episode 4, “Something Borrowed, Something Green,” directed by Bob Suarez, featuring Tawny Newsome, Jack Quaid, Noël Wells, Eugene Cordero, Dawnn Lewis, and Jerry O'Connell, first aired 21 September 2023, Paramount, Paramount +

[21] Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip,* 28.

[22] *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine,* Season 7, Episode 10, “It’s Only a Paper Moon,” directed by Anson Williams, featuring Aron Eisonberg, aired 30 December 1999 on CBS, at 39:11-39:31.

[23] Peters, “Disability Culture,” 415.

[24] Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Duke University Press, 2017), 91.

[25] Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 93.

[26] Joanna Russ, “Speculations: The Subjunctivity of Science Fiction” in *To Write like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction*, ed. Joanna Russ (Indiana University Press, 2005), quoted in Allan, “Reading Disability in Science Fiction,” 3.

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