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Evolutions of Disability Representation and Utopia in Star Trek

Évolutions de la représentation du handicap et de l'utopie dans *Star Trek*

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Abstract

This article examines how *Star Trek* franchise representations of disability and utopia have evolved across six decades, paralleling shifts in disability theory and cultural understanding. Beginning with *The Original Series* (*TOS*), where Federation officers imposed a progress-based Trekian utopia on alien cultures they deemed lacking, we trace how the franchise's approach to disability and difference transformed through subsequent series. Using narrative prosthesis theory, Tom Shakespeare's interactive model of disability, and theories of cure, we analyze key episodes from *TOS*, *The Next Generation* (*TNG*), *Deep Space Nine* (*DS9*), and *Discovery* (*DSC*) to demonstrate this evolution. In TOS's "The Apple," Kirk and crew medicalize and "cure" an entire society to align with Federation standards. By *TNG*'s "The Masterpiece Society," the *USS Enterprise* crew begins acknowledging the dangers of intervention, even as they struggle with competing definitions of utopia. *DS9*'s "Paradise" and "Melora" show further progression, allowing societies and individuals to choose their own paths and reject cure narratives. Finally, *DSC*'s Gray and Adira demonstrate the present status of these evolutions, where characters exercise full autonomy over identity and embodiment. Through these examples, we argue that *Star Trek* uses its cultural power to envision an increasingly inclusive future, one that moves from imposing normalized utopian ideals to embracing diverse definitions of both disability and utopia on societal and individual levels.

Cet article examine l'évolution des représentations du handicap et de l'utopie dans la franchise *Star Trek* au fil de six décennies, en parallèle des transformations de la théorie du handicap et des conceptions culturelles qui l'entourent. À partir de *The Original Series (TOS)*, où les officiers de la Fédération imposent une utopie trekienne fondée sur le progrès

à des cultures extraterrestres jugées déficientes, nous retraçons la manière dont la franchise reconfigure progressivement son approche du handicap et de la différence dans les séries ultérieures. En mobilisant la théorie de la prothèse narrative, le modèle interactif du handicap de Tom Shakespeare ainsi que les théories de la guérison, nous analysons des épisodes clés de TOS, *The Next Generation* (TNG), *Deep Space Nine* (DS9) et *Discovery* (DSC) pour mettre en lumière cette évolution. Dans « La pomme » (TOS), Kirk et son équipage médicalisent et « guérissent » une société entière afin de l’aligner sur les normes de la Fédération. Dans « La Société modèle » (TNG), l’équipage de l’USS Enterprise commence à reconnaitre les dangers de l’intervention, tout en se confrontant à des conceptions concurrentes de l’utopie. Les épisodes « Paradis » et « Melora » (DS9) marquent une avancée supplémentaire, en permettant à des sociétés et à des individus de définir leurs propres trajectoires et de rejeter les récits de guérison. Enfin, Gray et Adira dans DSC incarnent l’état actuel de ces transformations, où les personnages exercent une pleine autonomie sur leur identité et leur corporéité. Ces exemples nous permettent de soutenir que *Star Trek* mobilise son pouvoir culturel pour imaginer un futur toujours plus inclusif, passant d’une imposition d’idéaux utopiques normalisés à une valorisation de conceptions plurielles du handicap et de l’utopie, tant à l’échelle des sociétés qu’à celle des individus.

Keywords: disability evolution, Star Trek, utopia, interactive model of disability

Mots-clés : Évolution du handicap, *Star Trek*, utopie, modèle interactif du handicap

Introduction

“Utopia,” originally coined by Thomas More,[1] is commonly thought to be the conflation of two Greek words, one meaning “no place,” and the other meaning “good place.” As a concept, Northup Frye et al. suggest that utopia refers to a “nonexistent land of social perfection,” and that some utopian fiction “works to create the conditions of a better society now.”[2] Practically, however, several misconceptions regarding utopia have shaped the ways society thinks about it. For example, it’s possible to understand utopia as a perfect society, without realizing that “perfect” is a matter of

perspective. When Gene Roddenberry created *Star Trek* and the Federation, he developed it based on a humanist philosophy that focuses on dignity, respect, and progress. This Trekian utopia became the source of conflict during several episodes throughout franchise history as Federation officers encountered ideas that did not align with Federation ideology. While exploring different versions of utopia, Jon Wagner and Jan Lundeen explain, "If utopia is defined as a state of paradise that smothers the spark of growth and change, then the cosmology of *Star Trek* is profoundly anti-utopian. If, on the contrary, utopia is conceived as a process of movement along a path of human self-transcendence, *Star Trek*'s very conception of humanity is quintessentially utopian."[3] Placing these polarized ideas about utopia in conversation with disability theory allows us to critique and defamiliarize these concepts but also show their interrelated nature.

Analyzing specific episodes, we demonstrate how the Federation and Starfleet have always had a troubled relationship with disability, at least in part, because they define utopia differently than many of the species they encounter. Therefore, Starfleet officers cast others as metaphorically disabled and work to cure them in a single episode. Early Trek found itself enforcing a progress-based Trekian utopia with cultures it found lacking. Later, while stories still focused on medicalizing and curing these impairments, Trek's ideology around both disability and utopia evolved at a similar pace to the development of disability models and interpretations, so that its more recent evolutions are more aligned with inclusion and acceptance. In the end, we suggest Trek uses its own cultural power to show us a future that understands disability and utopia in progressive ways.

Our Theoretical Perspective

Our approach to disability interpretation is based on three theories. First, the notion of narrative prosthesis, first proposed by David T. Mitchell and Sharon S. Snyder, recognizes that every story is a story about disability. As viewers, we come into the story when something has gone amiss, and the resolution "cures" the narrative.[4]

Second, although we acknowledge the prevalence of medical and social approaches to disability throughout the episodes, we frame many of our analyses on a cultural and interactive model proposed by disability theorist Tom Shakespeare. The interactive model, he contends, updates social and relational approaches to disability by recognizing that definitions of disability do not exist simply in individualized bodies (as the medical model insists) or as the result of strictly environmental factors (as social approaches suggest). He writes:

> I define disability as the outcome of the interaction between individual and contextual factors which includes impairment, personality, individual attitudes, environment, policy, and culture. Rather than reserving the word 'disability' for 'impairment effects,' I would rather use the term broadly to describe the whole interplay of different factors that make up the experience of people with impairments.[5]

Applying an interactional model of disability to Star Trek provides for layered encounters between the characters and allows us to examine multiple episodes while using a common lens. Because it also recognizes policies and attitudes, this model becomes useful when working with Federation directives or personal assertions about the ways that people *should* behave. Moreover, interrogating Star Trek episodes through contextual factors permits the space for an evolutionary response

between the characters and the concepts. In other words, though we begin our analyses of Trek with the ways it interweaves ideas of utopia and disability with an episode from *TOS*, our work also acknowledges the changing ethos as each series re-articulated its own version of utopia against real-world (and real-time) cultures.[6]

Third, we know that in working through articulations of disability, we necessarily need to consider ideas of cure, because when differing expectations are placed in contention to one another, "cure" and "disability" may reside on opposite sides of a binary. According to disability theorist Eunjung Kim,

> Cure involves a transaction with speculative risks that carry the possibility of both gains and losses. Individuals attempt cure with the expectation of functional and social gains that enable them to access other resources. But cure carries a significant risk of unwanted changes or even death. These curative gains and losses are not easily discernible as gains and losses, for what is unwanted by an individual can be perceived as beneficial to one's family, community, and society and vice versa.[7]

Through the episodes we discuss, we suggest Trekian utopias present risk and disruption of the cultures the Federation visits that are presented as being beneficial. However, Starfleet officers, too, come with inherent perspectives of the "problem" they encounter, which may devastate a culture beyond repair. As such, the distinctions between disability and cure along with unremarkable existence and utopian existence are the spaces that we travel through here. Naturally, we begin with *TOS*.

In the Beginning: Medically Defining Disability and Utopia for Others

Early episodes of Trek established the Federation as the ideal system of utopian government by suggesting that Federation members had solved all social problems. As M. Keith Booker writes, *TOS* "modeled a utopian twenty-third century in which the social problems of the twentieth century had been solved, opening the way for human beings to pursue their true potentials without having to struggle against other human beings for the right to do so."[8] It was pitched as the place where everyone wanted to belong. Episodes from *TOS* showed the crew of the Enterprise beaming down to unknown planets and questioning the development of the inhabitants they found. Often, this resulted in the crew forcibly disrupting the status quo of that planet to match Federation ideology. Placed in a disability context, this thinking is best represented by the outdated medical approach which suggests that individuals have impairments because they do not meet expected standards. Season 2's "The Apple" is a clear example.

In "The Apple," Kirk, Spock, and McCoy beam down to what appears to be an ideal planet. The mission, according to Kirk, is to investigate some strange readings and make contact with the inhabitants. The climate remains a comfortable seventy-six degrees,[9] and the soil and landscape seem ideal for various crops and animals. The inhabitants, who call themselves the "Feeders of Vaal,"[10] appear happy and healthy. Their society appears to be primitive in nature, partly determined by living in straw huts. Medical readings reveal they are in perfect health and do not appear to be aging. In other words, they seem to be living in a society free of disease, conflict, greed, or any number of other evils. Their sole purpose, and the sole cost of this utopian existence, it seems, is to feed Vaal. Vaal appears as a serpent-like structure with an open mouth where a few times a day the

Feeders of Vaal deposit various energy sources to apparently power Vaal. The symbolism of the Garden of Eden and the serpent are hard to miss.

But McCoy, the Chief Medical Officer, has a problem with this society, as a conversation with Spock demonstrates:

> MCCOY: There are certain absolutes, Mister Spock, and one of them is the right of humanoids to a free and unchained environment, the right to have conditions which permit growth.
> SPOCK: Another is their right to choose a system which seems to work for them.
> MCCOY: Jim, you're not just going to stand by and be blinded to what's going on here. These are humanoids, intelligent. They need to advance and grow. Don't you understand what my readings indicate? There's been no progress here in at least ten thousand years. This isn't life. It's stagnation.
> SPOCK: Doctor, these people are healthy and they are happy. Whatever you choose to call it, this system works, despite your emotional reaction to it.[11]

Both McCoy and Spock are basing their opinions on scientific and medical frameworks of normality. McCoy is applying his professional knowledge of living organisms to shape his definition of living. According to biology and medicine, "All living organisms share several key characteristics or functions: order, sensitivity or response to the environment, reproduction, adaptation, growth and development, homeostasis, energy processing, and evolution. When viewed together, these characteristics serve to define life."[12] For McCoy, the Feeders are medically impaired because their cells are not evolving, changing, or growing. In effect, he argues that the environment itself is disabling because the inhabitants are not allowed freedom (of choice).

McCoy's position points to the humanist perspective that a society must progress. Spock argues that this society is not bound by that humanist or Trekian concept of utopia. He sees no immediate impairment and suggests leaving the Feeders of Vaal alone. By this point in the episode, their meddling with the locals has created what assumed is a machine (i.e. Vaal) to react to Kirk and crew as harmful to the Feeders, and as such, Vaal now has effectively managed to trap the Enterprise and pose a risk to the away team. Thus, Kirk ends the philosophical debate because of the threat to the Enterprise. With the ship trapped in orbit and about to be destroyed, the only way to save the Enterprise is to destroy Vaal. To justify his decision, Kirk uses a medical argument:

> SPOCK: I am concerned, Captain. This may not be an ideal society, but it is a viable one.
> KIRK: Bones [McCoy] was right. These people aren't living, they're existing. They don't create. They don't produce. They don't even think. They exist to service a machine.
> SPOCK: If we do what it seems we must, in my opinion it will be in direct violation of the non-interference directive.
> KIRK: These are people, not robots. They should have the opportunity of choice. We owe it to them to interfere.
> SPOCK: Starfleet Command may think otherwise.
> KIRK: I'll take my chances.[13]

At this point, the discussion is merely an exercise of explanation for Spock and the audience, because Kirk has made up his mind and in effect made the choice *for* the Feeders. They have been diagnosed with a disability because they are not progressing according to Federation standards. Therefore, they must accept the "cure" of the Federation, stop feeding Vaal, and fall in line with the Trekian humanistic utopia that requires societal progress -- what Trek defines as "normal."

In his concluding remarks to the Feeders of Vaal, Kirk attempts to explain how their lives will change: You'll learn to care for yourselves, *with our help*. And there's no trick to putting fruit on trees. You might enjoy it. You'll learn to build for yourselves, think for yourselves, work for yourselves, and what you create is yours. That's what we call freedom. You'll like it, a lot. And you'll learn something about men and women, the way they're *supposed* to be. Caring for each other, being happy with each other, being good to each other. That's what we call love. You'll like that, too, a lot.[14] (emphasis added)

What Kirk fails to recognize is that he has taken away the foundation needed for the inhabitants *to* learn and grow. His offer of help comes in the form of Federation support, which is light years away, and his description of freedom also denies them their freedom of choice. Yet, the help is never seen in future episodes and we have no idea whether that help was provided. Further, Kirk posits he knows how they are "supposed to be," even though at the beginning of the episode he knew nothing of the Feeders of Vaal and seems to have made no effort to learn. Kirk, acting as their doctor, has concluded he knows the cure. The problem is that Trek's early perspective was simplistic and assumed everything about a society, such as their technology, evolution, history, and overall fitness to *be* a society.[15] The inhabitants have no say in their future or Vaal's. Kirk destroys their entire society to protect his ship and crew; he cures the Feeder's illness in order to sustain his normalized way of life.

In the end, Kirk, Spock, and McCoy discuss their actions. Spock remains troubled by what occurred. McCoy responds, "We put those people back on a normal course of social evolution. I see nothing wrong in that." and Kirk adds, "[T]hat's a good object lesson, Mister Spock. It's an example of what can happen when a machine becomes too efficient, does too much work for you."[16] Here, Kirk

and McCoy apply the ideas of a Trekian utopia to justify their actions. McCoy uses the word "normal" and refers to Federation standard, and *human* evolution even though the inhabitants of the planet were decidedly not human. Kirk and McCoy purposely ignored the culture of the planet because the environment, specifically the energy that Vaal was directing at the *Enterprise,* created a disability for the crew as it trapped them and the crew needed to return to their version of normality.

In *TOS*, it was common for the crew to enforce a Trekian ideal of utopia on alien planets to such a degree that, as "The Apple" shows, they created a problem and then had to fix it. In early *TNG*, there is not much difference, but we noticed an increase in allowing cultures to at least be part of the discussion, which takes us to the first evolution of Trek.

Evolution 1: The Next Generation

In *TNG*'s "The Masterpiece Society," the planet Moab Four is being threatened by a stellar core fragment that will destroy the planet's habitability. The inhabitants are humans but isolationists that left earth to create a "perfect society [. . ..] through controlled procreation."[17] Speaking to Commander Riker and Counselor Troi, Conor, the leader of the colony, explains:

> CONOR: I have been bred to fill this specific role. We grow up knowing exactly what our society needs from us. What we are expected to do.
> RIKER: That must take some of the fun out of it?
> CONOR: Not at all. My entire psychological makeup tells me that I was born to lead. I am exactly what I would choose to be. Think of it another way. Are there still people in your society who have not discovered who they really are, or what they were meant to do with their lives? They may be in the wrong job, they may be writing bad poetry. Or

> worse yet, they may be great poets working as labourers, never to be discovered. That does not happen here. It is, for us, an ideal existence. We will not give it up easily.[18]

The colony's ideology is difficult for the crew of the Enterprise to accept in part because it defies Trekian utopia, that is freedom of choice, and recognizes, as Wagner and Lundeen point out, "Perfection [. . .] implies repression."[19] Additionally, their society regards genetic manipulation as the way to create "people without flaws and those people would build a paradise."[20] In their drive to create a "perfect society," they limited possibility, creativity, and have unintentionally built an oppressive society whose people are responsible for meeting genetic and social expectations. The episode deals in part with the conundrum of altering their perfect world in order to save it.

Much of the episode deals with trying to bolster the protective shield of the planet and adjusting the trajectory of the core fragment. At one point in the episode, La Forge and the planet's lead scientist, Hannah, have altered the trajectory of the fragment, but still need to bolster the planet's shielding. Unfortunately, no technology from Moab Four can handle the levels of energy needed. While working with Hannah, La Forge realizes that his VISOR[21] has the specific technology needed to enhance the shielding. His adaptive device buffers the energy impulses that allow the emitter arrays to handle the increased load without overpowering them.

After making the modifications, the disaster is averted. Later, Hannah realizes the colony's isolation has limited her society's ability to progress, expresses frustration with how everyone in the colony's "needs have been anticipated and planned for before" they were ever born. She requests asylum aboard the Enterprise, and soon thereafter several other colonists too. With the number of colonists wanting to leave, a new concern arises: the colony, which has been carefully coordinated

so that each member has specific responsibilities and is, "genetically integrated," now will have "gaps, missing pieces,"[22] In the closing scene, Captain Picard and First Officer Riker discuss the colony:

> RIKER: The colonists are all on board, sir.
> PICARD: How many finally?
> RIKER: Twenty three.
> PICARD: If we ever needed reminding of the importance of the Prime Directive, it is now.
> RIKER: The Prime Directive doesn't apply. They're human.
> PICARD: Doesn't it? Our very presence may have damaged, even destroyed, their way of life. Whether or not we agree with that way of life or whether they're human or not is irrelevant, Number One. We are responsible.
> RIKER: We had to respond to the threat from the core fragment didn't we?
> PICARD: Of course we did. But in the end we may have proved just as dangerous to that colony as any core fragment could ever have been.[23]

With this exchange, Riker and Picard recap the events of the past few days much as Kirk, Spock, and McCoy did at the end of "The Apple." What makes "The Masterpiece Society" different is that in the end, although Picard accepts twenty-three colonists from the planet and changes the delicate balance of their society, he recognizes the danger Starfleet posed. Further, although the disability of the narrative was defined in opposition to Trekian utopia, the fact that Picard worked with the colonists to find a solution, rather than dictating one, suggests that Trek's ideas regarding interventions had shifted enough to allow the colonists to define utopia and their future for themselves and began working toward an interactional model of understanding. At this point, Trek

has positioned itself to at least include a society in the discussion, but in the next evolution we see how a society is given a choice.

Evolution 2: Lessons from Deep Space

DS9, too, echoes some of the utopian philosophy of *TNG*'s "The Masterpiece Society" during the episode "Paradise." Here, two Starfleet officers encounter a colony on what is supposed to be an uninhabited planet. Sisko and O'Brien beam down to a planet and discover their technology no longer operates. They meet the human inhabitants who report they crash landed years ago and since then their technology hasn't worked. Because of this, they claim to live simply by growing crops and constructing what they need by ingenuity and hard work. At the beginning of the episode the community's leader, Alixus, gives their visitors some background. She explains:

> [W]e've done pretty well without our tricorders and EM converters and comm links haven't we? After all, the human body is a powerful tool. We can plow the crops, harvest the fields, construct the walls that we need for protection against the wilderness, weave clothes that we need to stay warm. In a way, we've rediscovered what man is capable of without technology. It hasn't been easy. We've had some bitter winters and we've lost some dear friends. But we're very proud of what we've accomplished here.[24]

Alixus's description reminds us of Conor's from "The Masterpiece Society" and sets up the conflict in the episode: no one is going to want to leave the utopian society they have spent years creating, which also calls back to "The Apple." When it's discovered that Alixus has deceived them for a decade and used a device that didn't allow any tech devices to work, she defends herself with the

simplicity of her ideology: "Look at yourselves. Look at what you've become. What you've achieved here has redefined your potential, the potential of man."[25] Again, we see the call back to *TOS*, but in reverse. The closing scene has one of the leaders speaking to O'Brien, and he says, "this is our home. Whatever Alixus may be guilty of, she did give us our community. I'm not sure if we'll leave the device on or off now that we know it's there. [. . .] But Alixus is right. We have found something here that none of us is willing to give up." At this point, we see the society having the option of how to proceed, with no influence by the Federation. While the Federation did want to figure out the problem of the tech not working, they allowed the society to decide how they want to be and, then, let them be.

The storylines for "The Apple," "The Masterpiece Society" and "Paradise" are similar, in that they all use the intrusion of Starfleet officers as a catalyst for disruption and the initiation of socially constructed impairment. They also fictionalize discussions between perfection and uncertainty, suggesting that one is better than the other. When the respective crews first encounter the societies, they are presented with planets that appear to be utopian in nature, as defined by their inhabitants, each society is balanced uniquely for their needs, making life ideal for them. But the Federation brings a different perspective and sees any existence that doesn't embrace Trekian utopian ideology as problematic. In terms of disability theory, the "problems" of each episode depend on the definition of impairment. More specifically, the framework of each episode, and each point of view, can be framed around concepts of normal. Lennard Davis describes this connective tissue this way: "[T]he very concept of normalcy by which most people (by definition) shape their existence is in fact tied inexorably to the concept of disability, or rather, the concept of disability is a function of a concept of normalcy. Normalcy and disability are part of the same system."[26] Like Davis recognizing

that normal and disability exist as part of the same system whose elements can erase the other, we recognize that normalizing a utopian state -- whether it is based in progress or not -- means that disability or difference disrupts current existence. Regardless of the assumed benefits, Federation representatives still position themselves as the arbiters of correct behavior. Moreover, in ending what they view as an oppressed society, Federation officers impose a different kind of oppression by requiring others to meet their standards. For us, this once again highlights a key idea from Mitchell and Snyder, who suggest that narratives that work to hide and repair disabilities only succeed in calling more attention to them.[27] In the final evolution, we see how Trek moves from allowing societies to choose their own path to having individuals do so.

Evolution 3: Moving to Inner Space

Along with presenting ideas of utopian societies, Star Trek also gives us individual characters who live their lives outside the Federation binary. As Antonio Fernando Cascais suggests "[science fiction] is occupied with overcoming notions of binary oppositions, between norm and deviation (in which the standards of normality, health, and psychological functionality of human subjects and the criteria to define impairment are configured.)"[28] In other words, science fiction allows us to explore possibilities.

In *DS9*'s second season, the episode "Melora" turns the idea of utopia inward as it challenges the living environment more directly. Starfleet officer Melora Pazlar comes aboard the station to chart a new sector of space and the story spends considerable narrative space demonstrating how she is different from others (e.g. a powered wheelchair, a cane, etc.). As the only Elaysian in Starfleet, she finds it difficult to walk in environments with Earth's gravity, and her

quarters have been modified for lower gravity; in her quarters, she can fly. Outside her quarters, she needs specialized equipment to navigate.

Part of the confining aspect for Pazlar is the station itself, which was constructed by the war-mongering Cardassians, who do not appear to provide any environmental accommodations such as ramps. In her essay, "No Ramps in Space," Hanley E. Kanar laments the ways that Pazlar's character is scripted. Kanar focuses on the moment when Pazlar first arrives and begins using a wheelchair-like device that she designed. As she is talking to Doctor Bashir about the chair, he tells her that he needed to modify it, and Pazlar appears irritated. Kanar explains:

> Rather than allowing the Pazlar character to express the disabled point of view that persons with disabilities know what works best for them, or the feminist point of view that women know best what works for them, the Pazlar character is [. . .] framed as a malcontent rather than a clear-headed designer irritated with a deviation from her design. The ultimate evidence that the writers do not understand the disabled woman's point of view is that Pazlar is then scripted to sound martyred rather than resigned when she says 'No, I'll just have to adapt.'[29]

Pazlar's adaptation is further expressed when she explains how much she prefers relying on herself and not others. Seeking to help, Bashir revives technology that would eliminate that problem by medically altering Pazlar's physiology so that she could move more easily in standard gravity. Intrigued, Pazlar begins the process thinking that she will be able to "throw away the chair."[30] After her first treatment, Bashir walks her back to her quarters, and he cautions her that she needs to maintain the station's gravity overnight, because if not, it would hinder her progress.

The episode continues with a predictable twist. Near the end, a shuttlecraft with Pazlar aboard is captured. To regain control of the shuttlecraft, Pazlar decreases the gravity, which forces everyone to float unexpectedly. With her low gravity experience, Pazlar is prepared and secures the craft. The resolution shows that Pazlar's embodiment, though understood as problematic for some people, can be a powerful way to navigate the world. After her experience on the shuttlecraft, she decides not to continue with the procedure and has a conversation with Bashir:

> PAZLAR: Julian, I'm not going ahead with the treatments.
> BASHIR: Well, you can always try it again someday, if you change your mind.
> PAZLAR: I don't think I will. I like being independent, but to give up everything that I am to walk on land. Well, I might be more independent but I wouldn't be Elaysian anymore. I'm not sure what I'd be.[31]

By rejecting the idea of "curing" her difference, Pazlar asserts her power and recognizes a more complex understanding of disability that includes medical and social aspects. Though disability and impairment need not be labeled as such for true embodiment to be accepted, theorizing those complexities through a more nuanced cultural or interactional model accounts for medical, social, and attitudinal responses that might occur. For Pazlar, the reality of her struggle with impairment on the station is framed by interactions of biology, medicine, culture, environments, and the conflicting expectations of others. Although, as disability scholar Hanley E. Kanar posits, Pazlar doesn't respond with the voices of identified groups (women or people with disabilities) at the beginning of the episode,[32] she finds her voice at the end. Pazlar recognizes that her identity as an Elaysian encapsulates all these aspects and more, which enables her again. In other words, Pazlar accepts

and progresses in a world she knows despite the difficulties that come with her physiology rather than navigate that same world in ways that are unfamiliar. As Eunjung Kim might suggest, Pazlar rejects the risk of cure for the benefit of maintaining her identity.[33]

Essentially, identity becomes the defining factor of the third evolution and is highlighted by the example of Adira and Gray from *DSC*. Further, we find it possible to define utopia on a personal level because the concept of a perfect society has to begin with a character's point of view. *DSC* presents two characters, Gray and Adira, who immediately transcend some perceptions of identity. Adira is a character who presents as a young, human, cisgender female ensign and the first human Trill host.[34] Additionally, because of their identity preference, Adira verbally, though privately corrects a senior officer that referred to them as "she." Adira corrects him with a demure but definitive "'they,' not, not 'she.' I've never felt like a 'she' or a 'her,' so I would prefer 'they' or 'them'." In a move that reflects the changing nature of (our) society and how it relates to people who identify in their own ways, he simply smiles and says, "Ok."[35] Yet, why such a scene is occurring so far in the future points to our society's ongoing discomfort with the discussion of pronouns. The larger point rests with the shift to a character deciding how they want to present themselves to the world, which is exemplified by Gray.

Adira's partner, Gray, was a former host to the symbiont that Adira now has. After Gray was injured but before he died, Adira accepted the symbiont and the previous hosts' memories. Although all hosts can connect with the memories of the symbiont, Adira can *see and hear* Gray, but no one else can. At one point, Gray expresses his wish to be seen by everyone. This major seasonal plot line reaches its peak during the episode "Choose to Live" when Gray constructs a synthetic body.

Gray's opportunity to make his body exactly how he wishes, even including a small mole on his hand, which he once disliked then grew fond of, is important because it represents what Trek has been working toward. As his body is being formed, Gray says, "It's me. I'll finally be a part of the world again. No more looking in from the outside, feeling invisible." As part of the reincorporation, Gray's consciousness is transferred from Adira to the synthetic. Knowing the risks, including loss of his consciousness, Gray states, "I'm lost without this. I've been living in an in-between place for too long already. I have to try." When the transfer is successful, Gray is asked how he feels; he responds: "whole and home."[36] Gray's new body was solely of his own design; there was no interference from others or medicalized alterations. He was able to choose his own existence and presentation. Gray's existence also represents what Eli Clare refers to as the body-mind:

> I followed the lead of many communities and spiritual traditions that recognize body and mind not as two entities but as one [. . .] I settled on body-mind in order to recognize both the inextricable relationships between our bodies and our minds and the ways in which the ideology of cure operates as if the two are distinct—the mind superior to the body, the mind defining personhood, the mind separating humans from nonhumans.[37]

The concept of body-mind is particularly useful when discussing Gray, because when viewers first meet Gray, he appears as almost imaginary. However, he represents the hierarchy that Clare wants to challenge; Gray's mind *is* personhood. By designing a body that he wants, and one that he *likes,* he has already navigated past many of the struggles that people with disabilities often face as they work within the realities of bodies they did not choose for themselves. Gray's ability to choose also

erases the potential of mislabeling that exists within various communities. Instead, he incorporates those characteristics that he finds most empowering, so that he can be present with the crew.

Adira and Gray represent the achievement of a long-term goal for Trek regarding disability. First, because whether morally, religiously, medically, or socially defined, disability began with a representative mark on the body that was socially interpreted against the pervasive context of normality.[38] When Gray formed his own body, he (re)defined both utopia and embodiment. Moreover, keeping his mole in place represents an act of reclaiming identity that people with disabilities rarely experience; Gray's choices do not represent an erasure of pain or difficulty, but rather a clear acceptance of identity inside a self-created utopia.

Conclusion

Through the example of *TOS* and Kirk, we explained Trek's inability to allow another culture to decide their own fate. In *TNG*, we demonstrated how Trek evolved to at least be aware of Federation meddling. In *DS9*, we saw another evolution of Trek where Pazlar and the "Paradise" colonists decided their fate. And in *DSC*, Adira and Gray had full autonomy to decide how they would be presented. From *TOS*, where Kirk and crew would have dictated how a person or group should live to *DSC*, where people can decide their own identity, we see how Trek evolved over the decades. These evolutions, then, suggest that Trek changed based on societal and cultural thinking. From a more progressive understanding of disability to one's ability to self identify, Trek continues to bridge the gap between the present and future. As we better understand the perspectives of identity politics, the presentation of disability, and the idea of utopia, Trek offers an example of a more inclusive

future. Inclusivity goes beyond ability and difference and provides for perspectives and positionality. As one's position/perspective changes, so does their identity.

Writing of the utopian novel, John F. Kasson explains, "[it] offered a mode of interpreting social experience."[39] Kasson continues, "utopia [. . .] functioned as 'a speculative myth,' a mode of projecting a vision of social possibilities at a time when Americans felt themselves at a turning point in history, but desperately in need of a sense of direction."[40] Through Kasson, we recognize the popularity of Star Trek. During difficult moments in history, Trek envisioned possibilities. Certainly, *TOS* at the height of the Cold War and Vietnam by holding to a Trekian utopian model of morality (right or wrong as it may be) helped viewers look to the future. *TNG*, while hiding a dark secret of economic stumbles, showed us diplomacy and cooperation. *DS9* offered insight into diverse cultures learning and growing together, while *VOY* thrust enemies together and forced them to work together. *ENT* offered a way through after a gut-wrenching attack.[41] And *DSC* saw a return to uncertainty and the never-ending potential of war coupled with misunderstanding and secrecy. The fact that Trek broadcasted these episodes is the result of two things: the realization that the definition of disability continues to shift, that one of Trek's goals is to keep its viewers talking about the concept of disability, even if metaphorically. Through all these, we had representation of disability, and it is with these representations that we conclude.

Over 60 years ago, Trek presented a future that many saw for the first time, a future of possibility, invention, and with a dose of reality. Viewers may not have envisioned a sensory dress or a powered wheelchair to navigate the world, but Trek gave us those ideas. Since then, disability, likewise, has been represented in different ways too. Still, as Christine Selinger points out, "media representations of disability may be some of the only experiences some people will have with

disabled individuals or the disability community."[42] This awareness remains important in our discussion because disability is a construct created by perceptions of ability. These perceptions impose limits on what people "with disabilities" can and cannot do by people without supposed disabilities. The reality is that not one of us can do everything and we all have limitations of our abilities. Part of the utopian pull of Trek rests in the idea that we will no longer impose limitations on others and will work toward ways of incorporating all abilities into society. We conclude with a thought by Selinger: "If disability was not seen as a deficit, but rather a natural way of existing, how would our world change?"[43] Indeed, how would our world, our future change?

Endnotes

[1] More, Thomas. *Utopia or The Happy Republic: A Philosophical Romance, in two books*. Foulis, 1762. https://archive.org/details/utopiaorhappyre00more.
[2] Frye, Northrup et al. "Utopia." *The Harper Handbook to Literature,* Northrup Frye, Sheridan Baker, George Perkins, eds. Harper & Row, 1985, 478-79.
[3] Wagner, Jon, and Jan Lundeen. *Deep Space and Sacred Time: Star Trek in the American Mythos*. Praeger, 1998, 137.
[4] Mitchell, David T. and Sharon S. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse.* U of Michigan P., 2000, 53.
[5] Shakespeare, Tom. *Disability Rights and Wrongs Revisited,* 2nd ed. Routledge, 2014, 77-78.
[6] We utilize acronyms for each series: TOS for *The Original Series*; TNG for *The Next Generation*; DS9 for *Deep Space Nine*; DSC for *Discovery*.
[7] Kim, Eunjung. Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea. Duke UP, 2017, 13.
[8] Booker. M. Keith. *Star Trek: A Cultural History*. Rowman and Littlefield, 2018, xiv.
[9] Assumed to be Farenheit.
[10] They also call themselves the "People of Vaal."
[11] Pevney, "The Apple."
[12] Bartee, Lisa, Walter Shriner, and Catherine Creech. "What Makes Something Living?" *Principles of Biology,* n.d.
[13] Pevney, "The Apple."
[14] Pevney, "The Apple."
[15] See *TOS*, Newland, "Errand of Mercy." Here, Kirk and crew report the planet Organia as a "A very peaceful, friendly people living on a primitive level," but later find out they are far evolved from the crew and exist as "pure energy" and detest violence in any form. In effect, the crew assumed based on the appearance of primitivity, they were primitive when they were not.
[16] Pevney, "The Apple."
[17] Kolbe, "The Masterpiece Society."
[18] Kolbe, "The Masterpiece Society."
[19] Wagner and Lundeen, 127.
[20] Kolbe, "The Masterpiece Society."
[21] VISOR = Visual Instrument and Sensory Organ Replacement.
[22] Kolbe, "The Masterpiece Society."
[23] Kolbe, "The Masterpiece Society."
[24] Allen, "Paradise."
[25] Allen, "Paradise."
[26] Davis, Lennard. *Enforcing Normalcy*: *Disability, Deafness, and the Body.* Verso, 1995*,* 2.
[27] Mitchell and Snyder, 8.
[28] Antonio Fernando Cascais. "The Metamorphic Body in Science Fiction: From Prosthetic Correction to Utopian Enhancement." *Disability in Science Fiction: Technology as Cure.* Editor, Kathryn Allem. Palgrave-MacMillian, 2013, 65.
[29] Hanley E. Kanar. "No Ramps in Space: The Inability to Envision Accessibility in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine." Fantasy Girls: Gender in the New Universe of Science Fiction and Fantasy Television.* Edited by Elyce Rae Helford, Rowman and Littlefield, 255.
[30] Kolbe, "Melora."
[31] Kolbe, "Melora."
[32] Kanar, 255.
[33] Kim, 13.

[34] Some Trill exist as a joined species, consisting of a symbiont and a host. A symbiont often has shared several lifetimes across several hosts. This partnership provides a place to live for the symbiont and shares the life experience with the host. While there are specific rules for hosts and symbionts, there is occasionally some wiggle room.
[35] Frakes, “The Sanctuary”
[36] Byrne, “Choose to Live.”
[37] Clare, xiv.
[38] See Goffman’s (1986) for a sociological analysis of stigmas; Edward Wheatley (2010) defined a religious model of disability; Gilman (1985) studied the ways that stereotypes have defined social expectations throughout history, and Davis (1995, 2013, 2021) has done extensive work framing ‘normal’ in opposition to ‘disability.’
[39] Kasson, John F. *Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America 1776-1900.* 2nd ed., Hill and Wang, 1999, 190.
[40] Kasson, 190-191.
[41] VOY refers to *Star Trek: Voyager*; ENT refers to *Star Trek: Enterprise*.
[42] Selinger, Christine. “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* 47, no. 2, (2025). https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2024.2336791, 366.
[43] Selinger, 355.

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