Homophobia, Intolerance, and Gender in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*

The original *Star Trek*, which debuted in 1966, is renowned for its progressive portrayals of women and minorities on television. Featuring minority characters in important roles, *Star Trek* was years ahead of its time in portraying equality on television. So important was the role of Nichelle Nichols, a black actress who was a regular on the show, that Martin Luther King, Jr. persuaded her not to leave the show because “people who don’t look like us see us for the first time as we should be seen—as equals.”¹ The show pushed boundaries even further with the episode *Plato’s Stepchildren*, in which Uhura, Nichols’ character, shares a kiss with Captain Kirk, in the first kiss between black and white actors on American television.² In order to stave off potential criticism of the show, the script was written so that an alien forced Uhura and Kirk to kiss, but it still made a point about race relations toward the end of the African-American civil rights movement. *Star Trek* successfully used its ability to develop controversial plots and characters in a completely removed setting to convey a socially important idea. Because *Star Trek* does not remain confined to a Western or even human cultural framework, it is in a unique position to offer progressive commentary on our own culture by comparing it to others. This approach has been employed occasionally in the more recent *Star Trek* series to criticize intolerant attitudes about homosexuality that are pervasive in our society. One example of this is *The Outcast*, an episode from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.³ By detailing the story of an alien who is labeled as a sexual deviant in an
androgynous society, the episode criticizes modern intolerance toward homosexuality.

This and other alien species in the Star Trek universe allow for the construction of a story that is carefully tailored to criticize the belief that binary gender is somehow natural. By these standards this episode is progressive; however, from a queer theory perspective, the episode is disappointing because it reverts to gender stereotyping and clings to essentialism as a means of justifying the characters’ actions, lending support to only homosexuality and not other queer identities.

**Conception and plot of the episode**

The Outcast was originally conceived as The Next Generation’s response to pressure from gay rights groups to address homosexuality on the show. Groups such as the Gaylaxians, comprised of LGBT science fiction fans, had long lobbied for a homosexual presence on the show. Some viewers wanted to see openly gay crew members with a regular presence on the show, while others just wanted acknowledgment of a gay presence in the 24th century. One fan wrote,

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

The heterosexual analogues of all these situations are commonly encountered in The Next Generation. Although Star Trek creator Gene Roddenberry stated shortly before his death that the fifth season of The Next Generation would “include gay crew members in day-to-
day circumstances,” the show’s producers never delivered on this promise—they instead substituted the issue of sexual orientation as a catch-all for addressing the concerns of the LGBT community. In 1992, they aired *The Outcast*, which producer Jeri Taylor described as “a gay rights story. It absolutely, specifically, and outspokenly dealt with gay rights issues.” Although *The Outcast* took a strong stance on the issue of tolerance for homosexuals, this one-episode response to years of complaints left much to be desired in the eyes of the LGBT community.

*The Outcast* begins by introducing the J’naii, humanoid aliens who are described as “an androgynous race.” Will Riker, the *Enterprise*’s second-in-command, and Soren, a J’naii pilot, are assigned to a mission to rescue a stranded J’naii shuttle. As they spend time together, Riker and Soren discuss their thoughts on gender; each is intrigued by how the other’s society views gender. Eventually, Soren tells Riker that she is attracted to him, simultaneously confessing that she identifies as a female. She adds that this is a very dangerous secret, as J’naii who identify with a gender rather than remaining androgynous are thought of as possessing a mental illness and are looked down upon. As Riker begins to show interest in a relationship, one of Soren’s J’naii colleagues, who has been watching her closely for some time, picks up on their closeness and turns Soren in as a gender deviant. Soren confesses to being female at her trial, and is taken away for “psychotectic therapy,” the treatment on her planet that brainwashes gender deviants into adopting a normative, androgynous identity. Riker rescues Soren the following night, but it is too late—Soren has already received the therapy. She apologizes for no longer having any interest in him and the two part ways.
Soren as a homosexual

Soren’s tale is clearly intended to be viewed as an allegory for the plight of homosexuals. The story simply inverts the accepted social order: “homosexuality” within the androgynous J’naii society is normative, and “heterosexuality” is deviant. There are several similarities between Soren and a homosexual in our society: the essentialist approach the show takes toward sexuality, the difficulty of coming out in J’naii society, Soren’s plea for acceptance in court, and the classification of her feelings as an illness that requires treatment are a few examples (although perhaps the last one is somewhat outdated). When Soren discloses to Riker that she is attracted to him, she adds, “I am taking a terrible risk telling you that. It means revealing something to you—something that if it were known on my planet would be very dangerous for me.” Riker responds by asking, “How long have you known?” and Soren ends her story telling Riker that she has “had to live a life of pretense and lies.” Their conversation is reminiscent of the stereotypical modern homosexual’s “coming out” conversation. By spending time early in the episode showing the formation of a friendship between Riker and Soren, the episode endears Soren to the audience. Thus when she “comes out” to Riker, viewers should feel sympathy for her lifelong problems. In siding with Soren rather than her “cruel” society which would subject her to “shame and ridicule,” viewers also side with those who identify as homosexual in our own society.

Another aspect of similarity between Soren and the Western homosexual that merits attention is that both J’naii and Western societies have adopted methods of treating their deviants: psychotectic therapy and reparative therapy (also known as reorientation therapy), respectively. When Riker speaks to Soren after her therapy, she characterizes
her past feelings using the words “mistake,” “urges,” and “wrong.” These terms are reminiscent of those employed in narratives written by graduates of the “ex-gay” movement on what they currently think of their past desires (“indulge” is also commonly used, connoting giving in to a harmful desire), although it is worth noting that these characterizations likely come from those who had these feelings of guilt before their treatment.\textsuperscript{6, 7} In contrast to Western homosexuality, there exists an effective method of forcing J’naii with deviant gender identities to adopt a normative identity. The effectiveness of psychotectic therapy ensures that gender-identifying J’naii would never be able to band together to create a political movement, because any publicly “out” J’naii would immediately be subjected to the therapy. If gendered J’naii are not publicly visible, one might wonder how Soren knew that she was a deviant—how she knew that her feelings were wrong. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s ideas about the excessive discourse on sexuality in Western society, Eve Sedgwick describes sodomy in nineteenth-century Western culture as “the crime whose name is not to be uttered, hence whose accessibility to knowledge is uniquely preterited [sic].”\textsuperscript{8} In yet another parallel between homosexuality and Soren’s gender identification, it is easy to conceive of the same mechanism controlling knowledge about gender identification in J’naii society; that is, everyone must be introduced to the concept of gender from a young age so that they can be warned of its dangers. In portraying Soren’s ignorance after the psychotectic therapy (when Riker suggests that it might be possible to restore Soren to her normal self, she asks, “why would I want that?”) along with Riker’s devastation, the episode manages to convince the viewer that everyone would have been happier if Riker and the \textit{Enterprise} had whisked Soren away from her homeworld before she was subjected to the therapy.
The lesson for a Western audience is that homosexuals do not need public shaming or reparative therapy, they need acceptance.

*The Outcast* makes its most impassioned plea for tolerance during the trial, when Soren admits to identifying as a female. Annamarie Jagose characterizes the homophile organizations of the 1950s and 1960s as comprising

[A movement] committed to securing [legal and social recognition] gradually, by persuasive rather than militant techniques. They argued that, apart from their same-sex sexual preferences, [homosexuals] were model citizens, as respectable as heterosexuals, and no more likely to disturb the status quo.  

She also notes that the homophile movement essentialized the homosexual identity to at least initially try to win pity rather than scorn for homosexuals. There are clear parallels between this and Soren’s speech, in which she says:

*I am female. I was born that way. I have had those feelings, those longings, all of my life. It is not unnatural. I am not sick because I feel this way. I do not need to be helped. I do not need to be cured. What I need and what all of those who are like me need is your understanding and your compassion. We have not injured you in any way. And yet we are scorned and attacked, and all because we are different…All of the loving things that you do with each other—that is what we do. And for that we are called misfits and deviants and criminals.*

As an indication of the parallel between Soren’s argument and those of the homophile movement, it is notable that if Soren had said “gay” instead of “female,” her speech would apply to the plight of modern homosexuals. In using the same language as those who identified with the homophile movement, Soren employs an essentialist argument to make her cause an issue of civil rights; she argues that she cannot help being female because she “was born that way,” so it is unfair to discriminate against her. Thus throughout the episode, Soren is established as the J’naii counterpart to Western society’s...
homosexual. By portraying Soren’s story in a light such that viewers sympathize with her, The Outcast forces viewers to sympathize with homosexuality, whether they realize it or not.

**Criticism of intolerance**

Offering a critique of homophobia, the episode includes a conversation between Riker and Soren about how they view gender. When Riker and Soren are first becoming acquainted, Riker says, “It’s hard to grasp the idea of no gender,” to which Soren responds, “It is just as hard for us to understand the strange division in your species—males and females.” This exchange offers a veiled critique of homophobia. The human crew of the Enterprise has no qualms about interacting with the J’naii, whose sexuality, from a human point of view, is homonormative—the J’naii default is that everyone identifies with an absence of gender, and most J’naii seek partners who identify likewise. Thus the Enterprise crew, portrayed throughout the series as a group of ideal, morally upright citizens in Star Trek’s utopian view of humanity, has no problems with the homosexual nature of J’naii relationships. This is true but for one exception: Lieutenant Worf, whose views are portrayed as an example of intolerance.

The ability to introduce alien species with unique cultural practices at whim is a key component of Star Trek’s ability to question our own worldview in the light of others’. This is accomplished in two ways: the views of intolerant aliens are criticized, and those of the generally tolerant humans are idealized. Worf, the ship’s security officer, is a Klingon. Throughout Star Trek, Klingons are portrayed as the epitome of stereotypical masculinity: they are first and foremost warriors, are obsessed with honor
and bravery, and are rooted in a very traditional, patriarchal culture. At one point in *The Outcast*, Worf is playing poker with a few crewmates, including Beverly Crusher, the ship’s doctor, Deanna Troi, the ship’s counselor, and Data, an android. Worf sets himself up for ridicule by stating that poker with wild cards is a “woman’s game” and agreeing with the statement that “women are weak and need more help.” Crusher presents the latter statement to Worf sarcastically, expecting him to say his statements are being misinterpreted, but instead he agrees. Right after Worf’s views have been established as foolish, he expresses his discomfort about the J’naii:

Worf: The J’naii…they bother me.
Troi: Why, Worf?
Worf: They just do. They’re all alike. No males, no females.
Troi: Well, I’m sure we’re just as strange to them.

This scene portrays Worf’s intolerance as laughable. From the beginning of the scene, viewers are advised not to trust his gender stereotyping, and this is easily extended to his apparent assumption that a binary approach to gender is natural, or somehow better than others. His thoughts are similarly ridiculed when the subject turns to the possibility that Soren might be attracted to Riker.

Worf: (Shaking his head) A human and a J’naii…impossible.
Data: Why?
Troi: Good question. Worf?
(Worf looks uncomfortable and does not respond.)

The fact that it is Data who expresses confusion about Worf’s views lends support to the idea of a rational approach to tolerance of desire. As an android, Data is known for his logical approach to all situations, and this one is no exception. Unlike other characters, whose objections to Worf’s statements could potentially be invalidated by their basis in
personal motivation, Data remains unbiased by emotion, as he does not experience feelings. Worf bases his statement off fundamental ideas or assumptions he has made about gender and desire. His inability to answer Data’s question indicates that he has not thought through his ideas. By pointing this out, Data offers a critique of Worf’s intolerant views.

**Complaints from viewers**

Criticism of *The Outcast* from gay rights groups has focused on its subtlety and its contrived plot. Gaylaxian and media studies professor Henry Jenkins writes of the episode, “Homosexuality remains a connotative ghost, still that form of sexual desire that dares not speak its name.” Indeed, the words “gay,” “homosexual,” and “sexuality” are never mentioned in the episode, despite Taylor’s assertion that the episode “absolutely, specifically, and outspokenly dealt with gay rights issues.” As a result, this type of response suggesting that the episode should have dealt with the issues more explicitly is common among the Gaylaxians:

> There was a discussion where I work in an almost completely straight environment and a lot of people who watched it didn’t connect it to the gay issue at all…The thing that was interesting, they were still outraged by what was done to Soren. They felt it was a generic freedom of choice issue. She wasn’t allowed to live the life she wanted regardless of what that was. That this might be treated as a gay-related issue was quite a surprise to them…They argued with [the idea that it might be a gay right issue]. They still felt that it was more a human rights issue.

Thus, the Gaylaxians claim, many viewers did not pick up on the allegory; in fact, Jenkins goes so far as to say a literal viewing of the episode might lead one to believe it is advocating that “heterosexuality ought to exist everywhere in the galaxy, hardly a
ground-breaking statement.” While it is disappointing that some viewers may not have picked up on the anti-homophobic subtext of the episode, the writers’ decision to make their point by analogy is perfectly valid. This approach provides a way around the cognitive dissonance of homophobic viewers: if the relevant issues are presented by analogy, viewers will at least take them into consideration rather than rejecting them outright. Perhaps these coworkers, upon discussing the episode, would at least think about the possibility that the gay rights movement is a struggle for human rights.

Another complaint was that the symbolism in the episode was too contrived—that the idea of persecution for being heterosexual was viewed as too unlikely for the episode to actually have any meaning. This was portrayed in one viewer’s heated response: “Big deal! The alien was oppressed for being hetero! Now that’s science fiction!!” Indeed, most viewers would perceive the notion that someone was persecuted for heterosexuality as preposterous, because it is so ingrained as a normative identity. In drawing the comparison between Soren’s heterosexuality and Western homosexuality, the episode suggests that persecution of Western homosexuality should be perceived as just as preposterous. The episode encourages viewers to question why they might not think homosexual oppression is just as absurd as heterosexual oppression, in the context of normative identities being afforded special treatment.

While it is true that Star Trek rarely directly addresses issues of social equality, its strength lies in its subtle critiques of issues that would usually be deemed too politically charged to air on television. One example of this is the original series episode Let that be Your Last Battlefield, which aired in 1969. In a commentary on racial violence, the episode depicts a man whose left half is black and right half is white, along with another
man whose skin is similarly colored, but with the color of each half reversed. The men immediately start arguing in each other’s presence and need to be separated to avoid violence. It turns out that their races have been at war with each other for 50,000 years over their differently-colored skin. When they are returned to their home planets to find all of their inhabitants long dead from the war, they still remain unable to set aside their differences or call a truce, so they are dropped off to battle amongst themselves. This episode is an allegory on racial violence in the 1960s. We would not interpret this episode as advocating racial violence, even though that is what it explicitly depicts; by analogy, the criticism of The Outcast alleging support for homosexuality is not believable. If this episode instead depicted a black race engaged in war with a white race, it likely would not have been allowed on television. Although the episode does not explicitly display an example of racial equality, it successfully treats the issue through metaphor. Similarly, The Outcast is able to treat the issue of homosexuality adequately without the introduction of a gay character.

It is reasonable to assume that a strong gay presence on Star Trek, as the Gaylaxians and others wanted, would not have been received well on network television. After Ellen DeGeneres came out as a lesbian in 1997, her network television show was cancelled within a year. If Star Trek had dealt with the issue of homosexuality more blatantly in the early 1990s, it would have risked being cancelled. Star Trek has had plenty of time since then to deal with the issue of homosexuality, though, rather than addressing the issue in a total of just two or three isolated episodes throughout all four of the modern series. Although the clamor for a gay character was somewhat premature in
the late 1980s, the issue could have been spearheaded in the late 1990s when homosexuality was no longer as taboo in Western culture.

**Gender stereotyping, gender/desire confusion, and essentialism**

The strategy of presenting alien viewpoints to question our own is further employed in the episode in an attempt to address gender inequality in our culture. During a visit to the infirmary, Soren asks Crusher what it is like to be female. When Crusher responds that she hasn’t thought about it before, Soren points out what stands out as foremost female in her mind: “you apply color to your bodies.” Crusher, not realizing at first that Soren is referring to makeup, is somewhat taken aback, but agrees with Soren that, even in the 24th century, women and men go about attracting each other in different ways. When Soren takes this to mean that the dynamic between men and women signifies that one group might be viewed as superior to the other, Crusher replies, as though struggling to recall a history lesson, “In the past, women were often considered weak and inferior. But that hasn’t been true for a long time.” The intended point about gender equality here is obvious: in the utopian *Star Trek* future, men and women will be considered equal. However, Soren’s comments about makeup indicate that this is not the case. If the gender stereotypes that were pervasive in the 20th century were actually gone by the 24th, it is likely that few enough women would wear makeup that Soren would not notice or that men would wear makeup, too. Additionally, Crusher’s statement about women not being “weak and inferior” rings hollow upon observation of the makeup of the *Enterprise* crew. Despite countless opportunities over seven seasons and four subsequent movies to introduce a strong female character, the show portrayed only two
female regulars, Crusher and Troi. As the ship’s doctor, Crusher takes on a very motherly role. Meanwhile, Troi is notorious among Star Trek fans for embodying stereotypical femininity; she is frequently portrayed as weak and fearful, and, inexplicably, is the only member of the crew who is allowed to dress in a form-fitting uniform. The episode’s attempt to be progressive on gender issues is ultimately useless, because throughout the series, the Enterprise crew is largely made up of characters conforming to the same 20th century gender roles that they claim no longer exist.

In an episode about acceptance of homosexuality, though, why have the producers gone to such great lengths to raise issues of gender equality? The crew’s criticism of Worf’s comments is at least tangentially related to homosexuality since that situation deals with tolerance of non-standard desires between other people. However, the other discussions about gender—several conversations in The Outcast revolve around crew members explaining the differences between males and females to Soren—seem to have been added as an afterthought. It is as though the producers, thinking of sexuality and gender as inseparable, reasoned that a treatment of sexuality required an attempt at a treatment of gender stereotyping as well. Unfortunately, the conversations about gender presented in the episode only detract from its quality. The episode contains well-done commentary on sexual tolerance, but not on gender.

This poor treatment of gender is also apparent in a more basic premise of the episode. Soren’s crime is not that she is attracted to males; it is that she identifies as female. When Soren says she feels female, she means she identifies with the Western conception of a heterosexual female. The implication is that femininity is defined as an attraction to masculinity—that Soren’s gender is defined entirely by her desire. Here the
episode fails to distinguish between gender and sexual desire. Gayle Rubin argues, “it is essential to separate gender and sexuality analytically to reflect more accurately their social existence.” Although her discussion is presented in the context of lesbian feminism and the oppression of lesbians, her point is applicable to The Outcast as well. Psychotectic therapy is effective at fixing Soren’s problem, but what exactly is it fixing—her identification as a female, or her attraction to men? The episode implies that both go hand in hand, which is an uninformed way of viewing the relationship between gender and desire. The notion that gender implies desire becomes untenable when viewed from the standpoint of transgender people. David Valentine deals with the complexity of this issue in his analysis of an “alternative lifestyles” support group, concluding that there is even a “place where desires escape identity.” He uses one of his subjects’ narratives to portray the difficulty that comes with categorizing specific desires. In light of this, it seems a stretch to presume that a given set of desires would imply a particular gender identity. The Outcast’s discussion of homosexuality would have been just as powerful if the conversations about human gender had been left out. Ultimately, the only thing they contribute to the episode is a meaningless explanation for Soren of what it would be like to live in a society that conforms to binary gender stereotypes.

Finally, the episode is disappointing from a queer theory perspective because it is so essentializing. Soren, by framing her plea in the same terms used by the homophile movement, argues that her gender and sexuality are innate and immutable (except by psychotectic therapy). This is understandable in that the episode was created as a response to complaints largely from gays and lesbians, not from transgender viewers. A more constructionist approach could have been taken on the issue, though, if Soren had
simply argued that she should be accepted for who she was, abandoning the rhetoric about being “born different.” The analogies to homosexuality would still be intact, and the audience would still sympathize with Soren upon seeing the destruction of her relationship with Riker. Phrasing the episode from a constructionist viewpoint would allow for alternate interpretations of what Soren’s Western counterpart might be. Rather than remaining confined to viewing Soren as homosexual, viewers could see Soren as intersex, Soren as bisexual, Soren as queer. The broadening of interpretations accompanying a shift to constructionist phrasing would leave this episode just as important for tolerance of homosexuality while lending it these same implications for tolerance of the entire queer community. This is best explained by borrowing Rubin’s terminology about “the line” that separates “good sex” from “bad sex.” As written, The Outcast attempts to shift homosexuality to closer to the line, allowing it to enjoy privileged status as a recognized identity. If the episode instead portrayed Soren’s story as applicable to sexual behaviors other than homosexuality, it would call into question the very existence of the line.

Conclusion

The Outcast employs Star Trek’s historical strategy of approaching controversial issues with subtlety. Contrary to the objections of some LGBT viewers, the episode is easily readable as an allegory on intolerance of homosexuality. The episode is weakened, though, by the inclusion of ill-conceived attempts to dispel gender stereotypes since the hypocrisy is obvious: Crusher, as one of two weak women on the show, is in no position to discuss the erosion of gender stereotypes. From a gay rights perspective, the episode
succeeds in accomplishing its goals, but the episode would have succeeded in being more progressive if it had advocated tolerance not only of homosexuals, but of the queer community as a whole. This discussion has focused almost exclusively on one episode of one science fiction series; it would be interesting to consider how science fiction as a genre has used its ability to create unique settings, aliens, and interactions to address contemporary issues surrounding gender and sexual identities.
Sources Cited


