

## “Out of the Closet and into the Universe”

### *Queers and Star Trek*

Henry Jenkins with John Campbell

*Janice Radway was one of the first academics to embrace my work on fan communities, in part because it paralleled her own observations of and experiences with romance readers. She had been one of the peer reviewers for “Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten.” She had told me that the original draft spent too much time trying to prove that audiences were active, when what the field then needed were ever more detailed descriptions of how different groups made sense of popular culture. “Out of the Closet and into the Universe,” along with “Do You Enjoy Making the Rest of Us Feel Stupid” (also in this volume) and “It’s Not a Fairy Tale Anymore,” responded to that challenge. This essay represented my first attempt at what John Hartley calls “intervention analysis” and in that sense help to pave the way for some of the popular writings I have done on Columbine and the debates about game violence.*

*In American Cultural Studies, John Hartley and Roberta Pearson argue that the so-called new journalists, writers like Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson, were important popular predecessors of and influences on the American cultural studies tradition. At its best, their work was deeply ethnographic, taking us inside unfamiliar communities or cultural sites and expressing the way participants understood themselves and their own practices, while being honest about their own subjective stakes in the process and remaining accessible to the broadest possible readership. “Out of the Closet and into the Universe” was self-consciously influenced by Tom Wolfe’s efforts to capture the “voice” of different communities. In this condensed version, I strip away much*

of the academic baggage allowing the more journalistic dimensions to surface.

I should note that my key informant and research assistant on this project was John Campbell, who was then a member of the Gaylaxians but who subsequently decided to go on to graduate school in media studies. He has written a remarkable first book, *Getting It On Online: Cyberspace, Gay Male Sexuality, and Embodied Identity* (2004), which emerges from his own participation-observation within various gay sex chatrooms.

“*Out of the Closet*” first appeared in *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Doctor Who and Star Trek* (London: Routledge, 1995), which I co-authored with John Tulloch.

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

—Franklin Hummel, *Gaylactic Gazette*<sup>1</sup>

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

—Dr. Beverley Crusher, “The Host,” *Star Trek: The Next Generation*

“Two, four, six, eight, how do you know Kirk is straight?” the Gaylaxians chanted as they marched down the streets of Boston on Gay Pride day. “Three, five, seven, nine, he and Spock have a real fine time!” The chant encapsulates central issues of concern to the group: How do texts determine the sexual orientation of their characters, and how might queer spectators gain a foothold for self-representation within dominant media narratives? How has *Star Trek* written gays and lesbians out of its future, and why do the characters and their fans so steadfastly refuse to stay in the closet? . . .

The Boston Area Gaylaxians is a local chapter of the international Gaylactic Network Inc., an organization for gay, lesbian, and bisexual

science fiction fans and their friends.<sup>2</sup> Founded in 1987, the group has chapters in many cities in the United States and Canada. Adopting the slogan “Out of the closet and into the universe,” the group has sought to increase gay visibility within the science fiction fan community and “to help gay fans contact and develop friendships with each other.”<sup>3</sup> The group hosts a national convention, Gaylaxicon, which brings together fans and writers interested in sexuality and science fiction. Although only recently given official recognition from the network, group members have organized a national letter-writing campaign to urge Paramount to acknowledge a queer presence in the twenty-fourth-century future represented on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Their efforts have so far attracted national attention from both the gay and mainstream press and have provoked responses from production spokespeople and several cast members. Gene Roddenberry publicly committed himself to incorporating gay characters into the series in the final months before his death, but the producers never delivered on that promise. The series *has* featured two episodes that can loosely be read as presenting images of alternative sexuality, “The Host” and “The Outcast.” Although the producers have promoted these stories as responsive to the gay and lesbian community’s concerns, both treat queer lifestyles as alien rather than familiar aspects of the Federation culture and have sparked further controversy and dissatisfaction among the Gaylaxians.

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

### *Intervention Analysis and Fan Culture*

This chapter documents the Gaylaxians’ struggles with Paramount over the issue of queer visibility on *Star Trek*, their efforts to gain a public

acknowledgment that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people belong within the program’s utopian community. I write from a partisan position within this debate as a *Star Trek* fan and a member of the Gaylaxians. John Hartley has called upon media scholars to engage in what he calls intervention analysis: “Intervention analysis seeks not only to describe and explain existing dispositions of knowledge, but also to change them.”<sup>4</sup> Hartley advocates that media scholars write from the position(s) of media audiences, recognizing and articulating the interpretive work that viewers perform, documenting their creative engagement with the media content. Hartley continues:

Intervention analysis certainly needs to take popular television more or less as it finds it, without high-culture fastidiousness or right-on political squeamishness, but it needs to intervene *in* the media and in the production of popular knowledge *about* them.<sup>5</sup>

Intervention analysis, Hartley argues, speaks from, about, and for the margins of popular culture.

My goal is thus to intervene in the debates about queer visibility on *Star Trek*, to trace the discursive logic by which producers have sought to exclude and fans have sought to include queer characters, to situate this issue within a larger social and cultural context of queer reception of science fiction and network representation of alternative sexuality. My goal is not to instruct or politicize audience response, since I believe that fans already exercise a form of grassroots cultural politics that powerfully reflects their interests in the media and their own ideological stakes. We need to create a context where fan politics may be acknowledged and accepted as a valid contribution to the debates about mass culture.

### *Children of Uranus*

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

—Susan Sackett, executive assistant to Gene Roddenberry<sup>6</sup>

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

—Michael Piller, *Star Trek* writing staff supervisor<sup>7</sup>

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

—Franklin Hummel<sup>8</sup>

The people who organized the national letter-writing campaign to get a queer character included on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* were not “outside influences,” “special interest groups,” or “gay activists.”<sup>9</sup> They saw themselves as vitally involved with the life of the series and firmly committed to its survival. As Franklin Hummel, director of the Gaylaxian Network, asserts, “we are *part of Star Trek*.” They saw their goals not as antagonistic to Roddenberry’s artistic vision but rather as logically consistent with the utopian politics he had articulated in *The Making of Star Trek* and elsewhere. . . .

The fans reminded Roddenberry that he had said:

To be different is not necessarily to be ugly; to have a different idea is not necessarily wrong. The worst possible thing that can happen to humanity is for all of us to begin to look and act and think alike.<sup>10</sup>

When, they asked, was *Star Trek* going to acknowledge and accept sexual “difference” as part of the pluralistic vision it had so consistently evoked? They cited his successful fight to get a black woman on the *Enterprise* bridge and his unsuccessful one to have a female second-in-command, and wondered aloud “why can’t *Star Trek* be as controversial in educating people about our movement as they were for the black civil rights movement?” (James).<sup>11</sup>

The people who organized the letter-writing campaign were *Star Trek* fans, and as such they claimed a special relationship to the series, at once protective and possessive, celebratory and critical. . . .

The producers’ refusal to represent gay and lesbian characters cut deeply:

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

...

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

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

Lynne, another Gaylaxian, tells a similar story:

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

What these fans describe is something more than an abstract notion of escapism—the persistent queer fantasy of a space beyond the closet doorway. Such utopian fantasies can provide an important first step toward political awareness, since utopianism allows us to envision an alternative social order that we must work to realize (“something posi-

tive to look forward to”) and to recognize the limitations of our current situation (the dystopian present against which the utopian alternative can be read). . . .

Nobody had expected the original *Star Trek* series, released in a pre-Stonewall society, to address directly the concerns of gay, lesbian, and bisexual fans. They had taken it on faith that its vision of a United Federation of Planets, of intergalactic cooperation and acceptance, included them as vital partners. Yet, when *Star Trek: The Next Generation* appeared, at a time when queer characters had been included on many American series, they hoped for something more, to be there on the screen, an explicit presence in its twenty-fourth century.

### *Where No (Gay) Man Has Gone Before*

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

—Susan Sackett<sup>12</sup>

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

—Franklin Hummel<sup>13</sup>

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

“Sooner or later, we’ll have to address the issue,” Roddenberry had told a group of Boston fans in November 1986, while *Star Trek: The*

*Next Generation* was still on the drawing boards: “We should probably have a gay character on *Star Trek*.”<sup>14</sup> “For your information, the possibility that several members of the *Enterprise* crew might be gay has been discussed in a very positive light. It is very much an area that a show like *Star Trek* should address,” acknowledged David Gerrold, the man assigned to prepare the program bible for *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.<sup>15</sup>

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

As a U.S. Navy veteran, I have had firsthand experience with the military’s discrimination against gays and lesbians. It could be that the United Federation of Planets also bans homosexuals from serving in Starfleet. . . . That would explain the large number of never-married officers on board the *Enterprise*. Except for Dr. Crusher, none of the regular officers have been married (chiefs, e.g. Chief O’Brian, are non-commissioned officers like sergeants). Does Starfleet have a huge closet? Still, this does leave the problem of civilian homosexuals. Since many of the episodes involve interaction with non-Starfleet characters, you would think that occasionally a gay or lesbian character would be somewhere in the 24th century. Has the Federation found a “cure” for homosexuality?<sup>16</sup>

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

If they had listened more carefully, the fans might have recognized the slippage in Roddenberry’s original comments, from including gay people as *characters* to dealing with homosexuality as an *issue*. What the Gaylaxians wanted was to be visible without being an “issue” or a “problem” that the scriptwriters needed to confront and resolve. . . . As Theresa M. wrote:

I want to see men holding hands and kissing in Ten-Forward. I want to see a smile of joy on Picard’s face as he, as captain, joins two women

together in a holy union, or pain across his face when he tells a man that his same-sex mate has been killed in battle. I want to hear Troi assure a crew member, questioning their mixed emotions, that bisexuality is a way to enjoy the best of what both sexes have to offer. I want to see crew members going about their business and acting appropriately no matter what their sexual orientation in every situation.<sup>17</sup>

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

The program’s producers would seem to agree, since their public responses to the letter-writing campaign often presuppose that queers would have gained tolerance and acceptance within *Star Trek*’s future, yet they evaded attempts to make this commitment visible on the screen. . . . One can identify a series of basic assumptions about the representation of gay identities that underlie the producers’ responses to the letter-writing campaign:

1. The explicit representation of homosexuality within the program text would require some form of labeling, whereas a general climate of tolerance would have made the entire issue disappear. As Roddenberry explained in a statement released to the gay newspaper *The Advocate*, “I’ve never found it necessary to do a special homosexual-theme story because people in the time line of *The Next Generation*, the 24th century, will not be labeled.”<sup>18</sup>

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

In Gene Roddenberry’s 24th century *Star Trek* universe, homosexuality will not be an issue as it is today. How do you, then, address a non-issue? No one aboard the starship could care less what anyone else’s

sexual preference would be. . . . Do not ask us to show conflict aboard the Enterprise when it comes to people’s choices over their sex, politics or religion. By that time, all choices will be respected equally.<sup>19</sup>

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

3. Representation of homosexuality on *Star Trek* would make the characters’ sexuality obvious and therefore risk offense. As Arnold explained,

Although we have no problem with any of our characters being gay, it would not be appropriate to portray them as such. A person’s (or being’s) sexual preference should not be obvious, just as we can’t tell anyone’s religious or political affiliations by looking at them.<sup>20</sup>

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

4. Representation could only occur through reliance on easily recognizable stereotypes of contemporary gay identities. With a twist, the group the producers didn’t dare to offend turns out to be not the religious right (which has often put pressure on producers to exclude gay or lesbian characters) but the gay fans who are demanding representation within the program: “Do you expect us to show stereotypical behavior that would be more insulting to the gay community than supportive?”<sup>21</sup> Arnold asked a room of 1,200 *Star Trek* fans at Boston’s Sheraton Hotel: “What would you have us do, put pink triangles on them? Have them sashay down the corridors?”<sup>22</sup>

5. Representation of gay characters would require the explicit representation of their sexual practice. Arnold asked, “Would you have us show two men in bed together?”<sup>23</sup> Since a heterosexist society has reduced homosexuals to their sexuality, then the only way to represent them would be to show them engaged in sexual activity.

6. Representation of gay characters and their relationships would be a violation of genre expectations. Adopting a suggestively feminine metaphor, Arnold asked, “Would you have us turn this [*Star Trek*] into

a soap opera?” To deal with homosexuality as part of the character’s lifestyle would be to transform (and perhaps, emasculate) *Star Trek*, while to deal with heterosexuality as part of the character’s lifestyle would be to leave its status as a male-targeted action-adventure program unchanged. Any sort of concerted effort to respond to this logic requires an attempt to make heterosexuality rather than homosexuality visible, to show how its marks can be seen on the characters, the plots, and the entire environment:

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

7. As a last resort, having failed to convince the Gaylaxians with their other arguments, the producers sought to deny their own agency in the production of the program and their own control over its ideological vision, saying, “Should a *good* script come along that allows us to address the problems that the gay and lesbian community face on the planet today, then it will very likely be produced.”<sup>24</sup> But, in fact, there had been a script, called “Blood and Fire,” written by David Gerrold, in the very first season of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, at a time when producers were desperately looking for material to keep the fledgling series on the air. Gerrold’s script used Regalian Blood Worms as a metaphor to deal with the issue of AIDS and included a gay couple as secondary characters. . . .

Gerrold’s script went through multiple revisions before being scuttled. The producers have consistently insisted that their decision not to produce “Blood and Fire” was based on its merits, not its inclusion of gay themes and characters. Gerrold, who parted company with Roddenberry shortly after this incident, has repeatedly challenged this account, charging that the episode was never filmed because the producers were uncomfortable with his attempts to introduce the issue of homosexuality into the *Star Trek* universe: “People complained the script had blatantly homosexual characters. Rick Berman said we can’t do this in an afternoon market in some places. We’ll have parents writing letters.”<sup>25</sup>

Gerrold told his story at science fiction conventions, on the computer nets, and to lots and lots of reporters. Copies of the script have circulated informally among Gaylaxians and other fans. “Blood and Fire” became part of the fan community’s understanding of the program history and was a key factor in motivating the Gaylaxians to adopt more aggressive strategies in lobbying for their cause. “Good scripts are accepted, and this script was deemed not to be a good script,” said Ernest Over, an assistant to the executive producer.<sup>26</sup>

The producers had said, repeatedly, in so many different ways, that the only ways that queers could become visible within *Star Trek* was by becoming a problem, and so, gay, lesbian, and bisexual *Star Trek* fans became a problem for the producers. They organized a national letter-writing campaign; they posted notices on the computer nets; they went to the queer press and made their dissatisfaction with the producers’ responses a public issue. Ernest Over, himself a gay community activist, told *The Advocate* that the *Star Trek* office had received “more letters on this than we’d had on anything else.”<sup>27</sup>

In the midst of the publicity, just a few months before his death, Gene Roddenberry issued a statement: “In the fifth season of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, viewers will see more of shipboard life in some episodes, which will, among other things, include gay crewmembers in day-to-day circumstances.”<sup>28</sup> An editorialist in the *Los Angeles Times* reported:

This season, gays and lesbians will appear unobtrusively aboard the Enterprise. . . . They weren’t “outed” and they won’t be outcasts; apparently they’ll be neither objects of pity nor melodramatic attention. Their sexual orientation will be a matter of indifference to the rest of the crew.<sup>29</sup>

. . .

When the Gaylaxians sought confirmation of Roddenberry’s statements, they received no response. When reporters from the *Washington Blade* called, they received only a tape-recorded message from executive producer Rick Berman: “The writers and producers of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* are actively exploring a number of possible approaches that would address the issue of sexual orientation.”<sup>30</sup> Once again, “the issue of sexual orientation” had substituted for the prom-

ise of queer characters. And, as the new season premiered, queer fans learned that they would become “outcasts,” after all.

### *A Human Failing*

[Roddenberry] had discussed with us before his death the possibility of having two men hold hands in some scene, which was totally irrelevant to the issue of homosexuality. . . . So we decided to tell a story that was about sexual intolerance.

—*Star Trek* writing staff supervisor Michael Piller<sup>31</sup>

There is a curious footnote in Gene Roddenberry’s novelization of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, one that members of the female fan writing community have long read as the producer’s wink toward Kirk/Spock fiction. “Because *t’hy’la* [a term Spock used to refer to Kirk] can be used to mean *lover*, and since Kirk’s and Spock’s friendship was unusually close, this has led some to speculate over whether they had actually indeed become lovers,” Roddenberry explained, acknowledging for the first and only time within a canonical *Star Trek* story that the concept, at least, of homosexuality still existed within his twenty-fourth-century universe.<sup>32</sup> Homosexuality is still the subject of “speculations,” “rumors,” perhaps of blackmail. Yet, Roddenberry allows Kirk to set the record “straight”:

I was never aware of this *lovers* rumor, although I have been told that Spock encountered it several times. Apparently he had always dismissed it with his characteristic lifting of his right eyebrow which usually connoted some combination of surprise, disbelief, and/or annoyance. As for myself, although I have no moral or other objections to physical love in any of its many Earthly, alien and mixed forms, I have always found my best gratification in that creature *woman*. Also, I would dislike being thought of as so foolish that I would select a love partner who came into sexual heat only once every seven years.<sup>33</sup>

So, just as quickly as he makes it appear, Roddenberry begins to make homosexuality disappear again. Yet Roddenberry doesn’t totally close the door here. With an extra bit of effort, we can peek into Kirk’s closet

and find hints of something perverse. What exactly does Kirk, this man of multiple worlds, mean when he says that his “best gratification” came through heterosexuality? How has he come to be in a position to make such an evaluation? He doesn’t, after all, say that it was his only gratification. What experiences had Kirk had with “physical love in any of its many Earthly, alien and mixed forms”? And, so, Roddenberry, at one and the same time, authorizes a space for fan speculation and explicitly, directly, denies the possibility that homosexual desire might run between Kirk and Spock.

In an important contribution to queer media theory, D. A. Miller has traced the ways that Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope* makes its characters’ homosexuality a matter of connotation rather than denotation, something that is suggested but never said. “Connotation will always manifest a certain semiotic insufficiency,” Miller notes, allowing “homosexual meaning to be elided even as it is also being elaborated.”<sup>34</sup> While the homosexuality of *Rope*’s major characters has been taken for granted by almost all critics writing about the film, their sexual preference is never explicitly stated and thus remains a matter of interpretation. The truth of denotation (i.e., the explicit representation or statement of homosexuality) is self-evident while the truth of connotation (i.e., suggestion or implication) remains open to debate and re-interpretation. Connotation has, as Miller suggests, “an abiding deniability.” A play with connotation is often a way to work around censorship, but by its very nature, it denies the queer visibility the Gaylaxians sought from *Star Trek*’s producers. Rather, the play with connotation, as Miller suggests, teaches only the importance of remaining silent.

“The Host” and “The Outcast,” the two *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episodes that brush across the issue of sexual preference, can be seen as similar plays with connotation, often threatened with being swamped by some larger, more “universal” concern. Here, for example, is director Marvin Rush describing the *Star Trek* episode “The Host”:

Male/female, male/male, female/female relationships exist in life in various forms and they’re fair game for drama. I think “The Host” was about an aspect of that. But to me it was more about the nature of love, and [whether] the packages makes a difference.<sup>35</sup>

Writing staff supervisor Michael Piller acknowledges that “The Outcast” was a conscious response to the letter-writing campaign but it

was, in truth, a “story that addressed the issue of sexual intolerance. . . . [T]hat was really the broader issue.”<sup>36</sup>

In “The Host,” the *Enterprise*’s doctor, Beverley Crusher, falls in love—with a man. Odan, an alien ambassador, beams aboard, charms the pants off her, and the two become romantically, and, it is strongly suggested, sexually, involved. Only then, after the fact, does Crusher learn that the body she has been sleeping with is actually simply the host while the “man” with whom she has fallen in love is an extraterrestrial symbiont. The host body is dying. The symbiont is temporarily transplanted into Riker’s body, the body of a man she considers as a “brother.” After much soul-searching, Crusher again falls in love with Odan and it is again suggested that she goes to bed with him. In the final scene, Odan’s new host, a woman, arrives to receive the transplant. Odan, in this body as in all of his previous bodies, still desires “Doctor Beverley,” but Beverley backs away from embracing him in his female form. “Perhaps it is a human failing but we are not accustomed to those kinds of changes,” Dr. Beverley says with a cold stare and a distant voice. “I can’t keep up. . . . I can’t live with that kind of uncertainty. Perhaps someday our ability to love won’t be so limited.” Odan kisses her on the wrist and then walks away, before the camera fades away on a cold, expressionless close-up of the good doctor contemplating, no doubt, the “nature of love.” “Perhaps it was a human failing,” she confessed, safe in the knowledge that on *Star Trek*, human failings like compassion, friendship, emotion, altruism, love, have long been validated in the face of alien challenge. It is, after all, in our failings that we are most decidedly human.

The Gaylaxians were sharply divided about “The Host.” Christine, president of the Boston chapter, wrote a letter praising the episode: “The story was powerful, sensitive, well-acted and intelligent, and clearly illustrates *Trek*’s continuing commitment to explore and present important issues regardless of how controversial they might be.”<sup>37</sup> Her praise was tempered by her recognition of what could be expected to be said on television rather than what it might be desirable for the program to actually say. *Star Trek*, she suggested, had found a way to explore alternative sexuality without running the “risk that the entire midwest would immediately switch off their TVs.” Christine’s acceptance of “The Host” thus balances multiple reading formations: one that interprets the program’s ideology in relation to Roddenberry’s activist image and the other that recognizes the fans as a “powerless elite” that must reconcile its

desires with what is practical in reaching a larger viewing public. Similarly, she negotiates between the appreciation of allegory as a form of social commentary and the fans’ desire for recognition in terms acceptable within fandom’s realist aesthetic. . . .

Not surprisingly, however, given the precarious balance she achieves between these differing reading formations, other group members did not share Christine’s endorsement of the episode. The ambiguities of the closing scene particularly provoked discomfort and debate. Why does Crusher pull back from Odan when he appears to her as a woman, yet she was able to sleep with him when he took the form of her “brother”? Is it, as she says, because she can’t keep up with the changes or because, as is strongly implied, she can’t deal with the possibility of lesbian desire? What is it that the people of the Federation have not yet learned to accept, parasites in host bodies or queer visibility? And, is homosexuality even what’s on offer here, given the program’s careful efforts to situate Odan as quite literally a man’s mind trapped inside a woman’s body? Consider, for example, this exchange during one of the interview sessions, a debate that recurred in a similar form each time I discussed this episode with group members:

*Betty:* I liked it but I wanted it to go on for another half hour. If the third body—the woman had come in fifteen or twenty minutes before the end of the show and Beverley had to deal with her.

*Lynne:* But they don’t have the guts to do that yet. . . .

*Betty:* If Beverley had to deal with the person she loved in the body of a woman, the whole gay issue would have been raised and you would have lost sight of the issue you raised—is it the shell or the personality that you love?

. . .

Even here, heterosexuality is seen as universal, abstract, while homosexuality is too particular and concrete to carry the weight of such a global concern as “the nature of love.” Straights can stand for all lovers, while lesbians are more specialized signifiers.

*Lynne:* I think Beverley would have responded almost similarly if Odan came back as a young blond male but a total stranger. “I can’t do this again.” That’s the feeling I got. But on top of it all, it’s a woman and she’s not usually inclined that way. I can’t deal with you changing bod-

ies on me. You don’t look like you did before. First she had to deal with Riker. My God! Riker’s body! Blech! She dealt with that but it took her a good twenty minutes of the episode. She would have needed another twenty minutes of episode to deal with this female body. But I saw the little smile on her face at the end and that’s what clued me in that the writer’s left it open-ended.

Homosexuality survives as a “little smile,” an ambiguous gesture, which is readable as homophobic, foreclosing all future possibilities or as tolerant, “open-ended,” and subject to multiple interpretations. So much weight to put on a “little smile” but sometimes that’s all you have.

The following season, *Star Trek* tried again to confront and resolve the “problem” of homosexuality. If “The Host” wasn’t really about homosexuality, even if it visually represented the possibility, however fleetingly, on the screen, “The Outcast” was to be the “gay episode.” Supervising producer Jeri Taylor explains, “‘The Host’ was really more about the nature of what is the basis of a love relationship. ‘The Outcast,’ though, is a gay rights story. It absolutely, specifically and outspokenly dealt with gay issues.”<sup>38</sup> “The Outcast” would put the issue behind them once and for all, carefully containing its implications within a single story set on an alien world that had no previous contact with the Federation and, under the circumstances, probably wouldn’t want to get into communication again.

The J’naii are an androgynous race who have outlawed the very concept of gender. (The J’naii, predictably enough, were played entirely by women.)<sup>39</sup> Riker meets Soren, a J’naii technician, while working together to rescue a spaceship that has been lost in “null space.” The appearance of a woman without gender invites a constant investigation of the wonders of heterosexuality. “What kind of a woman do you find attractive?” she asks Riker. “Tell me, is that the kind of woman all human males prefer?” she asks again. “It is up to the woman to attract the man?” Soren inquires of Dr. Crusher. Repairing a disabled shuttle craft, Riker and Soren discuss their feelings toward each other. “What is involved with two sexes? Mating?” she wants to know, and each time, both her questions and their responses assume that heterosexuality is the only possibility. After all, in a world with two sexes, why settle for only one? “Perhaps it is that complexity which makes the differences in the sexes so interesting,” she exclaims, amid Riker’s knowing talk about “snips and snails and puppy dog tales” and “sugar and spice and

everything nice.” Soren confesses that she has, in fact, come to think of herself as female and to have an “unnatural” preference for men, even though such a sexual identity is outlawed in her culture:

I am taking a terrible risk telling you that. . . . Some have strong inclinations for maleness. Some have urges to be female. I am one of the latter. . . . In our world, these feelings are forbidden. Those who are discovered are shamed and ridiculed. . . . Those of us who have these urges lead secret and guarded lives. We seek each other out. Always hiding, always terrified of being discovered.

The two disobey the laws of her culture and dare to express their “deviant” heterosexual desires for each other, but Soren is made to defend her heterosexuality before the council of Androgynies: “What we do is not different from what you do. . . . What makes you think you can dictate how people love each other?” After much soul-searching, Riker and Worf decide to disobey Star Fleet’s Prime Directive and attempt to rescue Soren from the therapy that will “cure” her of her outcast sexuality. For once, on a program famous for its split-second escapes from certain doom, they arrive too late. Soren, who has been cured, rejects Riker’s advances and so he flies away aboard the *Enterprise*, leaving her behind. . . .

If allegory depends upon the readers’ abilities to fill its silences with their own voices, to complete the statements the text has left unfinished, the fans saw only the gaps and the evasions. Nowhere do any of the characters make explicit reference to the possibility of homosexuality nor do they directly confront homophobia. Homosexuality remains a connotative ghost, still that form of sexual desire that dares not speak its name.

The Gaylaxians recognized that what made this episode particularly dangerous was its insubstantiability, its refusal to state directly and explicitly what its message was intended to be:

The depiction of Soren’s society seemed to be something taken right from Rush Limbaugh’s show or Pat Buchanan’s campaign literature. If you listen to those people, you’ll hear them talking about how the feminist and homosexual political agendas want to destroy the traditional family and make society into a sexless, genderless collection of politically correct clones, and if you don’t toe the line, you’ll be censored.

Soren’s society was a depiction of those people’s worst nightmares. It seems to me that if you were of that mindset to begin with, this show did nothing but confirm those unfounded fears, and nothing to challenge them. . . . It was so ambiguous, so valueless and empty, as to leave it open for this interpretation.<sup>40</sup>

The denotative dimensions of the story—the literal level of the narrative—had such force, they feared, that it would completely swamp the connotative meanings of the allegory. What appears on screen, at the most basic denotative level, is an “outspoken” defense of heterosexuality, including that daring moment when Riker and Soren, the actors Jonathan Frakes and Melinda Culea, break all social taboos and kiss each other on the lips, right there on television. . . .

But, pull back from the denotative, take the allegory on its own connotative terms, and what do you have?

If I were a gay teenager trying to come out, this episode would have done nothing for me. I would have left with exactly what I came in with. Yeah—I suppose there are gay people out there. I don’t know how or why I’m going to find them and I don’t have any kind of sense that things are going to be okay. (Gaylaxian group discussion)

. . .

But then again, given the instability of this allegory, perhaps some people missed the point altogether, perhaps some straight people didn’t even realize that the episode was supposed to be about “gay rights.” This story was oft-repeated:

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. (Gaylaxian group discussion)

What happened when you pointed it out to them? “They argued with it. They still felt that it was more a human rights issue.” And they did not perceive that a gay rights issue might also be a human rights issue?

“Well, I couldn’t really go into it because I’m only out to half of the group I was talking with and so it wasn’t something I could pursue.”

And, so, maybe, all the episode said was that heterosexuality ought to exist everywhere in the galaxy, hardly a groundbreaking statement. As staff writer Brannon Braga said, “We were advocating tolerance. What’s so risky about making a statement that intolerance is bad?”<sup>41</sup> The allegorical nature of the story allowed the producers to place the risk of “coming out” onto the backs of viewers rather than taking on that responsibility for themselves. “It was a very special episode. There are no subject[s] taboo for this show,” Braga brags.<sup>42</sup> Gay fans noted that this was not the same way the series had tackled civil rights issues in the 1960s:

*Frank*: “Let That Be the Last Battlefield” was a statement against racial discrimination. There was no need to make that statement. *Star Trek* had been making a statement against prejudice from the first episode when they had a multi-racial crew. If they had done “Battlefield” exactly as they did it as a statement against racial prejudice and every person on the ship was white, it would have been insulting—hypocrisy. But that’s exactly what “The Outcast” did. They said basically, “we should be accepting and tolerant of people who have different sexual preferences but we aren’t going to show any on our show. We aren’t going to include any on the crew.”

### *Q for Queer?*

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

—Steve K., *The Lavender Dragon*<sup>43</sup>

. . .

If Paramount and Berman thought that “The Outcast” would safely contain the specter of homosexuality on the far-strung planet of the J’Naii, then they misunderstood the power of connotation to grow, like ivy, all over a text once it has been planted there. As D. A. Miller writes, queer connotation has the

inconvenience of tending to raise this ghost all over the place. For once received in all its uncertainty, the connotation instigates a project of confirmation. . . . Connotation thus tends to light everywhere, to put all signifiers to a test of their hospitality.<sup>44</sup>

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

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

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

Soon the entire group is participating within this carnival of outlaw signifiers. . . .

For these fans, the text’s silences about characters’ sexuality or motives can be filled with homosexual desire, since, after all, in our society, such desire must often go unspoken. Straight fans, on the other hand, are apt to demand conclusive evidence that a character is homosexual and otherwise, read all unmarked characters as straight by default. What’s at stake is the burden of proof and the nature of evidence within a culture where homosexuality most often appears within connotation

rather than denotation. Such speculations cannot sustain direct challenge and often are not taken literally by those who advance them, but open up a fleeting possibility of imagining a different text existing in the margins of that which Paramount delivers.

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

The marks of heterosexuality, normally invisible, are made “obvious” by this interpretation, an act of violence committed against otherwise potentially queer characters, a reaction of homosexual panic that seeks to stabilize (or even to deny) their sexuality. Characters’ sexualities do not remain unmarked for long within the world of *Star Trek* or, for that matter, the world of popular culture, which insists that characters be undeniably heterosexual even if their sexual preference is totally irrelevant to their narrative actions.<sup>45</sup> “Data has been assigned a sexual orientation, basically” (James). Data has been “heterosexualized.” Yar has been “straightened.”

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

. . .

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

...

Moreover, we need to identify ways in which resistant reading is not necessarily a sufficient response to dissatisfaction with the images currently in circulation. As many writers have noted, resistant reading risks becoming a catch-all solution for all the problems within popular culture, a way of escaping the need for ideological criticism or research into the political economy of media institutions. A model of resistant reading quickly becomes profoundly patronizing if it amounts to telling already socially marginalized audiences that they should be satisfied with their ability to produce their own interpretations and should not worry too much about their lack of representation within the media itself. Resistant reading can sustain the Gaylaxians' own activism, can become a source of collective identity and mutual support, but precisely because it is a subcultural activity that is denied public visibility, resistant reading cannot change the political agenda, cannot challenge other constructions of gay identity, and cannot have an impact on the ways

people outside of the group think about the issues that matter to the Gaylaxians. Slash, or K/S fiction, represents a long-standing tradition in the women’s fan-writing community that poses ways of constructing homoerotic fantasies employing the series characters.

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