From Orlando to Ooloi:

Gender Nonconformity and Queer Futurity in Sci-Fi

by

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For everyone actively fighting to make a place for themselves in this world.

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Thesis Abstract

Through close examination of their distinct portrayals of gender nonconformity, this thesis places three feminist science fiction authors from the 20th century–Virginia Woolf, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Octavia Butler–in conversation. My project advocates for increased representation of gender nonconformity in media, and particularly within narrative fiction, through explaining how each author inspires new conceptualizations of what it means to live androgynously–both in our world today, and in the unknown and distant future.

Under western society's long established notions of heteronormativity, there are obligatory ways in which people are often expected by hegemonic powers to conform to their assigned sex at birth; through pronouns, physical presentation, and gender roles, among many other aspects of daily life. Yet not everyone accepts and adheres to these expectations, despite an increased likelihood of experiencing ostracization and other forms of discrimination due to their nonconformity. The genre of science fiction offers a unique and powerful medium through which to present potential alternative realities with different expectations, as shown by the authors examined in the following pages. Furthermore, I address the effect that these kinds of imagined existences have on society as a whole.

Relying on the groundbreaking theories outlined by José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia*, I show how Woolf, Le Guin, and Butler exemplify his notion of "queer futurity" within their novels. Queer futurity, according to my interpretations, is built upon not only a rejection of current reality, but also an assumption that a new world order is possible. Essentially, imagination does not occur within a vacuum; fiction is stimulated by reality whilst simultaneously inciting it. Queer futurity recognizes the potential for a better society–one in which human differences are not feared or hated, but admired and embraced. As other writers continue to emulate these authors and concepts, and readers embrace them, such a world comes ever closer to fruition.

Key Words

nonbinary gender identities, gender nonconformity, androgyny, literary representation, queer futurity, queer utopia, science fiction, societal influence, social change, gesture, 20th century

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Introduction

"Queerness, if it is to have any political resonance,
needs to be more than an identitarian marker
and to articulate a forward-dawning futurity."

-José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* (87).

For decades now, literary scholars have debated the nature of Virginia Woolf's relationship to Vita Sackville-West, with Woolf's fiction novel *Orlando* providing some of the most realistic evidence to support the possibility that their relationship was beyond platonic. Many scholars have suggested that the main character was actually modeled after West, based on notable parallels between her and the character's lives and personalities. Whether or not the characters in the story were truly inspired by West and others in Woolf's life, or if it was intended as some entirely unrelated metaphor, I argue that the main character's gender nonconformity must reflect aspects inherent to Woolf's perception of reality.

Woolf came of age in a world much different from our present one, though she saw many cultural, economic, and political shifts occur. She could've never imagined what existence would look like for the average person today, yet her work continues to stimulate other writers almost a hundred years later. Today, *Orlando* remains one of the 20th century's most iconic portrayals of queer existence in the eyes of many readers.

Well before I was accepted to the thesis program last year, I'd encountered many media forms in which gender nonconformity was explicitly represented; television, music, literature, art. By far, the richest area I discovered was in the realm of feminist science fiction. In this genre, presentations of gender stand out because they move beyond contemporary notions, and gesture towards the future. Many aspects of society are critically examined within them, yet the diverse and growing genre of sci-fi novels often provide a uniquely apolitical stance by separating themselves from certain, seemingly engrained aspects of our culture, like contemporary pop culture references and certain fashion trends. This allows the authors to hone in on more abstract and deeply integrated subjects, such as gender.

The most diverse representations appeared, alongside Woolf's *Orlando*, in the works of Ursula Le Guin and Octavia Butler. Particularly, Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy. All three novels deliberately include characters who are gender nonconforming; meaning they either simultaneously exhibit attributes traditionally assigned to both ends of the gender binary, or otherwise evoke a completely unique form of gender separate from male or female. As a gender-nonconforming person myself, I immediately recognized this exciting connection, even through initial casual readings, and felt extremely compelled to further explore how each author tackles the subject in comparison to the others.

Though science fiction is often confused with fantasy, there is one main point of differentiation between the two. The former deals with what is possible–if not now, at least potentially so in the future. It is rooted in extrapolations, sourced from actual reality. Fantasy, on the other hand, deals with the magical and mystical; things that are totally impossible according to today's hegemonic notions of life and science. Many stereotypically supernatural powers, such as magic, invisibility, and telepathy, are examples of fantasy elements. In this context, one can

see how science fiction offers a particularly useful lens through which to examine the effects and intentions behind literary representations of gender nonconformity. As Le Guin says in her preface to *The Left Hand of Darkness*;

> "All fiction is metaphor. Science fiction is metaphor. What sets it apart from older forms of fiction seems to be its use of new metaphors, drawn from certain great dominants of our contemporary life–science, all the sciences, and technology, and the relativistic and the historical outlook, among them. Space travel is one of these metaphors; so is an alternative society, an alternative biology; the future is another. The future, in fiction, is a metaphor." (Le Guin xxii).

This might seem a bit abstract. What I think this means is essentially that, due to how these representations are extrapolated from real life, assumptions can be drawn from them about the past, present, and potential of our society. Despite the fact that each story is not reality itself, they do exist within reality, and therefore are the result of the society that created them. Equally so, they are each an instigator of further changes.

When Woolf first published *Orlando*, many critics initially understood it as a work of fantasy, probably due to the widely believed consensus of the time being that a person's gender was inextricably connected to their assigned sex at birth. Consequently, most people believed that it would be inconceivable for a man to become a woman, as Orlando does in the story. I, however, along with a growing number of other scholars, believe that *Orlando* is far more reflective of reality than previously thought.

José Esteban Muñoz's work on gesture and queer futurity has been particularly

foundational in the formulation of my thesis. In *Cruising Utopia*, he writes that "queerness is about the rejection of a here and now, and an insistence on potentiality, or concrete possibility for another world." (Muñoz 1). For me, such a notion establishes and illuminates an undeniable association between science fiction and queerness, as the genre is intrinsically expected to present alternative realities based upon our own. It encourages readers to, so to speak, "reject the here and now," and push forward, into an unknown future where everything can be different. A world where the status quo can be upended, and our world replaced with a better one–whatever that might entail.

Relying on the groundbreaking theories outlined by José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia*, I show how Woolf, Le Guin, and Butler exemplify his notion of "queer futurity" in their novels. Queer futurity, according to my interpretations, is built upon not only a rejection of current reality, but also the assumption that a new world order is possible. Essentially, imagination does not occur within a vacuum. Science fiction is stimulated by reality while simultaneously inciting change within it. It recognizes the potential for a better society–one in which human differences are not feared or hated, but admired and embraced.

Each chapter in this thesis foregrounds one individual author, and seeks to (1) outline the manner in which each portrays their gender nonconforming characters, (2) explain how each engages with the concept of queer futurity as outlined by Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia*, and (3) position each of the three primary texts in relation to one another. Within their respective novels, each author approaches certain elements of life for gender nonconforming people–such as alternative pronouns, bodily characteristics, and gender roles–albeit in ways that are both strikingly similar and different from other representations. These authors are in conversation, with each answering and asking key questions meant more to provoke the minds of their readers,

as opposed to explaining outright how they themselves understand the subject.

On a larger scale, my thesis aims to convey the power of queer representation in science fiction, and confirm its effects on society as a whole. In order to do this, I will explore how changes in Western societal perceptions of gender nonconformity have manifested today, compared to and as an indirect result of representations such as the ones identified in this thesis. It is my hope that this will reveal how societies like our own, with a long history of ostracizing differences, have become more accepting and understanding of unique gender identities over time. Furthermore, this practice also provides insight on how such perceptions may continue to change as time moves on.

In terms of methodology, my work has been mostly observational and analytic, with the main form of applied research being close examination of linguistics within the text. In particular, the morphology of words, as well as the semantics and pragmatics evident in the way certain moments are written, have been the primary aspects of textual evidence upon which my thesis is built. By semantics and pragmatics, I mean the meaning of words in isolation and in context. I have also paid particular attention to concepts of imagination versus historical extrapolation, and how those literary processes interact to manifest queer futurity through science fiction. Also, I have done some work that could be considered autobiographical or biographical analysis, especially in studying non-fictitious text (essays and notes) from the authors and those who have studied their lives. Furthermore, studying moments of "meeting" in the texts, and how characters' realities and positions in society seem to be reflected through encounters with strangers, has also proved to form a large basis of what I have found most interesting in the novels.

It is especially important to note that the authors I study here are not the only ones to

have tackled gender, or gender nonconformity, even just within the genre of science fiction. There are a number of other texts which I could have easily included, which further exemplify how rich the literary landscape is regarding the subject. I also wholeheartedly believe there are currently other authors expanding on it, in works that have yet to be published. New visions of reality being created constantly, which will continue to shape our future as a society each time they are read by different eyes.

Chapter One:

Orlando

The novel opens on our character, who carries the same name as the text's title. The first lines read; "He–for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it–was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters." (Woolf 1). Over the course of the following one hundred and twenty-five pages, Orlando grows from a sixteen-year old boy into a man. All the while, the setting is moving at an accelerated rate through time, which allows him to experience over a hundred years worth of history while still in his youth.

Orlando enjoys many of the average activities expected for young European men in and around the seventeenth century, including the courtly pursuits, spending time with young ladies, writing, hunting, and exploring. Yet at the ripe age of thirty Orlando goes into a mysterious trance, emerging from it quite different than before. It happens quite miraculously; "Orlando had become a woman–there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been." (138).

She stays like this for the rest of her life–a woman–though a layer of doubt is cast over the truth of her gender, which carries through the rest of the novel. Although none of it appears to hold her back, or harm her in any way. She even gets married, after an incredibly brief "engagement", to a man named Shelmerdine. This is despite the fact that Orlando appears to doubt his sex, as much as he doubts hers;

"'Are you positive you aren't a man?' he would ask, anxiously, and she would echo,

> ‘Can it be possible you’re not a woman?’ and then they must put it to the proof without more ado. For each was so surprised at the quickness of the other’s sympathy, and it was to each such a revelation that a woman could be as tolerant and free-spoken as a man, and a man as strange and subtle as a woman” (258).

When Virginia Woolf originally published *Orlando* in 1928, the word transgender did not yet exist. There were no medical sex changes, and the average person had absolutely zero authority over whether or not they would adhere to the gender roles they were assigned at birth. Gender nonconformity of any kind was far more likely to be viewed by sensible members of society as an illness, rather than a strength–yet Woolf had other ideas, evident in her representation of Orlando.

Only a year after *Orlando*, Woolf went on to publish *A Room of One’s Own*. In this text, she discussed the concept of the androgynous mind as put forth by Samuel Coleridge. “[Coleridge] meant, perhaps, that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous…it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided,” she writes. “Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine.” (Woolf 98). In other words, according to Woolf, gender nonconformity actually makes artists better suited for their work, as well as indicates overall mental maturity.

“Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future,” José Esteban Muñoz tells us at the start of *Cruising Utopia*. More concisely; “Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a

here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world." (Muñoz 1). In this sense, queer futurity/ideality can be understood most directly as a type of utopia. It exists in the minds of humans who would prefer to live in a society that does not confine its people to the rigid structures of heteronormativity, and who put forth effort to initiate the kinds of societal change which bring us closer to making such a future into reality. Woolf exemplifies this concept enthusiastically in *Orlando*, as she presents another version of Earth; one where it is feasible for a person to experience the world as both a man and a woman from within the same body.

Importantly, Muñoz also references within that same excerpt how queer futurity is "distilled from the past". Virginia Woolf represents such an idealized version of the past through the supernatural aspect of the changing of Orlando's gender, and the temporal scale across which the story takes place. The book spans a length of time beginning before even the author's own birth, and follows the main character across centuries of societal innovation and change. For the sake of creating another version of the past where the events of Orlando's life are possible, Woolf alters the rules of mortality and time as she simultaneously deconstructs the boundaries of the gender binary. *Orlando* also essentially constitutes an accurate and radical prediction that gender nonconformity is an attainable goal–if not in Woolf's own lifetime, then in later ones. The book could not be written today in the same way because of modern inventions such as hormone therapy and surgery, which are now, by comparative standards, readily available to transgender people of current generations. Though without fictional suggestions from writers like Woolf appearing when they did, perhaps these advancements would not exist in reality today. After all, her future is our present, which makes her present our past. And according to Muñoz, the future for queer people can only be seen by looking into the past.

In the first chapter of *Orlando* Woolf writes, “The age was the Elizabethan; their morals were not ours; nor their poets; nor their climate; nor their vegetables even. Everything was different. The weather itself, the heat and cold of summer and winter, was, we may believe, of another temper altogether.” (Woolf 26-27). These lines might be attributed to the narrator or understood as coming from Woolf herself, but regardless, they come from a perspective which is clearly positioned in a relative future. They seem meant to bring attention to how the world changes through time; an extremely relevant interpretation in the context of this thesis.

Catriona Livingstone adds, in one recent edition of *Woolf Studies Annual*, that “[the lens of science fiction] identifies a form of utopianism in Woolf’s writing that is located not in programmatic, fully-realized visions of the future, but within her depiction of latent, unexplored aspects of her characters’ identities—the lives they might have led, the paths they might have taken—aspects which point the way towards an improved way of being. Her works exhibit what might be called a subjunctive utopianism, one that resides in the might-have-been, in the might-be: a utopianism that runs counter to narrative and emerges only in glimpses.” (Livingstone 88). Such a perspective on Woolf’s writing appears in strong agreement with another inherent aspect to Muñoz’ understanding of queer futurity–that it is “not an end but an opening or horizon” (Muñoz 91). In other words, there is no direct goal to be reached through the process of imagining a queer future. The intent seems more accurately to be inspiring positive change in general, from which tangible results will undoubtedly arise, whatever they may be.

Woolf fails–or perhaps does not even attempt–to clearly explain the phenomenon of Orlando’s shifting gender, in terms mystical or medical. I take this as a reflection of how the real possibility of a person changing their gender was absent from Woolf’s present at the time she wrote the novel. She had no idea *how* it might happen biologically, yet the potential that it *could*

was still visible to her. So, in her novel she created a falsified version of the past. One where not every person is confined to experiencing the world as only a man or a woman, respectively, despite the limitations to her understanding of how such a change could occur.

In terms of language, Woolf does not invent much. The later two authors I will examine, Le Guin and Butler, make use of many neologisms which were simply unavailable or unfathomable to Woolf in her time. The author of *Orlando* chooses to use masculine pronouns (he/him/his) to refer to the main character in the first half of the novel, and then switches to feminine ones (she/her/hers), though this is said only to be "for convention's sake" (138). The fact is that there was no established convention for sex changes in the early 20th century. Even allowing for Orlando's change was an idea that pushed beyond all established understanding of the natural relationship between sex and gender which had already been long prevailing in society at the time. There is one key grammatical tradition that Woolf does break in the text, with the limited use of plural they/them/theirs pronouns for Orlando, which are preferred by a number of gender nonconforming people today. "The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same" (138). While the second line is harder to argue for, as it seems to refer separately to young (male) Orlando and older (female) Orlando, the first line clearly says singularly "their future" and "their identity".

The main character's transition is a particular moment in *Orlando* which deserves further attention in this context. While recent scholarship from folks such as Catriona Livingstone and Elizabeth Wright have complicated the consensus, many previous critics with more heteronormative perspectives came to the conclusion that Orlando's transition was a biological and linear one. Simply put, that Orlando was born and raised as one sex, yet somehow ended up

the other. There are surely some parts of the novel that support such an interpretation; the pronouns that Woolf applies to the character at different times, and the reactions to those around Orlando constitute two major points. Other scholars however, myself included, have suggested that perhaps Orlando was always meant to be a mix of the two.

Elizabeth Wright is one academic who positions herself in agreement here. In her piece titled "Re-evaluating Woolf's Androgynous Mind", she discusses perspectives of nineteenth and twentieth century scientific figures which gained notoriety during Woolf's time; "Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Edward Carpenter, Havelock Ellis, Otto Weininger, and Sigmund Freud all put forward to some degree or other the theory of a third sex in which masculine and feminine characteristics (drawn of course along the lines of biological essentialist binary thought) came together in a single body." (Wright 2). The third sex in this context can be understood as referring to any person who exhibits elements of gender nonconformity, or presents as anything other than a full adherent to the gender they were raised as. Woolf would have most likely understood Orlando to be a member of this "third sex", as the character does exhibit both masculine and feminine traits at different times, regardless of whether Orlando's gender expression indicated one or the other in actuality. The researcher adds, quoting other scholar Barbara Fassler; "Ellis and Carpenter were read by members of the Bloomsbury group and most within that circle shared 'the common belief that to be artistic one must have the unique combination of masculine and feminine elements found in hermaphrodites and homosexuals.'" (3). Woolf, as a queer person and an artist herself, seems to have used *Orlando* to push beyond the limitations of how those gendered elements were ever previously thought to interact.

Woolf also does seem to intentionally leave the reality of Orlando's transition to the mind of the reader. It occurs in a way that is simultaneously natural and profoundly unnatural.

"Orlando had become a woman–there is no denying it," she writes, "But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been" (Woolf 138). Woolf adds that, "The change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely and in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise at it," and clarifies that Orlando's face remained "portraits prove, practically the same." For this to be possible, Orlando must possess an androgynous physicality on some implicit level. The character is described as physically beautiful, before and afterwards; "No human being, since the world began, has ever looked more ravishing. His form combined in one the strength of a man and a woman's grace" (138). There is no fairy godmother, and no surgical castration, and Orlando did not discover that she had been a woman all along. In fact, there is never any direct mention of Orlando's genitals throughout the novel, and while some people attempt to prove that she had always been a woman, or that he was still a man (139), none on either side were shown to be successful in gathering any evidence.

Especially when Orlando later in life goes out once again dressed as a man, meets Nell, and nearly seduces her, her gender can be read ambiguously. When Orlando first accompanies Nell back home, the latter "roused in Orlando all the feelings which become a man. She looked, she felt, she talked line one" (219). Orlando becomes unsettled not by being perceived as a man, but by Nell's actions in response to that perception, and "in the strangest torment of anger, merriment, and pity, she flung off all disguise and admitted herself a woman" (219). Nell reacts with laughter, then immediate acceptance and joy, and proceeds to bring Orlando into her circle of friends. The fact that Woolf chooses the word *admitted* as opposed to exposed, or presented, seems important to me, because it gives the choice to Orlando as to how her gender should be interpreted by the other characters. For a time, Orlando goes on to "change frequently from one set of clothes to another…she reaped a twofold harvest by this device; the pleasures of life were

increased and its experiences multiplied" (220-21). The ability of the character to fluidly pass between presenting as male and female is paramount too, as it further muddles the linear nature of Orlando's transition.

Throughout the novel, including after transitioning, Orlando continues to practice traditionally masculine behaviors. As a young man, he's violent and valiant, skilled with a blade and with politics. He even assists in the negotiations between King Charles and the Turks (119), an undertaking which a woman would have been considered too emotional to handle. Orlando forms no lasting attachments, and appears not to engage in sex despite being the object of desire for "many women and some men" (125). After becoming a woman, Orlando acts somewhat differently, yet does not totally lose her masculinity. "Too well pleased with the change to spoil it by thinking," she chooses to relish her lack of responsibilities. "The pleasure of having no documents to seal, or sign, no flourishes to make, no calls to pay was enough" (141).

Towards the end of the novel, as Orlando reads the poem she had written as a young boy years prior, she reflects on how she's changed over the years.

> "She had been a gloomy boy, in love with death, as boys are; and then she had been amorous and florid, and then she had been sprightly and satirical; and sometimes she had tried prose and sometimes she had tried the drama. Yet through all these changes she had remained, she reflected, fundamentally the same. She had the same brooding meditative temper, the same love of animals and nature, and the same passion for the country and the seasons" (237).

These lines make it clear how Orlando becomes a freer version of herself through

relinquishing the gender roles she was prescribed at birth. In becoming a woman, she is able to explore both her masculine and feminine sides in a way that she could not as a man alone. She is able to recognize her own unique qualities outside of their relativity to gender, while she refers to her younger self as a boy and her present self as a woman. These points are extremely evocative of the lived experiences of gender nonconforming people in our society today, both linguistically and in emotional resonance.

Woolf was imagining the possibilities of gender nonconformity nearly a century ago, when the concepts of sex and gender were only just beginning to diverge. The idea that a person could make such a change as Orlando did was at the time absolutely revolutionary, and borderline impossible, in a way that still resonates today through the lens of queer futurity.

Chapter Two:

The Left Hand of Darkness

In writing *Orlando,* Virginia Woolf was forced to be somewhat sneaky in how she moved across the boundaries of the traditional gender binary. While the novel was fictional, of course, the setting was still Earth. Plus, the period of time in which the story took place is a familiar one–not too distant, even, from the present. In Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, contrarily, we see a world nearly incomprehensibly removed from our own; by hundreds of thousands of years, and near-infinite space. This choice allowed for the writer to explore gender nonconformity through a completely different, and much larger scope; separated from the prejudices and expectations of Orlando's world, and ours.

The Left Hand of Darkness takes place in the distant future, on the planet of Winter–reminiscent of our own Antarctica–where an ancient colony of Humans has evolved in relative isolation to form a uniquely and entirely androgynous native population. While Woolf's Orlando never had any children, Le Guin's Gethenians are not inhibited on that front by their lack of binary genders. These people have completely different reproductive strategies compared to our present society, and Le Guin bravely even addresses what that could mean biologically, describing the "kemmer" cycles as the Gethenians call them, through which they gain the potential to reproduce for a few days out of every month. According to the Gethenian biology, any person is capable of taking on the role of either parent to their offspring. One might even be both at once; "the mother of several children may be the father of several more" (97). It is even explained that descent lines are traced through the mother only, known as the "parent in the flesh", and all children are raised communally in their mother's kin group (98). Details such as

these, which Le Guin provides liberally, make the novel such an incredible and rich source to examine in this context. Overall, Gethenian androgyny is described as fantastically and fascinatingly well-adapted, and which is thoroughly reflected in all aspects of their lives; "The structure of their societies, the management of their industry, agriculture, commerce, the size of their settlements, the subjects of their stories, everything," (99), as Genly Ai states with characteristically human egotism.

The entirety of the story is told through the eyes of Genly, the only narrator and a foreigner among the Gethenians, who comes as an emissary to bring them into the fold of a new intergalactic civilization. "He is one of us, our surrogate in the text," writes David Attebery, "a man of good will but not particularly acute perceptions, is able to articulate all the reader's objections… and thereby defuse them" (Attebery 131). I agree with this interpretation, though I must clarify I am also assuming that by "us" Attebery refers to people living in our modern society, as opposed to cisgendered people. I would also add that Le Guin also seems to use Genly's recurring awkwardness with the Gethenian gender and sexual nonconformity as a way to subversively poke holes in the modern-day gender binary.

"Though I had been nearly two years on Winter I was still far from being able to see the people of the planet through their own eyes," Genly tells us in the first chapter, showcasing the level to which he still views the natives through a gendered lens, "I tried to, but my efforts took the former of self-consciously seeing a Gethenian first as a man, then as a woman, forcing him into those categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential to my own" (Le Guin 12). Genly goes on to describe how deeply unsettling it feels for him to see feminine characteristics, namely being "all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit", being reflected in such a "dark, ironic, powerful presence" as the Gethenian Estraven's is. "It was impossible to think of

him as a woman…and yet whenever I thought of him as a man I felt a sense of falseness, of imposture" (13). In this section, as well as throughout the rest of the text, the attention that Le Guin pays to adjectives are clear. Many words are feminizing, many are masculinizing, and others are as close to androgynous as possible. Le Guin chooses each with careful intent, and through applying them in a context like this one, she weakens such connections. A word like "powerful" or "dark" would generally only be applied to non-men under extraordinary and symbolic circumstances, and would serve to masculinize the subject. However, in applying the word to Estraven–a man who is not a man at all, or a woman for that matter–Genly's uneasiness conveys the unreliability of these types of gendered associations in language.

Book: Example:	***Orlando* (Virginia Woolf)**	***The Left Hand of Darkness* (Ursula Le Guin)**
Pronouns	(equal) he/she (rare) they	(only) he/him
Reproduction	N/A	biological roles of "mother" and "father" are shared by all, apparently at random
Social Roles	Orlando is able to take typically masculine and feminine social roles, but only at specific times	all Gethenians are able to take on typically masculine and feminine social roles at any time
Physical Attributes	Orlando undergoes minimal physical change, despite perception of gender being altered	Gethenians are usually completely androgynous, and only become "male"/"female" during sex or pregnancy

(Fig. 1) Table emphasizing the similarities and differences between representations of gender nonconformity in both *Orlando* and *The Left Hand of Darkness.*

Later in the novel, Genly urges other future envoys who may interact with the population not to think of a Gethenian as "it", because they are not neuters. Genly explains, "They are potentials, or integrals. Lacking the Karhidish "human pronoun" used for persons in somer, I

must say “he” for the same reasons as we used the masculine pronoun in referring to a transcendent god: it is less defined, less specific, than the neuter or the feminine” (101). While I don’t disagree with it, I think the suggestion of positions within femininity and womanhood being more specific than those of masculinity is a very interesting one. To me, Le Guin seems to be chipping away at the gender binary once again here; by saying that society views a woman as part of an internal class of people, leaving everyone else a man, she exposes the weakness in our own language. Genly proceeds to also, perhaps guiltily, explain that the very use of the pronoun “leads [him] continually to forget that the Karhider [he is] with is not a man, but a manwoman” (101). The latter is hardly the most creative of neologisms, but it does a lot of work towards clarifying what it seems Genly is attempting to convey here; that the Gethenians are more like a combination of masculinity and femininity than they are something wholly outside of both.

A full page of the seventh chapter is dedicated to describing some of the most direct results of Gethenian ambisexuality, listed as “considerations.” Whether you read the passage from Genly or Le Guin’s perspective, it can be thought of as more of a philosophical exploration, as it is clearly written in a way that compares this fictional world to our own, and primarily focuses on the power dynamics inherent in the social and biological gender binary.

The first “consideration” is that all Gethenians are equally likely to become pregnant. Therefore, the sum of the burdens and privileges of reproduction equally falls upon, and is shared by, all individuals within the society. Simply put, “the fact that everyone…is liable to be “tied down to childbearing”, implies that no one is quite so thoroughly “tied down”” (100). Another consideration put forward is that there is no “unconsenting sex” under these biological rules. There is no rape, because sex is only made possible by mutual invitation and consent. Yet another consideration is,“There is no division of humanity into strong and weak halves,

protective/protected, dominant/submissive, owner/chattel, active/passive. In fact the whole tendency to dualism that pervades human thinking may be found to be lessened, or changed, on Winter" (100). I have already admired the thoroughness with which Le Guin presents this world, but the precision with which she puts forward these "considerations" seems especially notable to me. I take it as a very pointed allegory against particular moral dilemmas that come with the continued upholding of the gender binary; unequal responsibilities in parenthood, unequal access to bodily autonomy, and unequal status in general. It is an optimistic image, and one which reflects an ultimate, and potentially idealized, version of feminism, which I think Le Guin is simultaneously forcing readers to consider more critically.

While I examined through *Orlando* how a "willfully idealized" past reflects something missing from the present (Muñoz 86), I believe *The Left Hand of Darkness* shows how explorations of potential futures might also reflect the present. Alternatively, the latter might provide insight into what Le Guin saw as missing from *Orlando,* from the subjective "present" time in which she published *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Namely, what might a world where gender nonconformity *is* actually the norm look like–as opposed to a world where gender nonconformity is only possible, like in *Orlando*? This takes imaginations of queerness to another level. It makes queerness more than a trait, but an entire mode of sociological existence and interaction. Muñoz seems to advocate for this same kind of expansion in writing, "Queerness, if it is to have any political resonance, needs to be more than an identitarian marker and to articulate a forward-dawning futurity." (87).

In the previous chapter I also explained how Orlando can be easily viewed as an example of an "opening", or the horizon form of futurity, but this is not the only form. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz actually outlines a second type of futurity, as well; the "abstract" utopia, which refers to

any one that possesses a "prescriptive end" (Muñoz 91). His argument against this form of futurity becomes clearer in conversation with Giorgio Agamben's ideas about gestural politics. "The gestural speaks to…the not-yet-here," Muñoz writes. "The gesture is not the coherence or totality of movement. Gesture for Giorgio Agamben is exemplary of the politics of a 'means without ends.' The gestural exists as an idealist manifestation and not as a monolithic act directed towards an 'end': 'What characterizes gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but something is being endured and supported.'" (91). Muñoz is not the only writer to have taken Agamben's concept of gesture and applied it in a queer context, as well, and Juana Rodriguez adds that, "For Agamben, 'means without end' is a way to imagine a politics independent of a defined and knowable political goal; instead, 'means without ends' affirms a relationality that compels ethical action." (Rodriguez 5). In other words, one can create positive change without having a clear result in mind.

According to my own reading, I take Muñoz and Rodriguez to mean that queer futurity inherently rests on guesswork. There has never been a whole world made for queer people, so by nature such a world is unprecedented. An "abstract" utopia would be one that attempts to show the unknowable–what *will happen*, as opposed to what *might be possible*. The other type, which I have taken to referring to as the horizon futurity, is one that is aware of itself, and which does not attempt to be truthful; only to expose the *potential* realities of such a world.

It may be easy for queer readers to mistake *The Left Hand of Darkness* as something of a "prescriptive end" to queer futurity; so many of us are hardly optimistic enough to look beyond the drastic changes which have occurred in only the past fifty years. Therefore, a world like Winter might seem like an end result to many, though Le Guin refutes such conceptualizations of her novel in the *Author's Note*; "the moral complexity proper to the modern novel need not be

sacrificed, nor is there any built-in dead end" (Le Guin xviii). Essentially, Le Guin is pointing out that the fictional world of the Gethenians is indefinite–therefore, the Gethenian gender nonconformity is not solidified any more now than it ever was, and their lack of binary is no more static than our heteronormative one is in reality. "This book is not about the future," Le Guin adds later, "indeed the people in it are androgynous, but that doesn't mean that I'm predicting that in a millennium or so we will all be androgynous, or announcing that I think we damned well ought to be androgynous. I'm merely observing…that if you look at us in certain odd times of day in certain weathers, we already are. I am not predicting, or prescribing. I am describing" (xxii). *The Left Hand Of Darkness* does not show us how we might reach such a level of large-scale androgyny; Le Guin does not explain how the Gethenians came to exist as they are, although she puts forward a few ideas including genetic engineering. Le Guin shows us, rather, what might be possible in such a world according to our present beliefs and opinions as a society, and encourages us to explore our own reality from a different perspective.

"Science fiction is all too often defined as "extrapolative", Le Guin also points out; predictions based on logic she compares to cancer. "This book is not extrapolative," she states, encouraging us instead to view it as a thought-experiment, "the purpose of a thought-experiment, as the term was used by Schrodinger and other physicists, is not to predict the future–indeed Schrodinger's most famous thought experiment goes to show that the "future", on the quantum level, cannot be predicted–but to describe reality, the present world. Science fiction is not predictive, it is descriptive" (xviii). Le Guin hardly articulates a linear path to the events in her novel, and acknowledges it all as her own speculation, which makes me feel comfortable placing her alongside Virginia Woolf as a writer of queer-futurism.

While Woolf may have been the first of the two to touch on the subject of gender

nonconformity, Ursula K. Le Guin blew the concept out of the water only a few decades later. David Attebery agrees, writing in *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction* that "Woolf embodied the concept of androgyny when she turned to fantasy in her novel *Orlando*, but the book that for many readers most effectively fleshed out Woolf's intentions was Ursula Le Guin's 1969 science fiction novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*" (Attebery 130). Le Guin herself admitted an admiration for the previous author. In one 2011 interview with *The Guardian*, she named Woolf as her "favorite science fiction writer", and called her a model for others working in the genre (Livingston); acknowledgements which I feel are strong evidence towards my secondary claim, which is that representations of gender nonconformity push our society towards more widespread acceptance, and consequently encourage further exploration in a large-scale positive feedback loop.

At the end of the *Author's Note*, Le Guin writes, "Finally, when we're done with [a novel], we may find–if it's a good novel–that we're a bit different from what we were before we read it, that we have been changed a little, as if by having met a new face" (xxii Le Guin). I think this is the point of queer representation as a whole, and it is also how large scale societal change will be made. Before queer futurity can appear in the world, it must appear in the minds of the world's inhabitants through works of fiction such as *Orlando* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

Chapter Three:

Imago

The last novel I will examine is *Imago*, which is the third and final novel from Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy. While there is plenty of relevant material in the preceding texts–*Dawn,* and *Adulthood Rites–Imago* is the most relevant for this project due to particular narrative choices made by Butler, the result of which is one of the most relatable and powerful representations of gender nonconformity I've ever encountered in fictional literature.

Similarly to *Orlando*, this story also takes place on Earth in a time not so distant from our own. All three books in the series occur over the artificially extended span of a single character's life, as well; a woman named Lilith. Imago opens on one of her children, Jodahs, who is the biological offspring of five separate individuals. Jodahs' parents are two humans–one male and one female–and three Oankali, including another male-female pair as well as the third-gender "ooloi."

Notably more along the lines of the Gethenians in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the characters I am examining from Butler's novel are not entirely human. The *Xenogenesis* trilogy explores the result of a hypothetical encounter between us and an advanced alien species known as the Oankali, who are compelled to interstellar travel by a biological instinct to interbreed with other life forms. Possible only due to the existence of a third biological sex, the ooloi I've mentioned, the Oankali are able to fuse genetically with our own species, creating a new version of humanity. The resulting offspring are hybrids–or constructs, as Butler names them.

Jodahs is the very first construct ooloi, which puts it at odds with both Oankali and human society. Considered dangerous at first by the Oankali, and terrifying by humans, the

realization of what Jodahs will become sends the entire family into hiding in an attempt to avoid the adolescent ooloi from being confined to eternal supervision and exile on the Oankali ship. This is in accordance with laws agreed upon by the Oankali long before, which declared that any unexpected construct ooloi must be watched closely and prevented from causing accidental harm to others.

Despite the associated fear and anxiety, Jodahs accepts its situation. In a conversation with its ooloi parent, Nikanj, the elder tells Jodahs that it will eventually be able to alter its own form. "If I can change my shape," Jodahs asks, "Could I become male?" Nikanj replies with another question; "Do you still want to be male?", and Jodahs contemplates this. It silently wonders, "Had I ever wanted to be male? I had just assumed I was male, and would have no choice in the matter." (547).

To Nikanj, Jodahs says, "I wouldn't want to give up being what I am. I… I want to be ooloi. I really want it. And I wish I didn't. How can I want to cause the family so much trouble?" Nikanj attempts to provide some comfort in its answer; "You want to be what you are. That's healthy and right for you." (548). This unsettles Jodahs, who further implores, "Could I change if I wanted to?" Nikanj explains then that Jodahs could eventually make the choice to present as a male, but an ooloi would never truly be satisfied with that role.

This interaction between the two reflects a now widely-held belief that sexuality and gender are ultimately *not* choices for queer people, even when behaviors and modes of expression are manifested abnormally, or when they might result in discrimination from other community members. Gender nonconforming people simply are who they are, Butler seems to further suggest, whether it is projected outwardly or not. She also points to a real past through the exchange, in which people were heavily pressured to conform to their assigned sex and

associated expectations, through imagining a world where *inherently* androgynous people might be compelled to change themselves into a man or woman in order to be accepted by others. This aligns with Muñoz in how he suggests that queer futurity must be imagined from the past; by bringing attention to the pain of this reality for many queer people, Butler stimulates the imagination of futures where people like Jodahs do not even have to consider changing themselves.

This notion is strengthened through the following chapters, as Jodahs does learn to control its abilities, and eventually the family prove to the rest of the Oankali and construct society that ooloi constructs are able to grow safely into adults. The hybrid ooloi are ultimately accepted into their society and appreciated for who they are. But up until that point, the young construct faces threats to its freedom and safety from all sides.

While Butler's constructs are clearly not only human, I believe that they represent a version of humanity's future in much the same way as *Australopithecus,* or *Homo erectus* do–our predecessors–only in the opposite evolutionary direction. "In Butler's fiction, 'hybrid' is a term that consistently refers to identities that are biologically and culturally blurred," writes Gregory J. Hampton. "To be identified as a hybrid in Butler's fiction is, often times, synonymous with being a survivor and a signifier of the future." (Hampton 129). Butler suggests through her work that intermixing is an integral part of human nature, and necessary for our survival, whether it is manifested genetically, socially, or in another manner. Since many of the identities that fall under the umbrella of gender nonconformity can be considered "hybrids" of man and woman, particularly those individuals possessing distinct traits traditionally associated with each, Butler therefore seems to imply that gender nonconformity is equally integral to our nature.

One of the most obvious ways that the bounds of traditional gender binaries are broken in

this text is also evident in the language used to describe certain characters. The ooloi are referred to with neutral pronouns (it/it/its), a convention which is, to me, clearly reminiscent of neopronouns used today by gender nonconforming people. The construct children of the Oankali and humans also use these pronouns, though this is only until they develop fully; usually into a male or female. While this choice is a direct departure from what Genly–Le Guin's narrator–does in reference to the Gethenians, I think that is likely a simple reflection of the differences in the reproductive tactics practiced by the fictional Gethenians and Oankali. Another scholar notes that, "Unlike other science fiction works about alien genders, like Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the ooloi have a nonbinary gender, not a *lack* of gender. They are 'it' gendered." (Van Engen). Thus Butler seems to push the boundaries of these pronouns' meaning here, as the ooloi play an essential role in reproduction, yet their bodies do not change like the Gethenians' do. They remain physically distinct from males and females–nonbinary gendered–yet they are far from being "neuter", a state Genly had associated with the designation of "it".

Despite the special, integral role the third gender plays in Oankali and construct reproduction, ooloi are equal in rank and importance to their male and female partners. By the time we reach *Imago*, humans are continuing to reproduce on their own, though many choose to remain with their new Oankali families. Van Engen writes that, "The humans who fall in love with the ooloi, like Lilith, in turn become educators of other humans in understanding the Oankali gender system—and the possibility of nonbinary genders more broadly." (Van Engen). This echoes into reality, wherein many cisgender and heterosexual people have no reason to attempt to comprehend lives so different from their own. That is, until somebody they love takes such a path for themselves. On another level, Butler's story does the same for readers who 'fall

in love' with, or develop attachments to, characters like Jodahs. Stories like this one force readers to come to terms with the characters' realities, and empathize with them, in a way that is likely to transfer over to the reader's understanding of their own world, and of other people.

The Oankali and constructs do not exhibit any signs of their true sex until they near maturity, at which point they go through a biological process referred to as metamorphosis. I notice explicit parallels here, as well, to transgender people's lives in current reality–many often do not realize their desired gender, or begin to express it, until later in life than cisgender people. *Imago* opens with Jodahs beginning its metamorphosis.

The way that Jodahs is described physically as a child versus as a young adult seems especially important to me as well. Regardless of how they look, all children are referred to as "eka", which is a sexless term of endearment, or with the same neutral pronouns it/it/its. The construct children are just that; sexless, until maturity. Yet, much like other human constructs, including Jodahs' siblings, it resembles one gender while it is still a child (528). Before the metamorphosis, Jodahs is perceived as a male by its human parents and community members due to its appearance. While Jodahs is as much a human as it is anything else, the closest that it comes to being male is only in perception before it matures.

Jodahs also has a twin sibling named Aaor, who initially presents as a female during childhood. "She was the child of my Oankali mother, and not yet truly female, but I had always thought of her as a sister. She looked so female–or she had looked female before I began to change. Now she… Now *it* looked the way it always should have…It could literally go either way, become male or female" (533). Like its sibling, Aaor ends up becoming an ooloi as well, despite the initial perception otherwise.

Book: Example:	***Orlando* (Virginia Woolf)**	***The Left Hand of Darkness* (Ursula Le Guin)**	***Imago* (Octavia Butler)**
Pronouns	(equal) he/him and she/her (rare) they/them	(only) he/him	(preferred) it/it's (rare) she/her or he/him
Reproduction	N/A	biological roles of "mother" and "father" are shared, apparently at random	construct ooloi have two sets of male/female parents (Oankali and human), and one Oankali ooloi parent
Social Roles	Orlando is able to take typically masculine and feminine social roles, but only at specific times	all Gethenians are able to take on typically masculine and feminine social roles at any time	construct ooloi are able to connect with resistor humans more easily; viewed as dangerous, yet "perfect" and special
Physical Attributes	Orlando undergoes minimal physical change, despite perception of gender being altered	Gethenians are usually completely androgynous; only become "male"/"female" during sex or pregnancy	construct ooloi shift physical appearance to appeal to potential mates; never truly become "male" or "female"

(Fig. 2) Expanded table, emphasizing the similarities and differences between representations of gender nonconformity in the previous texts compared with *Imago*.

Once Jodahs goes through the first metamorphosis, it also does gain the ability to change its appearance from masculine to feminine. When it is around female humans, it looks more male, and when it is around male humans, it shifts to a form that more resembles a female's. This fluidity represents a much higher level of gender nonconformity than what is represented in the previous two novels, where shifts were totally involuntarily and much less frequent. Nikanj says that this was the intention Oankali had for their construct children, in hopes that future generations might utilize the ability to make themselves more appealing to potential mates. However, Jodahs always remains ambiguous enough that, throughout the novel, human strangers repeatedly ask whether it is male or female.

The first instance is when Jodahs and its family rescue one human woman from being

violated by a group of men. Marina, as she's called, comments to the young construct after learning that it is still a child, "You're almost a man now," to which Jodahs responds, "I'm not male. I never will be. I'm ooloi" (585). She does not believe it at first until she finds herself strangely drawn to it. Before she leaves she tells Jodahs, "I liked you. And I shouldn't have. You look too male. Nothing male should have been appealing to me last night" (585).

Shortly afterwards, Jodahs comes across another stranger, this time a human male. The man asks if Jodahs is a man or a woman, to which Jodahs replies vaguely, "I'm not an adult yet." The man then tells it, "You appear to be a young woman–too thin, perhaps, but very lovely" (598). Along the same lines as Orlando, Jodahs presents another androgynous character who can be naturally perceived as attractive by both members of the opposite sexes, despite the fact that they are usually unsure of its true sex.

Towards the end of the novel, Jodahs once again encounters a strange male, this time after it found mates of its own. This man, Santos, asks Jodahs, "Exactly what the hell are you anyway?" To which Jodahs answers, "Construct. Oankali-Human mixture. Ooloi." Santos, one of the resistors who had been hiding from the Oankali for a time, guesses that Jodahs is "one of the mixed ones–male and female in one body." "We aren't male or female," Jodahs clarifies, once again.

Through this recurring exchange, where a human attempts to classify the ooloi as a combination of male and female, I think that Butler is bringing attention to the limitations of the binary. In the context of Muñoz, perhaps Butler is even presenting the possibility that these classifications could be done away with entirely. To me, it seems obvious that the ooloi fulfill a role that cannot be understood through the lens of heteronormativity. The ooloi are part of a society where the act of reproduction insists on more effort than simply fertilization. They do not

carry out the same functions as a male or a female, so they must be something else. Butler also seems to point to the difficulty that humans often have with accepting difference, especially when they do not fully understand it. The humans in the story repeatedly seek to place Jodahs on a binary Venn diagram based on its physical appearance, failing to understand that the ooloi should have a circle of their own.

Back when Jodahs first begins to change, it goes to Nikanj, its ooloi Oankali parent. "Can't you change me back?" Jodahs asks, "I still *look* male." Nikanj replies, "You were never male, no matter how you looked" (536). This moment provides another interesting juxtaposition between sex and gender, similar to the ones that have appeared across the other two texts. Like Genly often did with the Gethenians, the people around Jodahs viewed it as a young man despite its true nature and what it would ultimately come to be.

"Give yourself time. You're a new kind of being. There's never been anyone like you before," Nikanj tells Jodahs after the latter continues to express uncertainty about its place in the world. "But there's no flaw in you. You just need time to find out more about yourself" (571). This acknowledgement of the unprecedented nature of Jodahs experience feels significant to me too, as it speaks to the current status that nonconformity of gender has in our reality. Nonbinary people are quite honestly a new kind of being, presently working to carve out a space in society which has never existed before.

This idea furthermore resonates with the concept of horizonal queer futurity; "Queerness should and could be about a desire for another way of being in both the world and time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough." (Muñoz 96). Compared to what is seen in the previous texts, the reluctance that Jodahs expresses with accepting itself also seems to come even closer to echoing lived experiences of queer people today. To me, this proves that we

are truly moving closer to some version of queer futurity.

Conclusion:

When I first saw the play adaptation of *Orlando* back in late 2018, I had never even heard of Virginia Woolf. I was only there to support my best friend, then a first-year acting major at Oakland University, and to celebrate her first real role. From what I remember, I didn't even read a synopsis beforehand. Nor did I retain much of the play's plot after it was over, except for the most basic underlying concept; Orlando was both a man and a woman.

My best friend and I attended high school together in a remarkably homogeneous rural Michigan town where white supremacy, homophobia, and far-right ideology were unfortunately commonplace. I was still aware of the existence of transgender and nonbinary people beforehand, but I'd never knowingly come across someone like that. Primary exposure came for me through popular media–sensationalized lifestyle interviews, and questionable late-night cable comedy bits. At best, they depicted gender-nonconforming people as confused or complicated. At worst, their identities were treated as dangerous and impossible.

Watching *Orlando* back then, still months away from beginning my own college experience, was nothing short of life-changing. Not only was the main character relatively unconcerned with gender roles, but Orlando was clearly happy in spite of his/her differences. There was no confusion, self-hatred. No discrimination or fear. In showing this alternative perspective, the story truly opened my eyes, and taught me that a person's choices did not have to be dictated by their sex.

The lesson stuck with me, and over the next several years I would return to *Orlando* time and time again. The intense, consistent interest I had in this story surpassed that of any I'd encountered before, for reasons that were difficult for me to comprehend. I wondered how it was

possible for one person to portray two genders so perfectly and accurately, and without any sort of permanent physical change. I wondered what the difference was, between being perceived a certain way versus actually *being*. I wondered what *Orlando* was meant to represent–not only for Virginia Woolf herself, but for her readers, too.

In the early months of 2021, I also turned that line of questioning inwards. As a lesbian, I already saw my sexuality as a kind of gender nonconformity, so further examination of my own self-expression didn't require a huge leap from there. Quickly I came to accept that my image and personality didn't much align with what was typically expected of women. I felt hindered by that label, yet equally so by the other binary one. After reaching that level of understanding, it didn't take long for me to officially "come out," once again, as nonbinary.

I'm not at all trying to suggest that *Orlando* caused me to become nonbinary, or even that seeing it made me decide to come out. I'm only stating, more or less, that I believe the play opened a doorway for me. It was a catalyst; one which brought me to begin considering the *possibility* that I might be more comfortable living outside of heteronormative expectations of gender. The story also provided me with an example of how such a life might be experienced, through Woolf's expression of the character's feelings and interactions with others.

Other stories have altered and expanded the way I understand my gender after coming out, including *Imago* and *The Left Hand of Darkness,* of course, but many more beyond those. You've seen how certain characters within these texts exhibit gender-nonconforming traits, beliefs, and behaviors undeniably relatable to queer readers like myself, regardless of whether or not the authors intended to present them in such a way. We are not the only ones who are affected by this kind of representation, however, and society as a whole stands to benefit in many ways.

According to researcher Diane Dakers, "In society and media, representation means how

race, gender, sexuality, age, class, size, and ability are shown or symbolized…[Media] reflects the dominant beliefs and values of our culture. It also influences values as well." (Dakers 7). In other words, representation is both a product of society *and* an agent through which it can be changed. But it's not always positive, and it's not always enough.

Inadequate representation can mean a lack of inclusion; one example is "white-washing", or "the practice of using only white actors, models, or performers, especially the practice of using a white actor to play a character who is not white." (It can also be negative, and advance harmful stereotypes that trivialize or insult. It can pit communities of people against one another, and spread divisive rhetoric that encourages continued discrimination against minority groups. They can even create insecurity in people who might see themselves reflected in these stereotypes. "When the media says nothing about you, or worse, allows only nasty things to be seen and heard about people like you," Dakers writes, "you might begin to think you don't matter." (38).

From an insider's perspective, adequate representation means having role models. It's having the ability to learn from others who understand your experiences; leaders who look, talk, and act like you. Positive representation should inspire, and empower members of minority communities who might not have much support coming from elsewhere.

For society as a whole, representation also offers a path to acceptance. In the context of this thesis, fictional representation gives heteronormative people an opportunity to empathize with gender nonconforming members of society. A 2020 study released by GLAAD finds that "Non-LGBTQ people who are exposed to LGBTQ media images are more likely to experience increasing levels of acceptance and comfortability towards LGBTQ people." In this way, storytelling is safer than many other forms of exposure, and still extremely effective at providing

insight into the lives of people who lack opportunities to publicly share their perspectives.

In a statement regarding the study, GLAAD President and CEO Sarah Kate Ellis writes;

> "If this study was conducted 20, 10, or even 5 years ago, the results would have looked very different. However, due to GLAAD's ongoing work to increase LGBTQ visibility across many different forms of media, we are able to see that **non-LGBTQ people continue to grow more comfortable and accepting of LGBTQ people through the media they consume**. The findings of this study send a strong message to brands and media outlets that including LGBTQ people in ads, films, and TV is good for business and good for the world.
>
> As consumers become more and more open to LGBTQ images in media, companies must understand that **including LGBTQ people in their ads is no longer an option, but rather necessary in order to truly reflect the world we live in**. As we continue to build upon this progress and identify the areas for improvement, the results of this study demonstrate that at a time of political and cultural division, entertainment and media continue to play a pivotal role in shifting culture, accelerating acceptance, and changing hearts and minds."

While the study was conducted on advertisements, there's no reason why it wouldn't apply equally to representation in fiction novels. After all, we find reality reflected through the works of authors like Woolf, Le Guin, and Butler, even when the worlds within seem so wildly different from ours on the surface.

As Le Guin herself said; "science fiction isn't about the future. I don't know any more

about the future than you do, and very likely less. This book isn't about the future…indeed the people in it are androgynous, but that doesn't mean that I'm predicting that in a millennium or so we will all be androgynous, or announcing that I think we damned well ought to be androgynous. I'm merely observing, in the peculiar, devious, and thought-experimental manner proper to science fiction, that if you look at us at certain odd times of day in certain weathers, we already are. I am not predicting, or prescribing. I am describing." (Le Guin xxi-xxii).

None of these authors are attempting to provide readers with strict instructions towards reaching a "better" society; that is not the intention of these texts. Instead, they are simply suggesting that a better society is possible, and inspiring their readers to create change–both in their own mentalities, and in the world around them. This is queer futurity in action.

I know the authors have been successful because their work has profoundly affected myself, not to mention many other queer readers. As a fiction writer myself, I see the impact they've had on my own work. I view and write about gender completely differently today than I did before encountering these texts. Without a doubt, these authors have encouraged me to further expand beyond their depictions of gender nonconformity, and, as a result, move society towards even more–and even better–possibilities for queer existence in the future.

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