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Science Fiction

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# Where Are All the Gay Robots?: Finding More Fully-Queer Utopias in AI Science Fiction

*Schyler Palm*

## **Abstract**

Claims about humans are central to AI depictions, both fictional and non-fictional. Like a funhouse mirror distorting our vision, AI can both highlight the parts of humanity worth celebrating and evince our less favourable qualities. Accordingly, but worryingly, mainstream depictions of AI in all its forms lack conjunctive depictions of queerness, implying a sanitized future where queerness is erased. While some scholarly work has extracted subtle queer utopias from AI science fiction, more work must be done to explore an AI future where queerness persists. I bring two works to bear on this issue, Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* and José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*, to show how this queer-friendly future could be imagined and what that future might look like. I will show how two webcomics, which I believe do this work exceptionally well, can serve as exemplars to science fiction and speculative content creators committed to this endeavour.

**Keywords:** Artificial Intelligence, Robots, Queer Utopias, Queer Theory, Science Fiction

## **Introduction**

Artificial intelligence has always been with us. From the Jewish golem to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, William Gibson's *Neuromancer* to Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, to more contemporary works like *The Matrix*, *Westworld*, *Mass Effect*, and *Black Mirror*, it is plain that non-human intelligence of human creation has long had a place in our fiction. Putting aside the complex question of how best to define artificial intelligence—or even just *intelligence*—we know that AI has served many different literary functions throughout history, posing questions about hubris, immortality, the dangers of unfettered technological advancement, and even what it means to be human. Yet as time and technology progress, the questions posed by AI stories become less and less hypothetical. Today we play host to disembodied digital assistants tethered to the Internet, travelling around in our pockets or waiting on the kitchen counter to be called upon. Alexa, Cortana, Google Assistant, and Siri, once the stuff of science fiction, can remind us of appointments or to pick up milk on the way home, show us the fastest route to the supermarket, or tell us the best place to get coffee in a 10 km radius. And while there is certainly discussion to be had about these (non-)agents of capitalism as minstrels and caricatures of gender,<sup>1</sup> this paper will focus instead on fictional AI and the spaces of queer imagining they

afford. As evidenced by our digital assistant friends, life increasingly imitates art. Or as Haraway puts it, “myth and tool mutually constitute each other.”<sup>2</sup>

### **What does AI have to say about queerness?**

In Donna Haraway’s *A Cyborg Manifesto*<sup>3</sup> several binaries or “leaky distinctions” are discussed that post-structuralist thought would have us interrogate. Haraway calls special attention to three of these binaries—human/animal, organism/machine, and physical/non-physical—casting the cyborg as the agent of their blurred boundaries. The cyborg for Haraway is a liminal entity working to collapse. Where human meets animal we have werewolves and the Animagi of Harry Potter lore; where organism meets machine there is Darth Vader and Iron Man; and where physical meets nonphysical there are spirits, ghosts, angels, demons, and even the occasional disembodied AI. And all of this can be a good thing. AI in its many iterations, both fictional and non, presents a significant opportunity to expand our representations of queerness, and by extension the sorts of beings we allow ourselves to be.

There are a host of other binaries we might include in Haraway’s list (such as male and female, or heteroerotic and homoerotic), and there are certainly examples to be found in pop culture of how each has been blurred. But there is a notable discrepancy between depictions of Haraway’s three leaky distinctions and those kinds of corrupted binaries that are more *explicitly queer*, which is to say, explicit in a way that is actually helpful to queer-identified people living in the present sociopolitical climate. For example, a film like *Her*, directed by Spike Jonze, depicts nonphysical, polyamorous relationships between humans and AIs,<sup>4</sup> so by non-normative standards of queerness it seems to fit the bill (and has indeed been credited as such).<sup>5</sup> But *Her* nevertheless presents beings with clearly cisgender personas, embodied or not, and positions its characters into ostensibly heteronormative relationships. When *Mass Effect*’s EDI gains a robot body, she becomes both a physical and non-physical entity, localized and de-localized, occupying and feeling through both her new robot body and the sensors of the Normandy spaceship. While this may be, strictly speaking, another leap for queerness and non-normativity, EDI’s first embodied action is not the mythic achievement of a human’s first breath, sentience emerging, ready to claim her rights and individuality, but a runway-walk in metallic high heels. Queer though she might be, she is still a rigidly gendered and sexualized character, made for a straight, male audience and, still again, positioned into a heteronormative relationship. One cannot help but wonder whether this kind of binary-corrupting and boundary-pushing is of more benefit to cisgender consumers who stand to gain greater relational freedom through this kind of representation (machine-human relationships, partial-bodied relationships, etc.) than it is of benefit to disenfranchised queers most in need of positive representation. In short, a strange sort of queering and de-queering is happening together: as Haraway’s boundaries are blurred on the one hand, they are reconstituted and reasserted on the other. AI in these instances is not being used to its fullest, boundary-blurriest potential. With few notable exceptions,<sup>6</sup> queer AI is rarely depicted, and this absence should give us pause.

This brings me to my second point: queering is a fundamentally *utopian* endeavour oriented to futurity and as long as queerness is absent from AI futures, a sanitized future is implied where queerness has been exterminated, erased, and forgotten. In fact, science fiction as a genre is so often concerned with the future that it should be surprising—even *enraging*—that more queer AI utopias have not already been depicted. As it stands currently, if the genre of AI sci fi could speak, it would seem to be saying we are better off without queerness.

In response to this state of affairs, I turn to Muñoz’s queer utopian hermeneutics. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*,<sup>7</sup> Muñoz claims that queer utopianism, far from being naive to present, less-than-ideal circumstance, is a critical endeavour that orients us to the future. “Queerness is not yet here,” he says. “We have never been queer...”<sup>8</sup> as if to say that we *could* be queer if only we strove for such futures. To Muñoz, queer utopianism does not languish in the unobtainable or dwell too long on present toils, but looks instead to the horizon for real possibility. Queer utopianism “dream[s] and enact[s] new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.”<sup>9</sup> It is, in a word, *hopeful*. Given science fiction’s concern for the future, *utopian* hermeneutics seems a fitting tool for reading queerness into fiction. I find this blurred-boundary queerness in two webcomics: *Artifice*, written by Alex Woolfson and illustrated by Winona Nelson, and *O Human Star* by Blue Delli quanti. First, I discuss the ways that *Artifice* uses its AI-human romance to paint a picture of transgression, and how this essential transgressiveness contributes to *Artifice*’s queer, utopic vision. Second, I analyse *O Human Star*, emphasizing the ways its queerness is explicitly multiple, which is to say, is queer in more ways than just suggesting cis, gay, male intimacy. *O Human Star* works to explore different configurations of queerness, deconstructing and reassembling gender and sexuality in beautifully Frankenstein-ian ways.

Before I do this, I want to note that the utopianism I speak of here should not be read as a genre judgement on the kind of fictions created in each case discussed so far (*Artifice*, *O Human Star*, or any of the others). I am not saying that this work is utopian and that one is not, or this work is dystopian and that one is not. I mean only to say that utopian logics, by Muñoz’s hermeneutics, look for *utopianisms* by taking otherwise constrictive binaries and turning them into new ways of being. Which is to say, these logics seek out ways that an AI depiction asserts utopia, or *can be read as utopic*. To put this yet another way, they ask: What are the ways that a work asserts its queerness? How does it subvert and refashion binaries, thereby availing new ways to be queer?

### ***Artifice* and Queerness as Transgression**

The first transgressive work comes in the form of *Artifice*,<sup>10</sup> offering a powerful image of a queer agent under oppression. In *Artifice*, the character Deacon is an AI android coming to terms with sexuality and sexual experience markedly different from the status quo. Not unlike many queer people’s experience, his identity is shown to be repressed, shamed, and desperate to be

explored. Deacon is a soldier treated like a slave and an instrument, literal bullet fodder yet possessing incredible strength. Dr. Maven, his interlocutor and narrative stand-in for conversion therapy, has control of Deacon's life but also his mind. With his command codes she can force him to do whatever she wants. In spite of the technological future in which *Artifice* takes place, it appears to have suffered social relapse in its attitudes toward queerness. When Deacon first meets Jeff, the human who he later comes to love, he asks Jeff if he is "a homosexual" and we learn that "outer colonies" in this universe are not accepting of queer people.<sup>11</sup> *Jeff reveals his homosexuality with considerable shame.* There is a known genetic cause for homosexuality in this future, as well as the means to splice it away, and most parents have taken this route—suggesting queer eradication as a real dystopian possibility. To most people in this world, Jeff's sexuality (and eventually Deacon's) are seen as deviant, even to themselves. The institutional powers that plague Deacon and Jeff have not only placed limits on their freedoms and behaviours, but also on the very thoughts they are allowed to think. But although Deacon and Jeff do not get along at first, their queer attraction is ultimately the means by which they overcome their antagonism.

When Jeff expresses doubts about an AI's ability to feel, Deacon says, "I'm designed to experience the full range of human emotions and sensations. I might not experience them the same way you do, but they're just as real to me."<sup>12</sup> The comic takes pains to affirm the feelings of both characters, as we might expect any two people in healthy romantic relationship to do, while at the same time allaying doubts that Jeff or the reader might have about the legitimacy of Deacon's feelings. This also draws an important comparison between queer and cisheteronormative relationality, effectively stating that non-normative feelings are not less real than normative ones.

Both characters are aware of the opposition they face, yet with trepidation, anger, exhaustion, and shame, they plod on, knowing that as the weeks progress and the retrieval team that is sent to collect them grows closer, the likelihood of their escape is slim. This is love literally under fire, queerness by conscientious objection, liberation by outlawry. Deacon disobeys his corporate masters at multiple turns, and though he and Jeff ultimately escape it is only by fighting their way out. Importantly, *it is through transgression that their queerness is claimed*, by facilitating their escape from corporate influence and the binaries that constrain them. This need not mean that all queer utopias must involve gunfire and violence, but when the alternative to queerness is keeling over and accepting defeat, transgression becomes an essential ingredient of liberation. Looking away from the terrible present and imagining a hopeful future, as Muñoz would have us do, can only be accomplished by overturning the causes of that terrible present, namely the institutions and social climate created by rigid binaries. A queer utopia is fundamentally oxymoronic then, both stuck in its moment of oppression and hopeful for futures free of it. The key in mediating this tension lies in Muñoz's concept of the "not yet conscious":

This ‘we’ does not speak to a merely identitarian logic but instead to a logic of futurity. The ‘we’ speaks to a ‘we’ that is ‘not yet conscious,’ the future society that is being invoked and addressed at the same moment. The ‘we’ is not content to describe who the collective is but more nearly describes what the collective and the larger social order could be, what it should be.<sup>13</sup>

The queer “we” that Muñoz reflects on is a “we” of tomorrow and hope. Remember that our utopian logic does not need to make wide, brushstroke claims about the good or bad of the worlds we speak about. The world of *Artifice* is stoic, corporate, militaristic, and socially regressive, but there is still utopia to be found here. As David Leavitt says of E.M. Forster’s *Maurice*, “Defying expectations and the suffocations of class, [Maurice] and [his lover] Alec elope into a rural wilderness [...], in the process fleeing not merely the restraints of sexual puritanism but the very ‘fencing off’ process implied by ownership. They flee, in other words, not just propriety but property; they challenge ownership not just of themselves but of England.”<sup>14</sup>

In the same way, Deacon and Jeff of *Artifice* flee property and ownership through their time in the wilderness of the outer colonies, and by their final escape. But unlike Maurice, Deacon of *Artifice* is literally property, subject to the programmatic whims of his creators and a society that denies him the same rights as a human, never mind access to marriage or adoption. Both he and Jeff are captives not only of anachronistic social mores but of a bloodthirsty corporation. *Artifice* turns its own terrible reality on its head, showing that the true queer utopia lies not in imagining a future without these circumstances, but in defiance of them.

### ***O Human Star* and Queerness as Multiple**

Another way to look for queer utopias is to consider the many facets of queerness beyond sexual orientation, in particular gender and gender expression. To do this, I turn to another webcomic, *O Human Star*,<sup>15</sup> which posits a different queer AI future. Although this comic is less emphatic than *Artifice* about queer transgression, it is nevertheless radical by who it chooses to centre and by how it comingles AI with trans identity and gender dysphoria.

In *O Human Star*, Alastair Sterling awakes sixteen years after his sudden death to a new android body. The source of this new body is unknown to both him and Brendan, his old lover and business partner, but it has been meticulously constructed to look and function exactly as his old body. Although Brendan (Alastair’s lover) was not responsible for creating this new body, it was not for lack of trying. Brendan had himself created, shortly after Alastair’s death sixteen years prior, a copy of Alastair’s mind that he implanted in a *different* robot body. Unlike the new Alastair, this other robot named Sulla, was an imperfect copy. But three years prior to the events of the comic (when Sulla was thirteen years old), Sulla asked Brendan to transition her to a girl’s body, which Brendan agreed to do. As the comic progresses, Brendan, Alastair, and Sulla start

an odd sort of family together, with Brendan and Alastair as parental figures to Sulla, their *transgender, adolescent robot daughter*.

Sulla's creation can be read as a metaphor for same-sex procreation. Brendan (a male human) and Alastair (an ostensibly male android) together conceive Sulla, who is the product of Alastair's imperfect mind copy and Brendan's technical genius. By this dynamic, *O Human Star* suggests a utopia that is differently queer and differently utopian from works like *Artifice*. It posits a future where two men (not even two *human* men) can begin a family in some way born of themselves. Sulla bears many similarities to Alastair but has none of his memories and a very different personality. She is just as smart and has similar social anxieties, but is bubbly and talkative where Alastair is reserved and quiet. She is, by all accounts, a happy and healthy adolescent, transness and robot-ness fully withstanding. By depicting this imperfect yet healthy family, the comic legitimates queer relationality.

Furthermore, a conversation between Alastair and Brendan reveals that an AI is only a copy at the moment of their creation. Thereafter, the AI goes on to make their own decisions, memories, and individual identity. But though Sulla is now her own person, she was at one time an imperfect copy of Alastair. Because she has accepted her transness, and in light of what we learn about Alastair's traumatic childhood, an important question hangs over Alastair: is he also trans but has not yet realized? Does he have some sort of 'true' gender buried beneath queer shame? What are the critical differences between Alastair's life and Sulla's? The comic is careful about arriving at conclusions here, and steers clear of absolute statements about Alastair's identity. But when juxtaposed to Sulla's, Alastair's situation does point to something notable about the debilitating effects of queer shame. Sulla is carefree and happy where Alastair is stoic. She has been raised with love and opportunity, and in spite of the anxieties brought on by gender dysphoria and her looking-like-a-human-but-being-a-robot, she is otherwise well adjusted. Whatever identity lies buried for Alastair beneath a mountain of shame and abuse, it is not the unhappy version of himself he is now. Sulla functions as a vision to the reader and to Alastair, of who Alastair could be if he were free of his past. Sulla's well-adjusted transness is at least partially the product of an affirming caregiver, and this juxtaposition functions to critique the culture of queerphobia that Alastair has internalized.

*O Human Star*'s radical queer utopianism comes not only from how it embraces the gayness of its fathers, but from how it affirms trans identity, human-AI sexual and romantic relationships, and non-traditional families all at once.

## Conclusion

In writing about efforts to legalize same-sex marriage, Munoz criticizes what he sees as "the erosion of the gay and lesbian political imagination."<sup>16</sup> For Munoz, these efforts, well intentioned as they might be, are ultimately doomed to failure because they hinge on promises of

freedom bound in heteronormative ways of relating. True liberation, born of a truly queer imagination, must reject the ossified mores of present reality and envision something better. While I will not here critique the claim that marriage is an entirely “flawed and toxic ideological formation,”<sup>17</sup> one might still say that a more fully queer utopic vision would not end at acceptance, nor would it presume that gay marriage is the be-all and end-all of queer liberation. There is always another horizon.

Although *Artifice* and *O Human Star* represent excellent examples of queer utopias, neither can be said to be *truly and fully queer*. One might say that such a queer work would need to be infinitely transgressive and endlessly multi-faceted, in addition to the many other qualities that make up queerness. But no such thing is possible, and I do not make that argument here. This paper aims only to emphasize that transgressiveness and multiplicity are important dimensions of queerness, and that making these dimensions explicit by representing experiences of actual queer-identified people makes for better, queer utopias. Mainstream AI discourse, for all its ubiquity, has been sorely lacking in explicit queerness, and an AI future without queer AI is a future devoid of queerness. Though far from perfect, *Artifice* and *O Human Star* provide prototypical (or at least very good) models for how to depict queer AI more fruitfully. Rather than sanitize or shy away from their queerness, these works make queerness foundational to their utopic vision.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Others, like Kevin LaGrandeur in *Androids and Intelligent Networks in Early Modern Literature and Culture* (2013), have argued that AIs are slave-like entities whose lot becomes increasingly horrific the closer they come to having personhood. Indeed, Scott Turner gave the name “Minstrel” to his 1993 story generator computer program, though he did not specifically describe it as AI.

<sup>2</sup> Donna J. Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 465.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 458–62.

<sup>4</sup> *Her*, directed by Jonze (Los Angeles: Annapurna Pictures, 2014), Netflix.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Alexander and Karen Yescavage, “Sex and the AI: Queering Intimacies,” *Science Fiction Film & Television* 11, no. 1 (2018): 73–96.

<sup>6</sup> A recent example is Michael Fassbender of *Alien: Covenant* (2017) playing two androids making out with each other. While fittingly transgressive, these sinister characters are not the positive representation queer people should settle for.

<sup>7</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1–4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Alex Woolfson and Winona Nelson, “Artifice,” *Webcomics.Yaoi911.com* (blog), March 25, 2011–March 31, 2012, <https://webcomics.yaoi911.com/artifice/>.

<sup>11</sup> The geopolitical significance of the term “outer colonies” goes undiscussed in the comic; however, it does function as a metaphor for socially conservative rural communities that many young queer people are often anxious to escape.

<sup>12</sup> Woolfson, “Artifice,” 46, <https://webcomics.yaoi911.com/artifice/artifice-page-46/>.

<sup>13</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 20.

<sup>14</sup> David Leavitt, “Introduction” in *Maurice* by E.M. Forster (UK: Penguin Books, 1971), xxiii.

<sup>15</sup> Blue Delli quanti, “O Human Star,” *OhumanStar.com* (blog), January 25, 2012, <http://ohumanstar.com/comic/chapter-1-title-page/>.

<sup>16</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 21.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.