Love and Its Discontents:

An Analysis of How Gender and Love are Portrayed in The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet by Becky Chambers

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Abstract

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This essay aims to analyze how The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet (2014) by Becky Chambers differs from a majority of science fiction novels regarding its depiction of gender and love. The theoretical approach used is gender studies and heteronormativity, with a focus on Judith Butler’s heterosexual matrix, and Dorthe Staunes’ definition of intersectionality. The findings of this essay show that this novel deviates from the status quo of having a white, heterosexual male as the protagonist and instead employs a primarily non-white, multi-species crew as its main characters. Characters with disabilities are given the right to exist in their own right, instead of existing as individuals who need to be cured through technology. The notion of love is also depicted in a nuanced way, where romance does not have to be an important factor in order to have a fulfilling relationship. In regard to gender, Lovey’s forming of her gender identity, with her being an AI, sets this novel apart from the majority of science fiction novels. There are aspects in this novel that still adhere to the heterosexual matrix but the aspects that veer away from this, such as the Aandrisks’ family structures, deviate in such a way that it sets The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet apart from a number of other contemporary science fiction works.

Length of essay: 31 pages

Keywords: science fiction, gender, disability, heterosexual matrix, intersectionality, heteronormativity.
He took of his clothes and climbed into the pit, as he had done many times. He sat down and leaned back against her core; his bare skin bathed in her glow. Without the chilled air, she felt like sunlight, only softer... He pressed his back against her, pressed the soles of his feet, his shoulders, his palms, trying to soak in as much of her as he could. He twisted back and brought his lips to her. He kissed the smooth, warm metal and said, ‘I don’t see any reason to change the best thing I’ve ever had’.

— Becky Chambers, The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet

Introduction

Since its conception, science fiction has focused on scientific marvel and technological grandeur. Humankind has always dreamt of traveling beyond the stars, and science fiction creates that opportunity. It allows the authors to create new societies with a whole new set of rules, giving them the chance to create their own literary universe and visions. One can distance oneself from the old traditions and values that exist on Earth and create new norms that challenge the way we perceive different aspects, such as gender and love. Even though authors have the narrative tools at their disposal to challenge gender norms that exist in science fiction literature, they most seldom do. Most science fiction novels still employ the white, heterosexual man as a protagonist who, reluctantly, is tasked with saving the world. It is not often that a woman or non-white character (of any gender) serves as the protagonist.
This has most likely to do with the fact that most of the authors, and the target audience, are men. Therefore, they create characters that the majority of readers can identify with. Science fiction novels are, more often than not, stories about intergalactic warfare, technology and aliens. Rarely do they push the boundaries regarding gender norms, instead they adhere to the cultural norms of Western society.

The genre has, according to Fredrick Jameson, always harbored dreams of a utopian future (Jameson qtd in Hubble and Mousoutzanis, 3, 2013). This dream of a utopian future consists of a technologically advanced society, where citizens are given the chance to live their lives to the fullest. Science fiction gained popularity when it was introduced in pulp magazines in America after the First World War (Stockwell, 9, 2000). In the following decades, the genre became more established around the world. The 1940s and 50s are often considered to be the ‘Golden Age’ of science fiction, due to the fact that many of the genre’s famous authors (Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, E.E. Smith) had their first novels published during this time. J.K. Ullrich argues in “Aliens Among Us,” (2016) that even though Mary Shelley wrote Frankenstein, which could be considered the first science fiction novel, people often think of Isaac Asimov or Ray Bradbury when speaking of classic science fiction (1-2). Stockwell argues that science fiction authors became interested in questions regarding subjectivity and the impact technology had on people’s personal lives during this time (9). As the genre evolved, authors focused more on space travel, alien invasion and technology (9).

As previously mentioned, most science fiction novels do not challenge the current gender norms and cling to the tropes of the genre. However, one novel that pushes the boundaries and presents a different perspective regarding gender norms and how we perceive love is The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet (2014) by Becky Chambers. This is especially prominent regarding the characterization. The novel takes place aboard the old, patched-up ship the Wayfarer and is focused on the relationships between its crew members. The
Wayfarer’s mission is to create tunnels in space, thus allowing other ships to quickly travel from one place to another. The novel’s overarching plot is that the Wayfarer and its crew are tasked with creating a new tunnel, “punching a hole” (65), as they call it, by travelling to a hostile and unknown planet on the other side of the universe. During the long journey to their destination, the readers are introduced to the crew aboard the ship. *The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet* does not have one main protagonist but instead shifts point of view between the different crew members and creates an ensemble cast. Rosemary, a human who is running from her family and her past and has been hired as the new clerk, arrives aboard the ship at the beginning of the novel. It is through Rosemary the readers become familiarized with the rest of the crew. The crew aboard the ship consist of Ashby, the ship’s captain, a human man with amber skin and black locks who considers the crew to be his family. Sissix, the ship’s pilot, belongs to a race of lizard-like creatures called Aandrisks. There are also the two human engineers aboard the ship, the eccentric Kizzy and the short statured Jenks. The cook/doctor aboard the ship belongs to a race of beings known as Grum. He is simply called Dr Chef, which is due to the fact that no human tongue can pronounce his proper name. Corbin, another of the humans aboard, is the ship’s algaeist and he is described as a grumpy and rather unsocial man. The navigator aboard the Wayfarer is known as Ohan. They¹ are a Sianat pair who possesses the knowledge and abilities to navigate through deep space when creating a new tunnel. The final member is the AI-system on the ship, who is known as Lovey, and functions as the brain of the ship.

This essay will be focusing on how the novel differs from the genre conventions of science fiction by analyzing how gender and love are represented. In order to do this, I will primarily focus on the relationship between Jenks and Lovey to analyze the body’s role in understanding gender and love. Moreover, the essay will examine how family, friendship and

¹ Ohan’s pronoun is they and them but they are still a single entity.
sex play a central part in the bond that exists between Sissix and Rosemary. Finally, I will analyze these four characters in relation to Corbin, in order to examine the portrayal of the white man that is presented in Chambers’ novel.

In “Gender in Science Fiction” (2003), Helen Merrick states that science fiction has always been viewed as a predominantly male field that ‘naturally’ excludes women and the consideration of gender (241). Even though authors are given free reigns when it comes to creating their fictive worlds, most of them still adhere to the cultural and social norms in Western society and, by adhering to these norms, they establish the same type of male dominated world that is present in today’s modern society in their fictive universe. In “Marginalized Bodies of Imagined Futurescapes” (2018), Josefine Wälivaara states that science fiction rarely includes homo- or bisexual characters or people with disabilities (227). Disabled people who identify themselves as queer are seldom represented. (229).

Merrick discusses that even if some science fiction authors, such as Robert Heinlein, do create competent and independent female characters, they are still constructed in such a way that they strive for male appreciation (“Gender in Science Fiction”, 245). Following Merrick’s reasoning, it raises the notion that female characters are seldom given the chance to be characters in their own right and are instead constructed in such a way that they need a male character to rely on. This becomes, in a sense, their raison d’être.

In “Men Writing Women” (2009), Janice Bogstad argues that female characters were objectified and sexualized by male authors during science fiction’s early days, mainly due to the fact that the target audience consisted largely of adolescent males (170). She develops this line of thought by writing that female characters were either totally irrelevant to the narrative or restricted to menial domestic roles (170). However, it is not just women who are affected by this stereotypical way of writing, Wälivaara writes in her article “Marginalized Bodies of
“Imagined Futurescapes” that characters who are either queer or disabled are often written in stereotypical ways. (234).

According to Bogstad there are authors, such as Geoffrey Ryman and Neal Stephenson, that have contributed to challenging the gender norms present in science fiction, and that this contribution is due to the understanding that gender is a social construct, rather than being biologically grounded in the individual (“Men Writing Women”, 171). This departure from the stereotypical portrayal of a dependent and ignorant female character is by no means dominant in the science fiction genre but there has been a shift in recent years. One of the reasons this departure has not had a larger impact on the genre is because, as Joanna Russ says, “the understanding of scientific changes is not always matched by understanding social changes” (171).

Brian Attebery states in *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction* (2002) that “[s]cience fiction is a useful tool for investigating habits of thought, including conceptions of gender” (1). The reason why science fiction is a useful tool for this is, as previously mentioned, due to the fact that the author is allowed to create a whole new world with a new set of rules and does not have to adhere to the social conventions present in our own society. This gives one the chance to explore how different societal issues, such as gender, are portrayed in various science fiction novels. Attebery also speaks of the gender code that is present in our society, what we perceive as ‘male’ or ‘female’, and how that is incorporated within science fiction (3-4). As mentioned earlier, a number of authors still adhere to the cultural norms in Western society; Attebery argues that this was especially present in the earlier days of science fiction, when the genre was mostly male dominated in a way that it might not be today (5). However, the ‘hard science fiction’, that focuses more on the scientific and technological aspects, still rarely challenges the gender norms within the genre.
Similarly to Attebery, Wendy Pearson argues in “Science Fiction and Queer Theory” (2003) that if science fiction is “the literature of ideas” it is worth looking into why it has taken such a long time for critics to consider what science fiction has done regarding the ideas about gender and sexuality, especially since the notion of gender in science fiction for a very long time has been a field potent for exploring social, instead of technological, issues (2). Even though the number of queer writers has risen among science fiction authors in recent years, it is still quite uncommon that science fiction novels feature a queer protagonist in the novels that are written by authors who, themselves, do not identify as queer (2).

In *The Geek Feminist Revolution* (2016), author Kameron Hurley describes how she wrote one of her bi-sexual characters with “a straight white male gaze in mind” (98), when speaking about that character’s sexuality. This demonstrates that white, straight males are considered the norm and are the dominant audience when it comes to science fiction novels. This shows how authors, subconsciously, adjust their own writing to adhere to the norm or the ‘status-quo’. She then proceeds to discuss how she, by “pointing so loudly at her desires” (99) was, flagging the character’s sexuality as something out of the ordinary. Hurley argues that it was necessary for her to write that her character was bi-sexual because the default narrative is that a character is only attracted to a person of the opposite sex, disregarding transsexuals and transgender completely (99). Even though the default narrative of only heteronormativity existing is not true, it is something that readers and authors carry with them at all times. Hurley also argues that the science fiction genre has changed a great deal since its early days, and that feminist science fiction authors are becoming more prominent than they were before (100).

Wälivaara states in “Marginalized Bodies of Imagined Futurescapes” that characters with disabilities in science fiction first and foremost are visible in relation to a medical discussion. The focal point is often how these characters with disabilities are to be cured,
preferably with a technological solution. Seldom is a character born with a disability; instead, they often become disabled from an accident or from war (229). Wälivaara also reflects on why it is important to include marginalized bodies in science fiction narrative. Seeing as the vast majority of science fiction works take place in a distant, and sometimes not so distant, future, inclusiveness and representation carry a certain weight. Excluding people with disabilities from these narratives does not just reflect the imagined futures of science fiction but also reflects reality (“Marginalized Bodies”, 232). As Attebery writes in Decoding Gender in Science Fiction: “[a]ny group that cannot negotiate a place for itself in the imagined future is already obsolete” (191).

**Theoretical Perspectives and Method**

The literary theory of gender studies will be applied when analyzing this work. This theory was chosen because it examines how gender and sexual orientation are portrayed and problematized within the literary practice. It also examines how female and male characters are constructed, and what type of space they are allowed to operate within. The aspects that will be discussed regarding gender studies that will be used in this essay are intersectionality, the heterosexual matrix and heteronormativity.

In my essay, I will use intersectionality as a central concept when analyzing gender and love. Intersectionality is a theoretical approach used primarily within feminist theory, where some argue that it is THE feminist theory (Carbin & Edenheim, 245, 2013). The term intersectionality was coined in the 1990s by Kimberlé Crenshaw to highlight how black women were marginalized within both feminist movements and anti-racism movements (“Mapping the Margins”, 1244, 1991). Crenshaw argued that black women were overlooked within these movements due to the fact that feminism mainly focused on white women’s oppression and the anti-racism movement mainly focused on the oppression of black men
Crenshaw wrote that people of color became synonymous with black men and women became synonymous with white women (1252), leaving black women on the outside of both movements.

The concept of intersectionality has since been further developed and I will primarily use Dorthe Staunø’s interpretation of intersectionality as it is used in the article “Where have all the subjects gone…” (2003). Staunø states that intersectionality is a term that is not only for marginalized women but that different intersections also create majority groups (102). Staunø opposes the idea that social categories such as gender and sexuality are something essential to humans, something that we inherently possess. She instead describes it as a sort of “doing”, the fact that people are interpellated into different genders and ethnicities based on the collective expectations and understandings that exist in different groups.

Staunø also argues that intersectionality is a “doing” that creates different hierarchies: it is a structural system that favors wealthy, heterosexual, white, male, Christian, young and slim people. In relation to them, everyone else becomes the Other, the illegitimate, the abnormal and the inappropriate (102).

This means that my analysis will be based on the thought that different social categories such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality and race (humans and aliens) are something that the characters in the novel do instead of something that they inherently have. I will, by analyzing the characters’ behavior and what is expected of them examine how gender is created and how different intersections shape their lives and life choices.

In my analysis, I will argue the importance of understanding bodies when analyzing gender. In order to do this, I will, among other things, use Judith Butler’s theory regarding the heterosexual matrix. This theory originates from her book *Gender Trouble* (1999) where she states that feminism has often made the distinction that sex is something biological and therefore natural, while gender is considered something cultural and constructed by humans.
Butler opposes this divide and means that one cannot exist without the other. The cultural understanding of a gender is not assigned to just any body. A masculine identity is, for example, only given to a male body. Gender and sex are created by each other and therefore there is no need to keep them separate (9-11). In *Bodies That Matter* (2010), Butler states that this is because language (the cultural understanding of gender) both creates and refers to something material (the body) (68).

The gendered body is, according to Butler, controlled by the culture that is considered the norm in society (*Gender Troubles*, 13). This is explained through the concept “the heterosexual matrix” where she states that only certain types of gender are accepted by society. This deals with genders where there is a coincidence between sex (body), gender, sexual practice and desire. The sexual practice and desire abide by the norm of obligatory heterosexuality (23-24), which means that a gendered body is supposed to be attracted by the opposite sex. Furthermore, Michel Foucault argues that the sexual practice and desire should preferably happen within a marriage between two people (*History of Sexuality, Vol.3*, 176, 1988). The idea is that the marriage between a man and a woman leads to an offspring. It is only in relation to the obligatory heterosexuality that discrepancies can occur (*Gender Trouble*, 23).

In “Science Fiction and Queer Theory”, Pearson argues that even if there have been science fiction stories that deal with sexuality, “often allegorically” (1), these stories have been, at least until more recently, greatly outnumbered by the stories that “take for granted the continued prevalence of heteronormative institutional practices – dating, marriage, the nuclear family and so on” (1). I will be using Butler’s theory as a foundation in order to analyze relationships in a science fiction environment. When a novel takes place in another time period, on different planets and contains different forms of sentient beings (humans and aliens), it gives the author the opportunity to explore different norms regarding gender/sex.
and love. The characters’ sex (body), gender, desire and sexual practice will therefore be in focus when analyzing which types of relationships are present in the novel and also what the expected norm is. This will especially be taken into consideration when approaching the relationship between the ship’s engineer Jenks and the ship’s artificial intelligence Lovey.

In order to further understand how sex (body), gender, sexual practice and desire are connected, I find it valuable to use R.W Connell’s classical concept regarding hegemonic masculinities as a recurring theme for this essay. Connell uses the term hegemonic masculinities in order to highlight which group is the most dominant in society, specifically which kind of masculinity is the most dominant one (Masculinities, 77, 2005). This type of masculinity is seldom the most statistically common sort of masculinity. The concept of hegemonic masculinities should instead be read as a symbol for the most revered type of masculinity that all men must adhere to (“Hegemonic Masculinities”, 832, 2005). Therefore, there is not one specific type of hegemonic masculinity that is present at all times and in all places but works instead as a way to clarify the kind of masculinity that is expected of men (Masculinities, 76). Furthermore, masculinity cannot be understood without femininity since these are inherently relational words (Masculinities, 68). Men have traditionally been viewed as more intellectual and socially competent, while women are more commonly connected to their sense of motherhood and caring nature and have therefore been seen as more suited to stay at home and look after the house (Social Science in Context, 26, 2013). The hegemonic masculinity that has dominated the science fiction genre has been that of the white, heterosexual man (The Geek Feminist Revolution, 99). Female characters have in relation to this become dependent and ignorant (“Men Writing Women”, 171). In my analysis, I will examine how the characters in The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet relate to the hegemonic masculinity that has shaped a considerable part of the science fiction genre.
I will use the term heteronormativity to shed light on the obligatory heterosexuality that is being upheld through the heterosexual matrix. Karin Martin states in her article “Normalizing Heterosexuality” (2009) that heteronormativity can be described as “the mundane, everyday ways that heterosexuality is privileged and taken for granted as normal and natural” (190). Furthermore, she argues that heteronormativity permeates people’s actions and institutions. Other sexualities are pushed aside because of this. According to Martin, people learn to see the world through the lens of heteronormativity and interpret themselves and others around them to be heterosexual (190-191). I will analyze how The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet upholds heteronormativity, consciously or sub-consciously, by assuming that all characters and cultures operate from an obligatory heterosexuality.
Transcending bodies: Jenks and Lovey

In the epigraph that introduces this essay, the reader meets Jenks, naked, as he is climbing down into the Wayfarer’s mainframe to express his desire and love for the bodiless artificial intelligence, Lovey, who functions as the brain of the ship. This is not the kind of intimate scene one usually meets, and I will therefore, with the help of Butler’s post-structural understanding of sex, study Jenks and Lovey’s relationship. The characters will be introduced, and focus will be on the key part their bodies (or lack thereof) play in the creation of their gender. I will then proceed to analyze how their sex, gender, sexual practice and desire are expressed in the relationship between these two characters.

To begin with, the first time the reader meets Jenks is when Rosemary is introduced to him. One of the things she notices about him is that he has a deeper skin tone than her and that he has decorated his body with tattoos, piercings and an imaginative hairstyle. However, the very first thing she notices about Jenks is his height: “But while his head has an average size, the rest of him was small, as small as a child. He was stocky, too, as if his limbs had filled out while refusing to lengthen” (21). Rosemary assumes that Jenks’ height is an active choice that he has made by changing his genes, which is called genetweaking in this universe. Rosemary cannot think of any other reasonable explanation to his short stature but genetweaking. In this context, Rosemary is used as a tool in which Jenks is seen through a perspective of normativity, which is why Rosemary reacts the way she does. The so-called genetweaks are individuals who change their body’s composition which in order changes their appearance. This creates a universe where people who are not comfortable in their body can, for example, change their height or stop themselves from aging (57-58). In Rosemary’s eyes it seems improbable that people with various disabilities exist in their own right and, therefore, Jenks must have chosen to be this height. However, she has trouble grasping why anyone would choose to remain this height.
In order to understand Jenks, it is important to assume an intersectional approach. As a reader, we know that he is a non-white, disabled man in a universe where he has the opportunity to alter his physique through genetweaking. Jenks makes a deliberate choice to stay short and thereby remain Other, staying outside of the norm. Someone like Rosemary cannot understand why he would actively choose to be of short stature. Science fiction as a genre has traditionally been dominated by the white man (The Geek Feminist Revolution, 99), who is able bodied (“Marginalized Bodies”, 227). In this way Jenks deviates from the hegemonic masculinity that has been and is the norm within science fiction.

While reading the novel, one eventually learns that Jenks has not genetweaked his body to be short, but he is instead born that way. Kizzy, the other engineer aboard the ship, tells Rosemary that Jenks’ mother belongs to a quite controversial group known as the survivalists. This group consists of people who harbor xenophobic opinions towards other sapient beings and they do not believe in technological advances or vaccines. Jenks’ height is therefore a result of his mother not receiving any prenatal therapy. The survivalists have a strong conviction that genetic deficiencies should be bred away and for that reason they wanted Jenks’ mother to abandon him (104-105). Because of this Jenks’ mother left the survivalists and when she found out that Jenks would not be affected by being short, she did nothing to alter his height (107). The fact that Jenks is a character who is born with his disability is noteworthy since, according to Wälivaara, the majority of characters in science fiction works who suffer a disability do so through an accident or war (“Marginalized Bodies”, 229). Thus, The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet departs from this trope by having a character represent a minority that is seldom given space within the science fiction narrative.

Jenks has also, as an adult, chosen to not genetweak his height (57, 107). He tells Lovey that everyone expects that he should undergo genetweaking in order to make life
easier for himself: “Dr Chef’s the only doctor I’ve ever had who’s never once told me that my life would be easier if I got a few tweaks. You know, so I could be a normal height. Fuck that. If I’m going to make changes to my body, they’re going to be changes that were my idea (58).” This quotation clearly states that Jenks has made a very conscious choice to not be a part of the norm because others wants him to be. He tells Lovey that most people undergo genetweaking because they suffer from poor self-confidence. He explains that the changes he has made on his body, the piercings and tattoos, he made out of self-love (57). Through this, the novel sheds light on how disabilities in science fiction are put in the perspective of a medical discussion (“Marginalized Bodies”, 229). There is an expectation from the physicians Jenks has met that he should “cure” his disability and someone like Rosemary reacts immediately that he diverges from the able-bodied norm. By allowing Jenks to actively choose to keep his disability, the novel allows disabled people not to be treated as defective or something that needs to be cured by advanced technology. Jenks is simply allowed to exist.

Regarding Connell’s theory of the hegemonic masculinity one can say that Jenks deviates from the dominant form of masculinity that readers often meet (“Hegemonic Masculinities”, 832). He is a non-white man of short stature who is self-confident, and he is someone who is allowed to speak, instead of being someone who is spoken about. Based on the heterosexual matrix, one can ascertain that his sex and gender do coincide, he has a male body and a masculine identity, but his body and especially his sexual practice and desire for Lovey deviate from the expected norm (Gender Troubles, 13).

Lovey is the result of the artificial intelligence-system known as Lovelace that has been installed aboard the Wayfarer. This means that, around the universe, there is a multitude of the Lovelace-systems, but there is only one Lovey. The artificial intelligence gains its knowledge through its environment and is shaped by events and people it encounters (53-54).
Therefore, Lovey has, just like the rest of the crew, been affected by what they have gone through. Regarding how AI’s are shaped by their surroundings, Jenks explains that: “Weren’t they all born running the Basic Human Starter Platform, which was shaped and changed as they went along?” (54).

Lovey should therefore not be understood as a computer but instead as a sentient being that is constantly changing in relation to what is happening around her. It is thus interesting to ask the question how Lovey has shaped the perception of her own gender. Has she been programmed to sound, identify and present herself as female or is it something that she, herself, has chosen and consequently developed on her own? If Lovey had been a human, her surroundings would have assigned her a feminine gender identity in relation to her body (Gender Trouble, 23-24). The AI-system Lovelace does on the other hand not possess a body but is instead installed on computers aboard the spaceships. No further explanation is given in the novel as to why Lovey identifies herself as a woman and I will therefore make the assumption that she is programmed this way.

It becomes increasingly interesting to ponder Lovey’s female identity when the reader is made aware that Lovey actually wants a body of her own. In the universe of The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet it is illegal for AIs to procure their own bodies (56,113) and the vast majority of AIs are not particularly interested in having their own bodies (57). Lovey knows that she wants her own body, but this is not a decision she has made with ease. By having a body, Lovey’s ability to monitor both the interior and exterior of the ship at the same time would be hindered, she would not be able to access information at will and she could only be in one place at a time (58). The positive aspects of having a body would mean that Lovey would be capable to leave the ship, meet people face to face and most importantly, be able to be a real partner for Jenks (58-59).

It is also in relation to Jenks that Lovey is trying to create an image of what type of
body she wants to have. When asked by Jenks what kind of body she would like to have, she answers: “I’m not sure. That’s why I’ve been paying attention to what you pay attention to. I don’t know what it’s like to be in any form other than what I am, so it’s hard to voice my desires on that front. It’s not as if I’m in here pining away for legs all day long” (56). For Lovey, the body is so far an abstract possibility and something that she is not entirely sure how she should relate to. Regarding Butler’s theory about the heterosexual matrix, one knows that there is an expectation that a person with a certain gender should have a certain body, sexual practice and desire (Gender Troubles, 23-24). Lovey states that she harbors a desire to “be a real companion” (59) for Jenks. To be able to share her body, sexual practice and desire for him in a more conventional way than by having him climb down into the mainframe of the Wayfarer. Lovey also wants to have a body that Jenks finds attractive and is therefore trying to gather information about what type of women he is drawn to (54,59). For example, she asks Jenks if he finds Rosemary attractive which makes Jenks wonder if she is jealous. Lovey’s responds: “[w]hat would be the point of me getting jealous over someone who actually has a face? Or breasts, or hips, or however it works. You’re designed to find bodies attractive, Jenks. Enjoy them” (56). The body Lovey wishes for herself is thereby one that Jenks would find attractive. In his case, it is about people with the sex and gender opposite his own. In other words, Lovey wants to create a body for herself that has the sex that corresponds with the gender she is programmed to. In line with Butler’s arguments, it can be ascertained that in the case of Lovey it is about the fact that a female coded body will be connected with a feminine gender.

These characters challenge the heterosexual matrix and the type of relationships that has been most prominent within the science fiction genre. One could argue that they do fit, in certain ways, in the heterosexual matrix. They are of opposite sexes and genders, they desire each other, and they only want to have a relationship with one another (Gender Troubles, 23-
At the same time, they deviate from the norm in fundamental ways. Jenks is a non-white, disabled man and Lovey is a woman who lacks a body. Their sexual practice does therefore not aim to have children (*History of Sexuality, Vol 3*, 176), and there is barely anything normative about kissing the parts of a mainframe.

It can be argued that Lovey does strive to fit into the heterosexual matrix and the norm by her desire for a body. That being said, it is nonetheless established in the novel that the body does not have to play a vital part regarding love within the science fiction narrative. Lovey lacks a body, but Jenks still loves her with all his heart, and they are able to have a meaningful relationship. The novel also brings forth that the disabled body can love and be loved. Jenks’ body breaks the norm but since Lovey lacks a body, Jenks’ disabled body is not put into focus. At the same time, the novel sheds light on the fact that the body does matter for a relationship since both Jenks and Lovey dream about her having a body. Therefore, one cannot say that the body does not matter for Lovey and Jenks but that it may matter in a different way than in a traditional heterosexual and able-bodied relationship.

I thereby conclude that the novel moves within the boundaries of the heterosexual matrix but, at the same time, challenges it and proves that science fiction can have a significant impact in regards to gender, sex, sexual desire and especially love.
An interspecies relationship: Sissix and Rosemary

For this part of the essay, I will examine the relationship between Sissix and Rosemary. When analyzing their relationship, I will use Staune’s concept of intersectionality in order to show in what ways different social categories appear in their relationship. First, I will introduce Rosemary and her background and will then focus on Sissix and the family structures of her race, the Aandrisks, and how they view the topics of sex and intimacy. I will also employ Butler’s theory of the heterosexual matrix to study Rosemary’s and Sissix’s relationship and how it deviates from the heteronormativity present in Western society.

Rosemary joined the crew aboard the Wayfarer as their new clerk in order to escape her past on Mars. She was brought up in a wealthy family and attended some of the most prominent schools. Rosemary, like the majority of humans alive in this universe, has the amber skin that is the result of “generations of mingling and mixing aboard the giant ships” (5). Humankind had to flee Earth and the survivors spent generations on board a space fleet. This meant that skin colors became more and more mixed as time went on. Whiteness among humankind is therefore not the norm in this fictional universe, which otherwise is a common occurrence in science fiction (“Gender in Science Fiction”, 241).

Sissix, the pilot aboard the Wayfarer, belongs to a species called Aandrisks. They are a race of lizard-like beings, with scales covering their body and colorful feathers atop their heads. The Aandrisks keep rather complex family structures that impact how Sissix views topics such as sex, intimacy and family.

The family structures of Aandrisk society are divided into three different phases (The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet, 251). First, one is born into a hatch family (Aandrisks lay eggs). Young Aandrisks stay with their hatch family until they are old enough to breed, they then join a feather family. A feather family usually consists of friends and lovers who depend on each other emotionally. The feather families tend to change over time, as Aandrisks need
different things during different times in their lives (251). Not everyone within the feather family harbors romantic feelings toward each other. That being said, there is a significant amount of ‘coupling’ occurring within the feather family. Sissix likens it to a good meal and “[I]ike eating a meal, it’s something you can do in public, with friends or with strangers” (252). As Hurley points out in The Geek Feminist Revolution (99), the majority of science fiction novels follow the status quo and employ heterosexual characters. This is in line with Butler’s heterosexual matrix (Gender Troubles, 13), where novels usually consist of two people of opposite sex who desire each other and have a sexual relationship within the confines of marriage or at least within an exclusive relationship (History of Sexuality, Vol 3, 176). In Aandrisk society, both male and female Aandrisks are expected to express their sexuality and have multiple sexual partners throughout their lifetime. Sex is seen as a natural part of the Aandrisk life and there is no larger valuation put in to this fact (252). This sets The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet apart from other science fiction novels because sex is often treated with a very human perspective in mind and is seen as something intimate and personal. This shows that Aandrisks have a relaxed view on sex and sexuality, and that one should not be ashamed of being a sexual creature. That being said, sex can still be something very intimate and personal for Aandrisks as well, if they are with a partner they harbor romantic feelings for (252).

The novel also highlights queer relationships which deviate from the heterosexual matrix where two people of the opposite sex desire each other. Within Aandrisk society, both males and females are allowed to express love and lust with Aandrisks of the same or opposite sex. In line with Wälivaara’s thoughts on queer representation (“Marginalized Bodies”, 228), the portrayal of the Aandrisks sexuality is quite uncommon in science fiction. Furthermore, the polygamous relationship of Aandrisk society does not fall within the spectrum of the heterosexual matrix. Their sexual practice is not limited to two people having
sex exclusively with each other. Instead, the members of a feather family, for example, have sex with each other in different constellations that are not limited by twosomeness. *The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet* takes advantage of the science fiction genres’ possibility of exploring other forms of relationships and sexual practices other than the norm (“Science Fiction and Queer Theory”, 1-2).

The third and final type of family that exists in Aandrisk society is the house family. Because Aandrisks tend to move and change feather families often as they age, they do not settle down and form house families until they are old and ready to raise children. During their early adulthood they are expected to study and travel and are usually not seen as ready to raise children. Therefore, younger Aandrisks give their eggs to a house family who raises and looks after the offspring (252). When the eggs that they have received hatch, the house family becomes, for those young Aandrisks at least, a hatch family. Biological mothers and fathers do not have the same importance in Aandrisk society as they do in, for example, human society. This becomes evident when Sissix tells Rosemary that she has children herself and she says “‘[b]ut that does not make me a mother’. She winked. ‘I’m not old enough for that yet’” (253). By giving Rosemary a small wink as she says this, she is acknowledging the fact that she and Rosemary come from very different backgrounds and have different views on such concepts as motherhood and family. The Aandrisk family structures have shaped how Sissix views the world and concepts such as intimacy and sex.

Butler argues that the heterosexual matrix creates an expectation of how relationships should be constructed. The desire between a man and women is expected to lead to children (who are born within a marriage). Women have, furthermore, been associated with motherhood and care, which deemed them to be more suited to stay at home with the family
(Social Science in Context, 26). Within science fiction women have primarily been given smaller and domestic menial roles (“Men Writing Women”, 170). The Aandrisk’s way of life and their societal norms break away from the science fiction genre’s expectations of women as mothers. Even if an Aandrisk has children, it does not make them a parent per se, since they are not expected to assume the role of motherhood until they themselves feel ready to settle down and raise children. This is also a departure from the more traditional depiction of female characters and what is usually expected of them in science fiction novels. In these novels, female characters are, more often than not, dependent on the male protagonist and are used as a foil to tell his story.

Being different races of sapients, Rosemary and Sissix have very different backgrounds and cultural differences when it comes to the aforementioned topics of sex, intimacy and family. When Sissix and Rosemary meet Sissix’s family, Rosemary understands that Sissix has been holding back when it comes to showing affection and intimacy. Even though Sissix is very warm and affectionate towards her crewmates, it is nothing compared to how Sissix behaves when she meets her hatch family (262). The members within a hatch family hug and are constantly touching each other. For the Aandrisk, physical affection is of great importance.

Furthermore, seeing the impact the crew’s visit to Hashkath, Sissix’s homeplanet, had on her, Rosemary knocks at Sissix’s door with a bottle of wine and two glasses shortly after they have arrived back at the ship. As they are sitting in Sissix’s room, Rosemary brings up the fact that Sissix has listed the entire crew as her feather family (272). They discuss the notion of family and how it feels for Sissix to leave her hatch family and home planet behind. Sissix feels sad about leaving her hatch family but expresses that she loves the crew and her life aboard the ship. Rosemary obviously feels honored to be included in Sissix’s feather family but notes that “no one touches you” (274).
Consequently, Rosemary has understood the importance of physical intimacy for Sissix and understands that her life on the ship is incomplete after seeing how happy Sissix was when her hatch family held her. Because of this, Rosemary suggests that she and Sissix should have a sexual relationship. Sissix is at first hesitant to accept Rosemary’s proposal of intimacy, mainly due to their racial and cultural differences, and how they view the concept of intimacy and sex. However, Sissix does end up accepting Rosemary’s offer.

The relationship between Rosemary and Sissix is not one of romantic love but instead one of love between friends who offer emotional support and intimacy when needed. Rosemary defines this by saying: “Sissix, I’m not asking you to marry me. I’m not in love with you. I like you” (276). Going back to Foucault’s notion that sex should preferably take place within the confines of marriage, Sissix’s and Rosemary’s relationship deviates from this idea. Their relationship especially deviates from the type of relationships readers usually come across in the science fiction genre. Within science fiction homo- and bisexual characters are usually invisible in the narrative (“Marginalized Bodies”, 228), and when they are present there is often a large focus on their sexuality (The Geek Feminist Revolution, 99).

The relationship between Sissix and Rosemary is an expression of friendship and family where the fact that they both are women is not put into focus. The novel takes into account the fact that Rosemary is willing to do something for Sissix that is breaking the norm for Rosemary, since she understands that Sissix needs it. They are, therefore, allowed to be characters with nuance and depth, instead of being confined to their sexuality. The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet shows in this way that a science fiction novel does not need to adhere to the heteronormativity of society. Sissix and Rosemary are not made into female characters that have to depend on a male character and his narrative, which is usually the case within science fiction (“Men Writing Women”, 171). They are instead allowed to have a narrative of friendship and sex that is not connected to a male character. The novel thereby
allows women to exist in their own right and acknowledges that women’s stories are worth
telling.
White heteronormativity in a fictional universe: Corbin

One of the most prominent tropes in science fiction is the tale of the white, heterosexual anti-hero who is reluctantly tasked with saving the world in one way or another. This trope stems from the fact that science fiction has primarily been a male-dominated genre of literature (Merrick, 241). *The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet* veers away from this by having a cast primarily made up by non-white humans and different alien species. The only white, male character in this novel is the ship’s algaeist Artis Corbin. In the novel, Corbin is given limited space in the narrative, which contradicts the more typical portrayal of the white male. Therefore, the scope of this analysis will be more limited than the ones concerning Jenks and Lovey and Rosemary and Sissix.

Corbin is described by Ashby, the ship’s captain, as a “pink man bred for tedious lab work and a sunless sky” (5). This is a far leap from the, most often, charismatic white protagonist that is prominent in science fiction. When Rosemary is first introduced to Corbin and shakes his hand, she describes it as “[h]is grip was limp, his skin clammy” (18). The way Corbin is portrayed can be seen as a critique towards the more common white, heterosexual protagonists, by being described as a bitter, frail, petty and sometimes racist human being (9). Corbin rarely socializes with his fellow crew members and instead chooses to stay in his lab and tend to his algae. By having Corbin as the only white human being aboard the Wayfarer sets *The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet* apart from many other science fiction works. By giving the white man a smaller role, the book instead allows non-white and non-human characters to impact the story in a larger and more meaningful way. This also removes the power that the white man usually possesses within literature. *The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet* is not a story about the white man, the white man is merely allowed to tag along.
Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to analyze how *The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet* differs from conventional science fiction novels. This was done by studying aspects such as, heteronormativity, family, sex, desire and the importance of having a body. Regarding the relationship between Jenks and Lovey, they do move within the confines of the heterosexual matrix but there are a number of factors that deviate from this matrix, such as Jenks being a non-white, disabled man and Lovey a bodiless AI but still being able to maintain a meaningful and fulfilling relationship. Then, there is the relationship and bond between Rosemary and Sissix. They illustrate the notion of love in a nuanced way by not being in a romantic relationship but instead offering intimacy and consolation if the other needs it. The Aandrisk’s family structures also deviate from the obligatory heterosexuality of the heterosexual matrix and how sexual practice should occur between two people in a marriage.

Lastly, the depiction of Corbin show that the white male is given very limited space within the narrative and is written in a way that deviate from the usual portrayal of the white man, due to him being described as a petty, frail and sometimes racist character. The way Corbin is constructed as a character can also be read as a critique towards the white heteronormativity that is more prominent in science fiction.

The novel consists of a multitude of characters, but this study has been limited to five of them. This was done in consideration of the topics that are being analyzed within the essay. Therefore, characters such as Dr Chef and Ohan were left out of the analysis. Regarding future research, it would be of interest to analyze Dr Chef who has a fluid gender identity and would therefore allow aspects such as gender identities and patriarchal structures to be examined. The Wayfarer’s navigator Ohan would also be of interest to analyze in regard to identity and body. The Sianat are a race afflicted with a virus that changes their perception of themselves but also their perception of time and space. Due to their changed perception of
themselves they refer to themselves as they, even though they are a singular entity.

Although conventional science fiction depicts sex, gender, love and desire in a certain way, *The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet* questions how these topics are constructed and multiplies social positions by allowing the characters to express their love in non-normative ways and by portraying characters that deviate from the obligatory heterosexuality that is established within the genre. The novel also veers away from the genre conventions by including disabled characters to exist in their own right and not be a result of an accident or suffering disability because of war. The novel thus allows a wider range of readers to find characters they can identify with. Therefore, as Scott Attebery says: “[a]ny group that cannot negotiate a place for itself in the imagined future is already obsolete” (191).
Works Cited


