Master's thesis

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Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Language and Literature

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Wayfaring Bodies

Embodiment in Becky Chambers' Wayfarer Series

Master's thesis in English
Supervisor: Paul Goring
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Abstract

This thesis is a study of the issue of the body in the fiction of Becky Chambers. It examines three novels from Chambers' Wayfarer series and probes how she uses the science fiction genre to explore questions of non-normative earthly embodiment. Through her extensive gallery of characters, she investigates a range of identity issues which are rooted in the body: gender, sexuality, disability, and race. I argue that Chambers attempts to show her readers positive representations of these bodily issues. Her representations of disabled characters are mostly positive, yet I contend that some of her depictions further negative biases towards already vulnerable groups. Her depiction of a homogenous Human race as a result of hundreds of years of mixing speaks to her lack of rounded racial conversation, which I argue keep her rooted in science fiction tropes of the past. However, I contend that where Chambers fails at representing certain disabilities positively or dealing with racial issues, she succeeds in representing the LGBTQ+ spectrum respectfully. She normalizes the otherness of her characters through treating their non-normativity as common-place, thus giving non-normative readers valid representation. To support my claims, I make use of key concepts from disability- and feminist theory, such as the medical and social models used to investigate disability representation in science fiction, and intersectionality, which I use to examine issues of disadvantage regarding race and gender. I aim to outline the ways in which Chambers follows and deviates from set tropes in science fiction through the use of critical studies of the genre, with reference to critics including Wendy Pearson, Helen Merrick, and Elisabeth Ann Leonard, as well as Donna Haraway and Josefine Wälivaara.

Introduction

> The dog-sized, speckled-yellow, wet-skinned person, lying legless on a motorised cart, with no feet and no bones and no real shape at all until you got to the wreath of grasping tentacles and smaller tendrils centred around a toothless maw, crowned with a pair of retracting eyestalks […] made Isabel stare despite her best efforts (Chambers, *Record*, 55).

Becky Chambers is an American science fiction author, born in 1985 in Los Angeles, California. Her family has always worked within the field of science, but she gravitated towards fiction, choosing to be a writer instead of working in STEM. She has, however, taken inspiration from her family's work in science and put it into her writing, constructing convincing science fiction narratives from early on in her career. She has travelled extensively outside of the United States, but she now lives in California – where she grew up – together with her wife (Segal).

In 2012, Chambers crowdfunded and self-published her first novel, *The Long Way To a Small, Angry Planet.* This novel was to be the first in the Wayfarer series, which now includes three other works, namely *A Close and Common Orbit, Record of a Spaceborn Few*, and *The Galaxy, and The Ground Within* (Segal). The series won the Hugo Award for Best Series in 2019, and has been nominated for a myriad of other awards as well ("2019 Hugo Awards").

My thesis investigates this series and explores particularly the way in which the science fiction genre is used to explore issues of earthly embodiment. These issues are varied, and encompass a general probing of the idea of the "normative" body alongside investigations of gender, disability, prosthetics, race, and sexual identity. I wish to argue that Chambers brings important representation to the foreground for many real-life body related struggles, showing her readers new, more supportive ways to view people belonging to minority groups, such as people with disabilities or people on the LGBTQ+ spectrum. Chambers illustrates the diversity of humanity as seen through the prism of science fiction by using her characters as representations for earthly embodiment. She includes many different aspects and varieties of embodiment throughout her novels, some of which are clear representations of bodily issues – such as the character Jenks and his physical disability – and others which are more indirect and suggestive, requiring more decoding in order for their connection to earthly bodies to be understood, such as AIs which can be interpreted as oblique representations of the trans

experience. How successful is her endeavour to include representations of diverse people, and in what ways do race, gender, sexuality, and disabilities intersect? Are the representations positive or negative? I contend that Chambers' works aims to enlighten her readers through her representations, and to point to ways of being more sensitive to the non-normative, all the while being entertaining.

To support my argument, I will be using a number of concepts drawn from a range of theoretical schools. The most important concepts for my discussion are those pertaining to bodily issues, and include intersectional and feminist critical reading, defamiliarization/alienation, artificiality versus organic identity, and the medical and social models brought up in disability theory. I will be drawing on critical studies of science fiction, the most relevant of which are "Science Fiction and Queer Theory", by Wendy Pearson, "Gender in Science Fiction", by Helen Merrick, and "Race and Ethnicity in Science Fiction" by Elisabeth Anne Leonard. The conversations these critics offer all include feminist theory in one way or another. Pearson discusses the way in which different sexualities have been portrayed in science fiction through the genre's history, and examines the outdated mode of presenting sexualities in a heteronormative/other dichotomy. Merrick investigates the history of women and gender fluid people in science fiction, arguing that even though it took a long time for non-male characters to be recognized in the genre, science fiction is now a "vehicle for exploring gender and humanity and 'unlearning' the strictures of cultural norms" (Merrick, 251). Leonard discusses science fiction's portrayal of race by looking at authors who write about or from a racial minority's standpoint, arguing that these stories have a history of being labelled anything but science fiction as the field of science has long been thought of as dominated by whites. She explores narratives written by white authors about coloured people, and compares them to similar narratives written by coloured authors. What I contribute to these conversations, is a comparison between tendencies in Chambers' diverse representation of body issues and the tropes and traditions of science fiction. I highlight where Chambers follows the typical characteristics of the genre, as presented by the aforementioned critics, and explore where she deviates from them.

I have constructed my thesis according to various bodily issues, namely hearing/speaking impediments, dwarfism, reproduction, biological sex versus societal gender, queer sexuality, and racial signifiers. All of these issues are considered non-normative by our current, real world society, and I investigate how Chambers' representations of them might bring about positive or negative change regarding their social reception. I have looked at how the bodily

issues are dealt with in the primary texts, and compared Chambers' modes of handling them to representations of body matters in other fictional works, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and Ursula LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness.* These works in particular have been chosen due to their influence on the science fiction genre in general, and I explore further in what ways Chambers could be said to be inspired by them.

I have chosen to use only the three first novels of the Wayfarer series in my thesis, as the fourth and final novel was released in the spring of 2021, giving me too little time to acquaint myself with the material. Although the novels belong to the same series, each novel is a stand-alone story that has little to no relation to the other novels. The plot of each novel is set in the same universe, but the main characters are completely different from novel to novel. That being said, some of the characters have peripheral knowledge of characters from the other novels, such as Sidra in *Common Orbit*, whose previous installation used to be the AI aboard the Wayfarer during *Long Way*, or Tessa in *Record*, who is the sister of Ashby from *Long Way*. Regardless of the small intersecting relationships across novels, the plot of each novel works in isolation from the others. Thus, I am able to give thorough analyses of each plot line and character arc without addressing the entire series.

Chambers capitalizes the names of every species as if they are proper nouns, including Humans. While the grammatically correct way of writing these names would be un-capitalized, I will be using the author's approach going forward. I do this because I believe that Chambers' way of addressing the different species is akin to the way one would address different nationalities, such as English and Norwegian. As I read the novels, I did not immediately pick up on the capitalization of the alien species' names, as those were unfamiliar to me already, but when I first read the word "Human" with a capitalized "H", I was taken aback. Chambers prompts her readers to think about Humans, not as a common starting point where all narratives begin, nor a superior species, but as one of many alien species. By having all species' names be capitalized, Chambers unites them under grammar, humbling the reader into perhaps viewing all species as equal. This is a form of defamiliarization, a literary device Chambers often use in her novels, a point to which I will return.

For orientation in what follows, I provide next a short summary of each of the primary texts.

Chambers' Universe

The novels are all about life in a universe where aliens and Humans co-exist, thousands of years after Earth has become uninhabitable. The Humans of the novels are all descendants of the Humans that left earth on the Exodus Fleet, a giant collection of spaceships. The Fleet remains operational at the narrative present, and many choose to live onboard these (now stationary) ships, although Humans have scattered far and wide across the known universe by then.

We are used to Humans being the dominant culture in most science fiction narratives, often the colonizing aspect of a "new world" story. It is not so in Chambers' works. Here, Humans arrived very late in the game into Galactic Commons controlled space, or General Space as most people call it. The Galactic Commons functions as a bureaucratic, peace-keeping alliance between the most influential species in the universe. The agreement was founded by Aeluons, Harmagians, and Aandrisks, but there are several other species involved. On arrival, Humans were seen as a puny species with little to offer in terms of economy, technology, or military forces, and were given small, almost unworkable planets on the fringe of General Space along with outdated technology as charity from the more affluent species. At the narrative present, Humans have risen a small amount in the stronger species' regards, as they have managed to thrive in the unworkable areas they were given, but they are still viewed as a minority.

Brief Synopses of the Novels

The Long Way To a Small, Angry Planet tells the story of a long-haul, wormhole-building spaceship called the Wayfarer, and its crew. The narrative is focalized through each of the crew members' perspectives, but mainly through Rosemary Harper, a young, Human woman who starts her new job as the ship's clerk at the beginning of the novel. Throughout the novel, we follow each of the Wayfarer's crew members in their daily tasks and challenges. The captain, Ashby, has a secret romantic relationship with Pei, an alien spaceship captain. The pilot, Sissix, and the person in charge of growing algae and turning it into fuel, Corbin, passionately hate one another. Ohan is a Sianat Pair who does the mathematical calculations that are necessary for the ship to be able to punch holes in the fabric of space. Kizzy and Jenks are the mechanical technicians that keep the ship in shape. Jenks also has a romantic relationship with the ship's artificial intelligence (hereafter called AI) assistant, Lovey. Dr. Chef keeps everybody happy and healthy, being the onboard doctor and cook. Rosemary is the ship clerk, keeping all paperwork in order.

A Closed and Common Orbit takes place almost entirely after the events of *Long Way*. Its narrative is split into two different timelines, where one follows Sidra, an AI who is illegally housed in an artificial body after leaving the Wayfarer, and the other follows Jane 23, a young slave girl in a factory, some twenty years prior to Sidra's timeline. The main characters are Sidra, Pepper, and Blue, but the narratives are focalized solely through each timeline's protagonist, Sidra and Jane 23 respectively.

Jane 23 escapes the factory where she was created, and finds shelter in a derelict spaceship. She forms a close bond to the ship's AI, Owl, and together they find a way to repair the ship over the years. Around the age of eighteen, Jane 23 escapes the planet together with Owl and Lauriel, but they are apprehended once they reach Galactic Commons controlled space, and Owl is taken away from them. Fleeing the GC offices, Jane 23 changes her name to Pepper, and Lauriel changes his to Blue. Some years later, the two help Sidra navigate her new life on the tidally locked moon, Port Coriol.

The third novel in the series, *Record of a Spaceborn Few*, takes place almost entirely onboard the Asteria, one of the spaceships in the Exodus Fleet. The narrative is focalized through five main characters, all of whom are Human. Tessa is a working mother trying to raise her children, Kip is a rebelling teenager, Isabel is an elderly archivist who tries to show her alien visitor life in the Fleet, Sawyer was born on a planet but come to the Asteria seeking a place to belong, and Eyas is a funeral worker. Although all of them share about equal distribution of chapters, it is Isabel who seems to be the main protagonist, as her role within the Fleet is that of an archivist, recording every major event of history in the archives. She also touches every other main character's life (and chapters) through her work.

The Artificial Body

One of the overarching storylines in the Wayfarer series is about artificial intelligence, and what makes a person a *person*. Several of the series' characters either have technological modifications to their bodies, or have entirely artificial bodies. Science fiction has been deeply concerned with artificiality for as long as the genre has existed, dating back to the time of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and his creature. Throughout its history, science fiction has striven to examine the border between Human and machine by creating stories about robots, cyborgs, androids, and automata, blurring the lines between organic and in-organic beings along the way.

The interest in robotics and mechanical bodies did not start with science fiction, however. According to Julie Wosk, the story of Pygmalion, as retold by Ovid, marks the start of men's obsession with creating the perfect woman. In the story, Pygmalion makes a sculpture of ivory (or marble in some versions), and the beauty of the figure is beyond that of any mortal woman. He prays to Venus, asking her to grant him a woman of the same calibre as his statue. She grants his wish by giving the statue life, turning it into a real woman.

> The outlines of the Pygmalion myth – and the idea of a simulated woman who comes alive – would be echoed over the centuries ahead in cultural images revealing men's enduring fantasy about fabricating an ideal female (Wosk, 9).

Wosk states that figurines mimicking human animation have been found and dated as far back as ancient Greece. These figures, most of which exhibited signs of female anatomy, were often too fragile to be played with but were deemed fit as offerings to the gods. (Wosk, 34). Through the years, people have shown great interest in creating life-like dolls that give the impression of autonomy, or at least the impression of moving on their own. In 1773, Swiss clockmakers Pierre Jaquet-Droz and Henri-Louis Jaquet-Droz made a female automaton which they named The Lady Musician. She appeared to be playing a clavacin, but there was a hidden pair of bellows in her that supplied an organ with air. Her fingers, however, were able to press down the keys so that music played. This was a mechanical marvel, as earlier automata's fingers would merely mimic the keys' movements, acting as if they were playing (Wosk, 35).

These simulated women show a clear interest in fabricating the perfect woman throughout history. Most of the earlier examples of these automata exhibit traits of what men thought the perfect woman looked like at that time: their body shapes, their faces, the way they dressed, but most importantly their voice (or lack of it). A woman should be seen and adored, but

never heard, these mechanisms suggested. If she was heard, she should play music or sing, providing her listeners with entertainment. These thoughts on the perfect woman echo the general consensus of earlier western societies, and still carry weight in certain circles.

In Chambers' novels, we encounter several mechanical and semi-mechanical characters, many of whom have strained relationships to embodiment. In *A Closed and Common Orbit*, the AI Sidra is downloaded into an artificially organic body, gaining full autonomy over it and herself in the process. This is illegal in GC controlled space, so she keeps her identity as an AI a secret. Before being downloaded into the body kit, Sidra's program was installed in the core of the Wayfarer, the spaceship where most of the first novel's plot takes place. Here, she started out as a program called Lovelace, which might be a nod to the Samuel Richardson fictional character of the same name, or to the "mother of computer programming", Ada Lovelace ("Ada Lovelace"). This is not referenced in the primary texts, however. Despite being a computer system that was programmed to survey the ship and keep everybody safe, Lovelace developed her own personality through her experiences. At the narrative present of *Long Way*, she is sentient, calls herself Lovey, and has deep, emotional relationships with the crew of the Wayfarer. She is in a committed, romantic relationship with the ship's computer technician, Jenks. Over the course of the novel, Jenks and Lovey seriously consider buying a body kit on the black market, so that Lovey can be with Jenks in a physical way. Jenks ends up buying the kit, but he and Lovey ultimately decide against using it.

Jenks' relationship with Lovey might seem strange to some of us, since we are used to thinking of programmes and technology as unintelligent or, at least, "un-living" things. In science fiction the alienation between AIs and Humans has been all but eradicated. The genre lets us explore and experiment with what it means to be human, or even a person, by granting inanimate objects such as computers, programs, and robots a form of life. Characters such as Sidra force us as readers to re-examine our views of humanity, of the worth of life, of identity itself.

So how does Lovey and Jenks' relationship measure up to the tradition of mechanized women in science fiction? To start with, there is the obvious distinction between Lovey and previous artificial women: her voice. Lovey not only speaks, but she speaks *her mind*. Despite being a computer system with a pre-set program of operation, Lovey has developed her own opinions and feelings throughout her operational lifetime.

> Her personality had been shaped by every experience she and the crew had together, every place they'd been to, every conversation they'd shared. And honestly, Jenks thought, couldn't the same be said for organic people? (Chambers, *Long Way*, 54.)

As opposed to the silent, smiling robots of the past, Lovey shares her opinions out loud. In fact, all she seems to be in the beginning is a voice, heard over the intercom systems throughout the Wayfarer.

Jenks' relationship to Lovey, and their discussion of acquiring a physical body for Lovey to embody, could be said to further the patriarchal tradition of men dominating how women should look in science fiction. After all, Lovey is perfectly content being as she is, embedded in the Wayfarer's walls, interacting with the crew through intercoms and cameras. To the question of what type of body she would like to have, Lovey answers Jenks:

> "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 other form 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." (Chambers, *Long Way*, 56.)

The male gaze is decidedly present in Chambers' novel, intentionally or not, and it becomes an outspoken theme between two lovers in the case of Jenks and Lovey. Not only is Jenks a man, which in many societies – up until recent history – would mark him as the dominant part of their relationship, but he is also the person who installed the Lovelace program into the Wayfarer. That, and the fact that it is Jenks who repairs and maintains Lovey, gives him a position of power over her from the start of their relationship. Regarding the term "male gaze", Korsmeyer and Weiser defines it as such:

> The phrase 'male gaze' refers to the frequent framing of objects of visual art so that the viewer is situated in a 'masculine' position of appreciation. [W]omen depicted in art are standardly placed as objects of attraction [,] and that the more active role of *looking* assumes a counterpart masculine position (Korsmeyer and Weiser, my emphasis).

Chambers often deals with issues in her novels in a non-gendered way, writing with more of a "Human gaze" in mind. By this I mean that she focuses on presenting an alien universe to her Human readers, focalized through her characters. As many literary critics have argued (Korsmeyer and Weiser among them), writing that appeals to the male gaze mostly objectifies female characters, which in turn belittles their autonomy, and ultimately devalues them as people. While the rest of Chambers' work suggests that she tries to avoid writing in such a way, she has not managed to avoid it all together.

Lovey is not so much concerned with her own wants when it comes to how her hypothetical body should look, other than that she wants Jenks to find it attractive. A case could be made that even though Chambers has put a lot of effort into depicting the romantic relationships in her novels as ones of equality, respect, and support, she falls short when it comes to Jenks and Lovey. Lovey states that she thinks highly of Jenks' opinion when it comes to her hypothetical body, and their conversation suggests that she would not have thought to acquire a body kit if it had not been for her relationship to Jenks. In this way, Lovey is concerned with Jenks' opinion of her more than she is concerned with her own desires.

Jenks does, however, ask Lovey about what she feels and wants, instead of forcing his own preferences upon her. This behaviour differs from the established tradition of men creating their perfect woman in science fiction. Instead of him deciding what body Lovey should have, he is genuinely interested in and concerned about her having first and final say in the matter. "Lovey, if you were able to have a body, it should look how you want it to look. […] I'd find you pretty in any package" (Chambers, *Long way*, 59). Jenks is genuinely interested in Lovey's feelings and goes to great lengths to ensure that she is not considering a physical form just to placate him. He asks her about pros and cons regarding the matter, hears her out, and speaks to her as an equal. The fact that Lovey started out as a computer system is not even considered an issue to Jenks. Chambers ventures into the established trope of a man creating a perfect woman through technology with Jenks and Lovey, and follows the tradition for a while with Lovey wanting to appease Jenks. Where Chambers deviates from the established trope, however, is by having Jenks treat Lovey as an equal, and not have him decide anything for her.

The fact that Lovey wants Jenks' approval regarding her hypothetical body could be said to stem from her love for him. Yes, she does want a body that he would find attractive, but could that not be said of anyone in a romantic relationship? We all want our significant other to be attracted to our appearance, as well as our minds. Jenks and Lovey have fallen in love despite Lovey only being a mind, and although she states that she does not particularly long for a physical body, it would be logical to assume that when talking about a hypothetical body, she would want her lover to find it beautiful.

According to Wosk, the tradition of artificial women in fiction has a tendency to portray the robotic woman as hyperintelligent, sexually alluring, and the picture of femininity. All these attributes are sometimes construed as intimidating to the men who created them, and as such have been controlled by an important trope:

> One of the tropes in representations of artificial women is that the 'perfect woman' – even with her sexiness, superior intelligence, and skills – is also a fallible machine prone to malfunctioning, mechanical breakdowns, and glitches. (Wosk, 109).

Lovey is no exception to this rule. After a horrible accident where the ship is severely damaged towards the end of *Long Way*, Lovey's core memories have taken so much damage that the only way to save her is resetting her: "A hard reset of an AI was like stopping someone's heart for a few minutes, then trying to get it beating again" (Chambers, *Long Way*, 366). Chambers follows the malfunctioning AI trope in that Lovey has to be reset because her software is failing, but in contrast to the usual narrative, it is not because her original wiring or program was faulty; an external factor affected her programming, forcing her to reboot in order to function properly. Wosk continues: "These breakdowns may be a way of making these formidable females psychologically safer, too, by defusing them – however momentarily – of their power" (109). Although Lovey is highly intelligent, and almost omnipresent aboard the Wayfarer, she is not seen as a threat to anyone of the crew, any more than any of the other characters are. When she has to reboot, it is something taken extremely seriously by all involved, and not executed without Jenks obtaining her full and clear consent:

> Lovey, do you understand what I just told you?
>
> *Yes. You're going to do a hard reset.*
>
> Only if you say it's okay.
>
> *It' okay. I don't want to be like this any more.*
>
> Do you understand what – what might happen?
>
> *Yes. I don't want to be like this.*
>
> (Chambers, *Long Way*, 369).

With Lovey's consent, Jenks resets her program. It is a fifty-fifty percent chance that she would come back the same, but to everybody's sorrow, she comes back "clean". Lovey loses all her experiences, all her memories, her relationship with the crew, and, in short, everything that makes her Lovey. This effectively kills Lovey and replaces her with a fresh installation of the Lovelace system. Jenks is inconsolable.

The important part of the exchange between Jenks and the damaged Lovey, is where he asks for her *consent* to reset her. Consent is an underlying theme of Chambers' books. It is never discussed in outright language, but the characters show an understanding and acceptance of the fact that people's anatomy – or mind, in this case – are theirs to govern. Chambers teaches

her readers that asking for consent should always be normalized, in that her characters always ask for permission to interact with any other character's anatomy or personal belongings before doing so, and nobody remarks upon it. In keeping with the way Jenks has treated Lovey for the entire novel, he here leaves *her* the choice of what to do with herself. Instead of following the subject/object dichotomy that so much of fiction relies on, Jenks makes sure that Lovey understands what is happening before accepting her consent. Lovey thus gains an acting role in her own demise, instead of being the object which is acted upon.

In many works of entertainment, we see the Damsel in Distress trope. This is where the male protagonist has to rescue a female character from danger, often acting heroically and putting himself in peril to do so. The woman is often someone close to the protagonist, such as his wife, girlfriend, sister, or mother. Chambers steers clear of this trope, not only by having Jenks give Lovey full autonomy over her destiny, but also by having Lovey "die" after all of Jenks' effort to save her. By having Jenks sobbing and wailing openly, and having his best friend (who is a woman) comfort him, he does not appear to be the testosterone-filled hero of the Damsel in Distress trope.

Another trope that Chambers could be accused of using in this instance, is the Fridged Girlfriend trope. Here, the female love interest of a male character is killed off in order to give him motivation to further his own story arc. The term was coined by Gail Simone in 1999 as a reaction to a scene in an issue of the Green Lantern comic, where the protagonist finds his girlfriend brutally murdered and stuffed into his refrigerator ("Women in Refrigerators"). Had Lovey's "death" come earlier in the novel, and had it led to Jenks using her death as motivation for his own character progression, I would say that this would be true. As her demise happens at the end of the novel, however, I contend that it does not further Jenks' plot at all. We leave Jenks on the Wayfarer, broken-hearted and grieving with the rest of the crew. Since the next novel is about the new installation of Lovelace, I argue that Lovey's "death" only furthers her own plot. By having the focus be on Lovey, Chambers makes her a fully valid character in her own right, entirely avoiding the over-used tropes of the Fridged Girlfriend and the Damsel in Distress.

With Lovey, Chambers blurs the line between machine and Human, and makes her reader think about worth in a new way. In her essay, "The Icons of Science Fiction", Gwyneth Jones states:

> The conviction (which has support from the neuroscience of robotics) that the perfected 'intelligent machine' will have a human or quasi-human form, raises obvious ethical

> questions. But though mechanical men, immediately read as an [sic] futuristic underclass […], may resemble humans, they remain defined and devalued by their artificiality. (Jones, 167).

Unlike other science fiction narratives, Lovey is an AI that is treated like a real person by her crew. Her unsuccessful reboot is treated by her friends as her death, and she is mourned just as profoundly as any other crew member would be. Jones shows many examples of popular science fiction narratives where robots and androids are treated like lesser members of society, a trend which Chambers also follows to an extent. In Chambers' universe, no android or AI has the right to govern themselves, but their increasing intelligence and self-awareness have made it difficult for sentient organic species to ignore their wishes for basic rights. Chambers shows her readers a universe that operates with the same basic outlook on AIs as many other science fiction narratives, but she also shows us a very important exception. With Lovey, Chambers illustrates the complexity of identity within the field of science fiction, prompting questions of a deeply ethical nature. What makes a person a person? And why do we treat other species than Humans like lesser beings? Would we treat Lovey like a person, or a digital assistant without the ability to feel and think for itself?

After the reboot, Pepper is the one to talk to Lovelace and explain the situation to her. She tells her of Jenks' relationship with Lovey, and gives Lovelace the option to leave the Wayfarer with her, should she choose to. During this conversation, Lovelace uses her cameras in the cargo bay to view Jenks, sobbing in the arms of his best friend:

> 'What am I gonna do?' Lovelace watched his face fall in his hands as he asked his pointless, horrible question over and over again. When she zoomed in, she could see the bleeding cracks in his fingers, caused by days of twisting wires and circuits together by hand. This wasn't her fault, she knew, but she couldn't stay here if it meant that she was making this man's pain worse. He had exhausted himself in trying to save whoever she had been before. She didn't know who that was. She didn't know Jenks, either. But she could help. Even after watching him for only two and three-quarter hours, she knew he deserved to be happy again. (Chambers, *Long Way*, 382).

Lovelace understands that her presence on the ship is causing Jenks pain because her voice reminds him of her predecessor, so she decides to leave the ship, using the body kit as a means to escape. Together with Pepper, she travels to Port Coriol, where she changes her name to Sidra and tries to pass as a Human woman. A person who has up until the very last pages of *Long Way* been just a voice over the intercoms, suddenly has physicality, and we see the robotic side of Chambers' work. The body kit has coppery hued skin, a head with short,

black, curly hair, and deep brown eyes. “[A] face that would easily disappear in an Exodan crowd” (Chambers, *Common Orbit*, 130). This kit is a highly realistic replica of a Human female body, and would fool most people and ID scans in General Space. Should someone take a blood sample of it and search for discrepancies, however, they would discover the truth.

Sidra is exceedingly troubled by her physical form, as it was not chosen by her, but by Lovey. Sidra feels alienated in her own body, both because her system was programmed to operate within large spaceships instead of a small humanoid android, and because the outward appearance that this android has does not match with how Sidra sees herself. When Blue paints a picture of Sidra she does not recognize herself in it. “She looked at the portrait’s eyes, and tried to imagine what it would be like to see herself looking back”. (Chambers, *Common Orbit*, 132). This could be seen as an example of one of the binaries that Haraway is criticizing in her 1985 essay, “A Cyborg Manifesto”, namely the divide between Human and technology. In her essay, she states that the image of a cyborg is an amalgamation of these two, and functions as a metaphor for discarding the language of earlier feminists’ way of thinking dichotomously:

> The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion. (Haraway, 291).

Looking at Sidra through the lens of Haraway, her character becomes so much more than just another AI. Her physical form becomes the instrument with which Chambers explores trans people’s experience. Chambers uses Sidra as a means to investigate the innermost workings of a trans person’s experience, and through her finds a way to explain to her readers that trans people, like Sidra, is equally deserving of one’s respect and kindness. I will be coming back to this line of thinking in my chapter on queer bodies.

The Language of Nurture in Chambers

Pepper is a character who has a lot of experience with robotics and AIs. As a child, she was brought up in a factory as a slave, where the only other Humans she saw were the other slave girls her own age, all named Jane with a number attached. We never get to know how many Janes there were in Pepper’s batch, but her given name was Jane 23, and her bunk mate was named Jane 64, so we can assume there were at least 64 little girls in that batch alone. Ensuring that these children did as they were told were the *Mothers*. All events pertaining to

Pepper's childhood are focalized through 10-year-old Pepper, then known as Jane 23. She describes the Mothers as such:

> Mothers had hands, of course, and arms and legs like girls did, but taller and stronger. They didn't have faces, though. Just a dull silver round thing, polished real smooth (Chambers, *Common Orbit*, 13).

Despite the connotation to warmth and care their title conveys, the "Mothers" are not nurturing, but dangerous android AIs that keep the slaves in line. According to Wosk, men in science have a tendency to envision robot women as both tempting and nurturing:

> Often, when male roboticists refer to the beautiful artificial females they are developing, they refer to the robot's future use in a nurturing role. In his press interviews and academic papers, Professor Kosuge spoke not of the fantasy aspect of his PBDR robot, but instead he predicted that it could be used sometime in the future to provide care for the sick and elderly and companionship for people who were lonely. (Wosk, 153).

Wosk argues that our history, both in real life science and in science fiction, has been influenced by the male gaze, and that men often try to justify their robots' appearances by stating that they can be used in nurturing occupations as well as being used as companions for lonely people.

Chambers turns this way of thinking around with the Mothers. Here, the role of the nurturing mother is taken by cold, faceless androids that physically punishes children for straying from their tasks. Does it have anything to say that Chambers is a woman, when envisioning the future of robotics? Is she, perhaps, exempt from wanting to justify her artificial females' looks? Chambers' novels do have mostly female AIs, and all the sentient models we come across are presented as female. In spite of this, there are no mentions of a robot that is both sexy and caring at the same time. In fact, none of the android AIs in the entire series are sexualized at all. In the case of Sidra, we do not even get to know what her body looks like. We can assume that the body kit has all four limbs normally associated with Human anatomy, and when Sidra describes the face we get to know the skin colour, but other than that we have to imagine. Why is that?

Maybe Chambers wants to focus on the inner goings-on of the character, and not put too much emphasis on the appearance. It is also stated that it was Lovey, and not Jenks who chose the body kit's looks. A woman chose her own appearance, not the man she was trying to impress. This suggests to the reader that Lovey had full control of her own appearance, moving her character's arc away from that of the earlier science fiction narratives where the

man creates the perfect woman. Such narratives can be found in the 60s tv show *My Living Doll*, where NASA scientist Dr. Carl Miller develops a robotic woman in secret, and hides her in the suburbs with his friend, Dr. Robert McDonald (Wosk, 105), and the 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, where Rick Deckard – in his attempt at hunting down bounties on rogue androids – is seduced by a woman who is later revealed to be an android that was especially created for seducing him. The directive to seduce him was programmed into her by the Rosen Association, led by her male manufacturer and "grandfather", Eldon Rosen ("Rachael Rosen"). Such Pygmalion narratives make it clear that the male creators of the female automata hold all the power in the relationships, even when the automaton is an opposing force to the male protagonist. Chambers avoids these tropes by focusing her attention on all the autonomous decisions the AI characters in her novels make, and the emotional bonds they share with their organic co-characters. We see such a bond when we read about Pepper's childhood. After she escapes from the slave factory as a child, she finds a derelict spaceship where she seeks shelter. The ship's AI, Owl, becomes Pepper's (then Jane) caretaker over the next decade of her life. Owl is portrayed as incredibly nurturing, telling Jane how to survive by gathering and purifying water, teaching her to find edible plants in the surrounding area, and keeping her clean and warm within the hull of the ship.

Owl, like Lovey, is a program installed into a spaceship. She has cameras all over the ship, and communicates with Jane by projecting an avatar onto screens while talking to her over the intercoms. When Jane finds plants outside, Owl helps her figure out if they are edible or not:

> 'What am I looking for?' she asked Owl, wanting to think about something else.
>
> 'Here, let me show you.' Owl's face went away, and a picture appeared: a small machine with a round flat tray beneath some kind of lens.
>
> Jane opened the cupboard. There it was, right in front. She held the machine up to the camera.
>
> 'That's it!' Owl said, and Jane felt good, even though she hadn't done much. 'That's a scanner for medical samples. You can probably use it to analyse what's in that mushroom you found. I can tell you if any of it is bad for you.' (Chambers, *Common Orbit,* 135).

In previous chapters from Pepper's childhood, we see that she was severely mistreated by the Mothers in the factory. Through being physically abused when doing "bad behaviour" the children were taught what not to do, creating a constant anxiety in them that made them malleable and easily controlled. One of the Mothers compliments Jane for being "on-task" one day, and Jane explains that it feels good to hear that, but it does not make her happy:

“This was a small kind of good, the kind of good that was only the opposite of the Mothers being angry. Sometimes it was real hard to guess when they’d be angry” (Chambers, *Common Orbit*, 14).

The language Jane uses in these early chapters reveal that although she has received education in the factory, this education has mainly focused on the practical learning of mechanical repairs, not linguistic prowess. Jane’s vocabulary is stunted, even for a 10-year-old, something evidenced by her use of the intensifier “real” in conjunction with adjectives and adverbs instead of inflecting them. “Difficult” becomes “real hard”, “great” becomes “real good”, and “brisk” becomes “real, real fast” (Chambers, *Common Orbit*, 14, 27). This suggests to the reader that the factory is keeping the slaves in an unaware, naïve state of education. This could be because they are more easily controlled this way, or it could simply stem from what the owners of the factory deems necessary for the slaves to know. Either way, Chambers paints both the factory and the Mothers in a gloomy, dystopian hue, letting her readers connect the dots through her use of cold, barren language.

Owl stands in stark contrast to the coldness of the Mothers. Although she can only communicate with Jane through screens and speakers, there is a warmth in her personality from the very first sentences she speaks. After Jane escapes from the factory, she is chased by wild animals, and Owl calls her over to the ship, managing to shut the door between Jane and the animals.

> ‘Be still,’ the voice said in a whisper. ‘They’ll go away.’
>
> And after a little bit, they did.
>
> ‘Oh, stars,’ the voice said. ‘Oh, stars, I’m so glad. Are you all right? Here, let me turn on some lights.’ […]
>
> Jane 23 tried to breathe, taking in big mouthfuls of air. She was crying. She wasn’t sure when the crying had started, and it scared her, because crying meant she’d be punished, but she couldn’t stop. Even if there’d been a Mother there, she wouldn’t have been able to stop.
>
> ‘It’s okay,’ the voice said. ‘You’re okay now, honey. They can’t get in here.’
>
> (Chambers, *Common Orbit*, 69 - 70).

From the first moments of their relationship, Owl takes care of Jane. She saves her from being attacked by rabid animals, and then goes on to comfort her when she sees that she is upset. Up until that point, Jane has always been punished for crying, and after her ordeal she is severely traumatised. Owl does not expect anything from her, but comforts and takes care of her. She calls her “honey”, and repeats that she is safe within the ship. When Jane asks where the voice is coming from, she *apologises* to her for not having introduced herself, and then shows Jane

an avatar of herself on a screen. The language used when Jane is speaking to Owl is full of positive words that evoke thoughts of warmth and love, suggesting that Owl is good for Jane. Owl keeps speaking directly to Jane in a polite and caring manner, and explains anything Jane is unsure of slowly and clearly, starkly contrasting how the Mother's would address her. After the harsh language of past chapters, the reprieve of reaching the safety of Owl's ship induces a katharsis in the readers.

The contrast between the Mothers and Owl is immense. The androids with the maternal title abuse Jane cruelly, while the disembodied AI treats her with care, respect, and politeness. As Wosk argued, the artificial women created by men (both in fiction and in real life) are often aesthetically beautiful and sexual in appearance, while their creators try to pawn them off as caretaker-robots and the like. Chambers has created her own spin on the "caretaker-robot", by giving the cold, dangerous androids the title of "Mothers". These robots do indeed keep the children alive and relatively healthy, but they damage both their minds and bodies in doing so. Owl, on the other hand, is an AI that is programmed to have control of a small spaceship, and make sure the crew on it stays healthy while onboard. It is *she* who cares for Jane as a mother would, by offering comfort and safety. She also educates Jane beyond the vocational training she received at the factory, and instates times for both relaxing and playing throughout each day. In short, she lets Jane be a child for the first time in her young life.

Chambers' robots and AIs illustrate complicated, complex narratives throughout her novels. Through them, we as readers are prompted to reflect on questions of identity, self worth, body issues, and ethics. The traditional narratives and tropes of the past are flipped around, as Chambers shows us characters that go against the tendencies of earlier science fiction narratives. Through Lovey, we see an AI love, both romantically and platonically. We see her reflect on what she wants out of life, and learn about her view of physical bodies. Through Jane, we see the horrible, violent androids that controlled the first ten years of her life, and see the reversal of the sexy-but-nurturing robot that so often permeates science fiction narratives of the past. It is also through Jane that we meet Owl, the disembodied AI who takes the role as Jane's parent after her escape. Through their relationship, we see an AI love a child as if it was her own, showing that Chambers' AIs are capable of familial bonding. All of these artificial people are presented as female, a notion that could stem from Chambers' own gender identity, or from her desire to showcase the versatility of AI gender. Chambers does not fall into the traditional pitfalls of past science fiction narratives by presenting her AIs as either good or bad, but poses the suggestion that giving AIs more social intelligence and autonomy

could make them more agreeable to society. The Mothers seem all but evil seen through Jane's eyes, and are described as cold and indifferent to the children's plights. They survey and keep the girls in line, but have no conversations with them beyond that of their tasks and reprimands. As we see Owl and Lovey, two highly intelligent AIs, converse with the people around them, we see more socially developed characters. This suggests that creating robots and AIs with limited programming keeps them from reaching their full potential as sentient beings, and prompts questions of our responsibilities as creators. Where do we draw the line?

The artificiality of robotic bodies and AIs also bring a whole new side of representation to Chambers' books. Through Sidra, Chambers is able to represent the struggle many trans people go through. She battles her own body dysmorphia throughout the novel, and clearly states that she feels like her body is not her own. This is also shown through the language she uses about herself and her body, as she narrates the events of the book: "She pointed the kit's eyes at the back of Pepper's head and kept them there", "The kit blinked", "Pepper put her palm between the kit's shoulder blades" (*Common Orbit,* 20, 21, and 77). By continually referring to her body as "the kit", Sidra distances herself from it, inferring that her identity and the kit are two separate entities.

In her essay, "(Re)Reading Queerly", Veronica Hollinger poses that androids in science fiction could be performing as representation for queerness:

> [The] techno-body reiterates itself through replication, not through reproduction, and it does not require the heterosexual matrix as the space within which to duplicate itself. Given the emphasis in theories of performativity on reiteration and citation, the techno-body as replicated body points us toward the utopian space of queer excess. Perhaps all techno-bodies are, at least potentially, queer bodies. (Hollinger, 31).

Although none of Lovey, Owl, and Sidra shows any indication of being on the LGBTQ+ spectrum, they are part of a species that lacks the ability to reproduce. As Hollinger states, their kind replicates, and this could allude to them being representatives for the queer scene in science fiction. I will be discussing artificial bodies and queerness in my next chapter, where the representation of trans people through embodied AIs comes into play.

The Queer Body

> "Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world." (Muñoz, 1055).

Science fiction has always been a prism through which contemporaries can explore imagined futures, and as such has also been the perfect platform for examining the queerness of humanity. Chambers has created several characters in the Wayfarer series who fit the description of queer, and is herself a lesbian. In this chapter, I will look at the ways in which both earlier and more recent science fiction writers have treated queer people in their narratives, and how the work of Chambers may be located within the genre's traditions.

In *The Geek Feminist Revolution,* Kameron Hurley writes about her experience in writing queer science fiction. The main character in one of her novels is bisexual, but Hurley found it difficult communicating this to her reader in a natural way, choosing to over-describe it instead of letting it speak for itself. "I was writing with a straight white male gaze in mind. […] By pointing so loudly at her desire, I was automatically flagging it as something out of the ordinary" (Hurley, 98-99). Hurley goes on to discuss how readers and authors alike treat heterosexuality as the default in fiction, and that everything that falls outside of this narrow frame is considered "other".

Throughout the ages, literature has examined what is familiar and what is 'other'. There have been many techniques through which writers have conveyed their alienation from certain things, people, or places. A common tool is the defamiliarization of the familiar, a term coined by the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky.

> The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The *technique* of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. (Shklovsky, 9, my emphasis).

By seeing the comfortable reality from a new perspective, the writer prompts their readers to rethink what their reality. By making objects and people seem strange, a writer can lengthen the process of perception, and thereby inspire a new thought pattern within the readers. In science fiction, however, our familiar world becomes more familiar, more safe, more comfortable in relation to the alien worlds of 'out there'. Early science fiction narratives strove to make the unfamiliar even more unfamiliar, and as a result, our comfort zones became even more comfortable. The aliens were scary and unknown, while the hero and his

(almost always exclusively white, heteronormative) culture seemed safe and familiar in comparison. Some examples include Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*, where white American men invade and colonize Mars, and Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*, where the protagonist travels to an alien planet in order to communicate with the indigenous aliens, only to be reminded of his dead lover by the unfathomable alien planet. The culture of science fiction was early on flooded with straight, white, male protagonists, and women were reserved to the home, caring for silent, obedient children, and keeping the house presentable for the hero's return to normalcy.

In her essay, "Feminist Theory and Science Fiction", Veronica Hollinger argues that the early culture of science fiction was dominated by male authors, stating that the feminist revolutions happening in Europe and United States did not start exerting an influence until the 60s and 70s (128). Because of this, we saw imagined futures where women and even female aliens were largely absent, even though much of the science fiction audience consisted of women.

> Although sf has often been called 'the literature of change', for the most part it has been slow to recognize the historical contingency and cultural conventionality of many of our ideas about sexual identity and desire, about gendered behaviour and about the 'natural' roles of women and men. (Hollinger, "Feminist Theory", 126).

Female empowerment started to have an impact upon the narratives of science fiction after the feminist revolutions of the 60s and 70s, but society – to this day! – still has a long way to go before offering equal opportunities to everybody. This has affected the ever increasing number of female science fiction writers, as Joanna Russ remarks when discussing imagined utopias:

> These utopias are not embodiments of universal human values, but are reactive; that is, they supply in fiction what their authors believe society … and/or women, lack in the here-and-now. The positive values stressed in the stories can reveal to us what, in the authors' eyes, is wrong with our own society. (Russ, qtd. in Hollinger, "Feminist Theory", 129).

Based on this assessment, Chambers' works suggests a few things about what she feels is lacking in our current society. For one, the number of female characters in leader positions in her universe far outweighs that of the male characters, a statistic that is never remarked on. This suggests that Chambers wishes to see more women in leading positions in reality. Many of her characters are also genderfluid, or change sex and/or gender in the course of the novel. None of them face harassment or judgement based on their sex or gender. This judgement-

free universe accepts people of all sexualities, and none of her queer characters are persecuted for their sexuality. Persecution for being queer is something Chambers may have experienced first-hand, being an openly gay woman in the United States. Her creation of a universe where queer is the new normal could be a reaction to the real-world mistreatment and alienation of queer people. All of the positive values that Chambers has written into her universe are issues that our current society has yet to fix, but from narratives such as the Wayfarer series we can take inspiration for making lasting change.

The fictional narratives available to Chambers at a young age would have been nothing like her own novels, as the field of science fiction had yet to evolve with its audience in the late 80s. Hurley remembers her own childhood, filled with amazing action heroes, of which none were female:

> I loved watching [80's action] heroes growing up – I loved reading about them in noir and science fiction thrillers. I just […] couldn't understand why none of them could be women; I didn't know why the women were always sidekicks, plot hurdles, prizes, when I and all the women around me were heroes in our own lives. (Hurley, 95).

In the chapter, "Tea, Bodies, and Business", Hurley discusses missing representation of herself from the entertainment she consumed as a child. The entertainment was all about men being heroes, and women needing rescuing, staying home, or being the hero's prize. This narrative dichotomy in fiction was not reserved only for the male/female divide, but is also highly present in the heteronormative/queerness segregation.

While not many, some of the earlier science fiction narratives include descriptions of sexual behaviour and sexualities, but there are very few which touch on non-normative sexual practices, most of them sticking to the heteronormative social structures of the real world.

> Although there have always been some [science fiction] stories which have touched on issues of sexuality in imaginative ways, often allegorically, these have until recently been vastly outweighed by the number of stories which take for granted the continued prevalence of heteronormative institutional practices. (Pearson, 150).

As Pearson states in "Science Fiction and Queer Theory", the number of queer stories in science fiction has increased during recent years. This is largely due to the rise of female and queer science fiction writers over the years. Because of the increasing openness around sex and gender expression, science fiction has started to compare the familiar with the unfamiliar, building bridges and creating bonds between what had earlier been "the norm" and "the

other". So how does Chambers explore the issues of queerness in her novels? Her books all have characters that fall outside of reality's normativity, either through appearance, species, or sexual preference. Through her many different characters, the author explores a universe where queer is the new norm, as there is an almost universal agreement among the novels' people not to judge or gatekeep what is normality, and rather being open and inclusive when it comes to different ways of identifying oneself.

Chambers is married to a woman, and as such falls into the LGBTQ+ category (Segal). I am not going to presume that her intentions are entirely recoverable from a reading of the fiction in my thesis, although I do believe her identity as a lesbian woman has had some influence on her work. Chambers comes from an American family where her father worked with aerospace engineering, and her mother with astrobiology (Segal). Both Chambers' sexuality and her parents' influence are evidenced in her novels through her many non-normative characters, and the sheer amount of scientific detail she goes into when describing her universe.

> "Everybody else in my family works in or studied STEM in one capacity or another, and I was the weird one who studied theater. I still loved science, though, and that was always where my brain and my heart really lived" (Chambers, qtd. in Segal).

Segal's interview makes it clear that her parents' occupations have had a clear influence on Chambers' works, and that she draws inspiration from her own life and experiences: "At some point I said, 'These are the stories I want to tell. These are the stories I care about most.' So I started focusing on writing science fiction instead" (Chambers, qtd. in Segal). Segal states nothing more about her sexual identity than the fact that she is married to a woman named Berglaug Asmundardottir. There is no evidence of either woman identifying as anything other than female, so it would be safe to assume that they identify as lesbians. Just as Chambers draws inspiration from her parents' influence and the entertainment she consumes when writing about science, it may also be inferred that she draws from her own, personal identity when writing about some of the non-normative characters of her universe.

In "(Re)Reading Queerly: Science Fiction, Feminism, and the Defamiliarization of Gender", Hollinger discusses the difficulty of producing valid feminist critiques of literature without falling into the male/female or heterosexual/homosexual dichotomies.

> [Our] critiques of sex and gender polarities often leave those polarities in place. Using the strategically powerful perspectives of queer theory, however, is one way in which feminist work can be mobilized to think against the grain of heteronormativity, so that we can also

> begin to think ourselves outside the binary oppositions of a fictively totalizing feminine/masculine divide. (Hollinger, "(Re)Reading Queerly", 25).

It is a challenge to properly dissect the works of Chambers in a feminist fashion, without comparing her characters and universe to that of our own heteronormative, male-dominated reality. We have certainly come a long way from female writers having to publish under male pseudonyms, but there is still a prevalent male, heteronormative precedence in our society. Just as Hurley had trouble describing her heroine's sexuality without automatically labelling her as 'other', I find it challenging to write a proper feminist critique without labelling every non-male, non-heterosexual character in the Wayfarer series as 'other'.

One way of tackling this conundrum, is by taking Hollinger's advice: use queer theory. This is to say, start focusing on what Chambers does with her books in terms of queer representation, and in terms of promoting and normalizing the queer side of science fiction. How does Chambers queer her characters without labelling them 'other'? *Does* she manage to do this?

> Developing out of […] lesbian and gay theoretical and political work, queer points to a broad interest in gendered behaviours, human sexual practices, and questions of sexual difference in general, while at the same time it aims to resist and critique dominant sexual paradigms. Queer is the result of contemporary developments in postmodern theorizations and deconstructions of subjectivity and identity. (Hollinger, "(Re)Reading Queerly", 25).

As Hollinger states, queerness and queer theory go beyond the earlier feminist theories, and look closely at the gendered behaviour of human beings, avoiding the hegemony of heteronormativity. Through investigating Chambers with a focus on understanding characters' identities intersectionally, we see that she offers representations of complex, multidimensional embodied issues. Pearson emphasizes the importance of imagining our future as heterogeneous instead of binary:

> The real aim of queer theory is to make possible a future in which society is radically restructured in order to invalidate fixed identities and deconstruct the Cartesian binarisms which automatically value white over black, male over female, and straight over gay (Pearson, 157).

By focusing on the different expressions of sexuality and embodied identity found in Chambers' books, I will move away from the duality of the sexual binarisms of the past, and towards a more inclusive, more open-minded pluralism of the imagined future.

Sexual Identity in Chambers

Sexuality is heavily featured throughout the Wayfarer series. There are representations of gay couples, lesbian couples, polyamorous relationships, and more. Jenks and Lovey's relationship is technically heterosexual, although Jenks exhibits sexual desire for the Wayfarer's main hub, the core where Lovey's programming is stored. This can be seen as a representation of technosexuality, a sexual orientation where an individual "has a sexual attraction to machinery" ("Technosexual"). In the scene where Jenks and Lovey decide against transferring Lovey's consciousness into the body kit, Jenks' actions towards the core containing Lovey's programming points to him being sexually attracted to it:

> He took off 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 (Chambers, *Long Way*, 308).

The language used here suggests that Jenks never stops seeing Lovey as a person, even though she technically has no physical, humanoid form. The repeated referrals to 'she' and 'her' reminds the reader of this. This scene may be foreign to many readers, but to a select few who identify as technosexuals, it is valid representation. Lovey's core is continually described with affectionate, romantic language, presenting the metal and cables as attractive aspects of a person, not the cold, hard features of a computer mainframe or a ship's engine.

According to David W. Wahl's article, "Is Technosexuality a Real Thing?", technosexuality is not a new sexuality, although it may be misinterpreted. Many see the term as describing trends in our current society where technology has moved away from being mere tools for making life easier, towards something we are addicted to. Technosexuality is far from this, however:

> It's not a matter of needing the latest iPhone. Technosexuality is associated with a paraphilia for technology. The individual is not only attached to technology, but they are sexually aroused by or expresses themselves sexually through their technology. (Wahl).

Further, Wahl states that there are several branches of this sexuality, and that not all technosexuals find the physical forms of technology desirable. Many technosexuals do not even need a humanoid form in order to find their object of infatuation attractive:

> Several studies find that there are people who have sexual fantasies about their voice-activated assistants, such as Siri and Alexa. A Mindshare survey found this to be the case in 26 percent of their respondents, with 37 percent claiming to be in love with their assistant so much that they wished they were real. (Wahl).

In the case of Jenks and Lovey, this is a complicated matter. Lovey knows no other form of being, and as such does not long for a physical form. Jenks, however, has a strong desire to be with Lovey in a physical way other than that described previously.

> He slept in the AI pit that night, his head nestled against a cold interface panel. He could feel the dull metal pressing little hatchmarks into his skin. He fell asleep imagining soft arms across his chest, warm breath against his cheek. (Chambers, *Long Way*, 175).

Although Jenks is fully capable of and passionately interested in having sexual relations with the core where Lovey is stored, it seems that his primary desire is for a humanoid form. The section above suggests that he would be happier if Lovey had a humanoid form, something that codes him as a person with heterosexual desires. That being said, he still cares for Lovey just as much after they decide against transferring her consciousness into the illegal body kit. Chambers makes it clear that whatever sexuality Jenks has, his romantic feelings for Lovey takes priority.

Wahl stresses that technosexuality is valid and should be "removed from shame, question, and stigmatization" (Wahl). Through the character of Jenks, Chambers eliminates some of the stigma we see in other popular culture representations of the sexuality, such as in the *Black Mirror* episode "Be Right Back", or in *The Big Bang Theory's* episode "The Beta Test Initiation".

In "Be Right Back", artificial intelligence in humanoid form connotes the uncanny, as a grieving wife (Martha) acquires an android that looks eerily similar to her late husband (Ash), and has all of said husband's online presences downloaded into a "memory bank", so as to be able to talk like him. Martha has sex with the android, but it is made clear that she hates herself for it, and only sleeps with it because she misses Ash ("Be Right Back").

In "The Beta Test Initiation", one of the show's main characters, Raj, develops an infatuation with his mobile phone's voice-activated assistant, Siri. He fantasizes about her having a humanoid form, but finds that he is unable to talk to her in this state, as she resembles a real woman too much. As Raj suffers from selective mutism when it comes to speaking to real women, the joke becomes that he is able to communicate with Siri because she is not "real".

The moment he perceives her as such, he can no longer speak to her (The Beta Test Initiation").

In both cases above, the AIs are perceived as something lesser than human, and the people who desire them are presented as unwell, or even mentally disturbed. This form of representation of technosexuality is negatively affecting the way society perceives it, furthering a harmful bias toward people who identify as technosexual. Chambers deviates from the trend of ridiculing the uncommon sexuality, choosing instead to give her technosexual character a fully romantic, albeit tragic story arc. Jenks is never seen as the butt of the joke, he is portrayed as confident and witty, and his love and desire for Lovey is presented as beautiful. His technosexual activities are described as warm and loving, and his mental capabilities are never questioned. Jenks is presented as an emotionally strong man, capable of both rational thought and immense empathy. There is no question that Jenks' feelings toward Lovey, and his actions towards the AI core, come from a place of pure and healthy love.

Sexuality in Chambers' Aliens

Among the many alien species Chambers introduces in her series, are the Aandrisk people. They are reptilian humanoids, with blue or green scales, clawed hands and feet, and colourful feathers covering their heads. Their society views physical intimacy and sex as normal and necessary for bonding purposes, and as such they have a much more casual attitude to physicality than Humans do. Aandrisks bond through physical intimacy such as hugging, nuzzling, and cuddling, sometimes even what they call "coupling": intercourse. While Chambers never has her non-Aandrisk characters pass judgement on Aandrisk intimacy, she makes it clear that her Humans often think Aandrisks are too familiar with them, invading their personal space and physically touches them too intimately. This juxtaposition highlights the differences between Humans and Aandrisks, and can be read as Chambers' attempt at posing heteronormativity (Human culture) against sexually liberated societies (Aandrisk culture).

Aandrisks have complicated family structures. They are hatched from eggs into a 'Hatch Family', where elders raise them. As they grow older, Aandrisks move out and form their own, non-relative families, called 'Feather Families'. These social structures consist of the people they love and want to live with, but the members of each family can change over time. In Feather Families, the members often engage in sexual activities, as evidenced when Sissix explains Aandrisk families to Rosemary:

> "Yes, there's a lot of coupling going on […] but many members are platonic towards one another. They'll touch each other more than Humans do, but it's still not coupling. Or, well, then again, sometimes it can be. We tend to think about coupling […] like eating a meal, it's something you can do in public, with friends or with strangers. But even so, it's best when you share it with someone you care about romantically". (Chambers, *Long Way*, 252).

When Aandrisks get older, they find a final family called 'House Family', where they raise other people's children from eggs.

Aandrisks' way of living portrays an abnormal, often stigmatised lifestyle to Chambers' readers. The unfamiliar family structures and sexual freedom of the Aandrisk people are other examples of how Chambers uses defamiliarization in her novels. Although many people in reality identify as polyamorous, Chambers prolongs the process of perception by making her readers evaluate how positively they view the Aandrisk society. Despite science fiction's long history of exploring the unknown, polygamy and polyamorous societies are under-represented in the genre, according to Pearson. She explains how earlier science fiction writers dealt with sexuality by keeping their worlds predominantly heteronormative:

> [S]tories which are sympathetic to homosexuality do not necessarily involve any sort of unsettling of a heteronormative regime; at the same time, stories which interrogate alternative possibilities for sexual-social structures are not necessarily sympathetic to alternative sexualities. (150).

Pearson goes on to mention several novels where alternative sexualities and sexual societies are explored, but where heterosexuality still remains the desired "normal". Among her examples is the 1964 science fiction novel *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, by Robert Heinlein. Here, the society has evolved to accept other forms of marriage structures beyond that between one male and one female, " – but only so long as these arrangements, whether between three people or twenty, remain exclusively heterosexual" (Pearson, 150 - 151). This example is not unusual, according to Pearson. A common trend among the earlier science fiction narratives that include descriptions of non-normative sexual behaviours, is the unwavering notion that heterosexuality is the norm.

Chambers deviates from this outdated way of writing, in that her characters live in a more individualistic, sexually liberated universe. There are plenty of characters who prefer the opposite sex in a partner, but not once in the entire series does the word "heterosexual" appear. That being said, just because a word is not used does not mean that its meaning is not

conveyed. There are many couples in Chambers' novels that keep to heteronormative institutional practices such as dating and marriage, and therefore can be said to represent heterosexuality. However, Chambers breaks with tradition because these couples are never stated to be the "norm" of her universe. There are several other couples and relationships that portray non-normativity, without the words "homosexual" or "queer" ever being mentioned. For all the talk about reproduction and "coupling", the characters of Chambers' novels do not seem focused on any one particular sexuality.

Hurley struggled with describing her heroine's sexual orientation for her readers without automatically labelling her as 'other'. Chambers has side-stepped this problem by simply not putting any focus on sexual labels at all. There are plenty of mentions of peoples' companions, and in gendering them, their sexuality is inferred. "'Tamsin worked there, until some years back,' Isabel said, knowing her colleague knew her wife's name even though they hadn't properly met yet" (Chambers, *Record*, 60). By using the female pronouns for both Isabel and Tamsin in this scenario, and by using the very gendered term 'wife' for Isabel's partner, Chambers identifies both women's sexuality for the reader. Of course, either woman could be identifying as pansexual, bisexual, or any other sexuality that involves being sexually attracted to women. They could even be asexual but homoromantic, given that we have no indication of their relationship other than their marital status and, later on, a few suggestions that they love each other romantically. All of that being said, the most logical assumption to make, is that Isabel and Tamsin are lesbians.

The rest of the scene transpires without mentioning sexual preference or marriage customs, even though Isabel is having an educational talk with her Harmagian visitor, Ghuh'loloan, who is very interested in Human customs aboard the Fleet. This just goes to show that a lesbian couple is nothing out of the ordinary in Chambers' universe, and would not merit a remark in the conversation between two academics. Chambers writes as if Tamsin and Isabel's sexualities are "taken for granted", in much the same way as heterosexuality usually is. Every character who is introduced in Chambers' novels, who also has a romantic or sexual relationship, gets the same treatment: their sexual preference(s) are never explained. Not even when Sissix, an Aandrisk, is explaining her species' complicated family structures to Rosemary, does the issue of sexuality come up. It seems as if Chambers' universe operates without any emphasis on sexual norms, which is remarkably unlike our own reality.

Later on in *Record*, it is revealed that Isabel and Tamsin have five grandchildren. We never hear about their children, however, nor about how they went about acquiring children.

Nowhere in Chambers' novels does it say that Humans have discovered a way for same-sex couples to conceive on their own, and as Isabel and Tamsin are lesbians, we have to assume that some sort of adoption or artificial insemination was involved. Again, Chambers glosses over the intricate details of this particular part of the story, conveying to her readers that the 'how's' and 'what's' of it are unimportant, and that their attention should be on more worthwhile questions.

> [O]f their five grandkids, Sasha was the biggest handful, always bruised or bleeding or stuck in a storage cabinet somewhere. […] Sasha was an absolute scamp, and though Tamsin showered all the grandkids and hex kids with equal amounts of teasing and candy, Isabel knew she had a special soft spot for the little cabinet explorer. Tamsin had never said so, but she didn't need to. Isabel knew. (Chambers, *Record*, 88).

In this scene we see suggestions that Isabel and Tamsin are well-adjusted, affectionate wives and grandparents, without there being any focus on either gender or sexuality. We also see evidence of the couple's deep understanding of one another in Isabel's comment about how she knows Tamsin's feelings without Tamsin having to say anything. This off-hand comment shows that their relationship has come to a place where words are not always necessary, suggesting the longevity of their love.

Isabel and Tamsin are both elderly Human women, and Tamsin walks with a cane due to her frail skeleton. Not only do they fall outside of the regular science fiction protagonist-trends, but they fall *into* several classifications that our current, real-world society would label 'other': lesbian, elderly, disabled, and coloured. Although we, as a society, have come far in terms of feminism, their being female could also mark them as 'other' in terms of science fiction, which to this day is still a male-dominated literary field. Chambers does not treat these women as anything other than normal, however, despite everything that could flag them as 'queer' or 'other' to her readers.

Isabel is one of the five main characters in *Record*. Her chapters, like those of the other four protagonists', are told using free indirect discourse through a third-person narrative. In much the same way as Rosemary works as *Long Way'*s focalizer, so too does Isabel for *Record*. However, where the reader experiences and learns about the universe through Rosemary's inexperienced eyes in *Long Way*, in Isabel's chapters we find *her* being the learned one, who explains what needs explaining to the alien visitor, Ghuh'loloan. Ghuh'loloan is a Harmagian ethnographic researcher visiting Isabel to learn more about life in the Fleet. She is a scholar, but knows very little about Human culture and customs aboard the ships in the Fleet, and

therefore can ask Isabel to explain even the most basic topics to her. In this way, exposition happens without the readers even noticing it, important information being conveyed in a natural, elegant, and straightforward manner. Chambers opens her series with a novel where the focalizer is almost as inexperienced in her fictional universe as the readers are, and by the third novel turns the tables so that the focalizer is the knowledgeable one, able to lecture the travelling visitor, and – by extension – the readers. Isabel's sexuality is never once either questioned or brought up as a topic of discussion, and the questions Ghuh'loloan asks her about her personal life do not pertain to sexual preference or identity. This again suggests to the reader that it is not important to the story, but rather just one of the many things that make up Isabel's character, just as Jenks' disability is not *his* defining characteristic. Ultimately, Chambers emphasizes the complexity of her characters, and normalizes their 'otherness' in her novels.

The romantic relationships Chambers chooses to focus on in her series tend to gravitate towards the monogamous, if not the heteronormative, lifestyle. Most of the romantically involved people described in the books keep their amorous relationships exclusively between two people, even though many of them are unmarried. Ashby and Pei, Pepper and Blue, and Jenks and Lovey are all in committed and heteronormative relationships, but none of them are married. As mentioned, Isabel and Tamsin have a long, loving marriage, showing the reader a normalized lesbian couple in an otherwise alien universe. This is especially evident in the chapter where Tamsin takes Isabel away from work for a date on "the Sunside Joyride", a shuttle ride through a sun-facing rock cluster that the Fleet is orbiting:

> 'Y'know, if [the pilot is] used to kids on dates, I bet she won't mind if we make out.'
>
> Isabel smothered a laugh and slapped Tamsin's leg. 'We'd traumatise the poor kid.'
>
> 'What? No. We're gorgeous.' Her eyes narrowed in thought. 'Didn't we make out on the Sunside once?'
>
> A very old memory dusted itself off: a pair of women, younger than their pilot was now, drunk on bartered kick and eyes full of nothing but the other, cosied up in the back row of a shuttle as if no one else was there. 'That was the ferry, not the Sunside,' Isabel said.
>
> 'You sure?'
>
> 'I'm sure.'
>
> 'Okay. You're the archivist.'
>
> Isabel leaned a little closer. 'How would you make out on the Sunside anyway? You'd knock your teeth in.'
>
> Her wife snorted. 'But if you didn't, you'd be a legend.' (Chambers, *Record*, 145 – 146).

The two women are joking around with each other, much like any other married couple. When Tamsin is misremembering something from earlier in their relationship, Isabel corrects her lovingly, after remembering the event in question for herself. The scene illustrates how old they themselves are, while indicating how long they have been together. In spite of their age, however, they are still youthful at heart, as evidenced by their flirty, witty banter, and the fact that they are taking a tumultuous joyride at their advanced age. The chapter does nothing in terms of furthering the plot of the novel, but as exposition it reveals to the reader a loving, deeply committed, and comfortable married couple who just happen to be lesbian. Chambers illustrates their relationship perfectly in this chapter, grounding the events of the novel in the normalcy of their marriage, and gives her readers an example of a queer couple that feels "normal".

Tessa Santoso, another main character from *Record*, is married to the father of her children, George, but the two live unconventional lives when compared to the heteronormative narrative we are used to in reality. Before the narrative present, Tessa accidentally got pregnant after they had a one-night stand, and the two decided to start a family together. George's job involves leaving the Fleet for extended periods of time, but he always stays at the Santoso household whenever he comes back, being a father to their children and a husband to Tessa.

> Mining tours were long hauls, so Tessa and George conducted themselves how they liked during the interim, each keeping their own schedules and having the occasional fling (the highs and lows of which were always shared with the other). […] They'd also decided, without much fuss, that since the whole arrangement suited them both fine, they might as well get married (Chambers, *Record*, 97 – 98).

Even though the two are married and have children together, they practice an open relationship where each has the freedom to sleep with other people. That being said, it is never stated that they have sexual experiences with more than one person at a time, and at the end of the novel, they do decide to move to a fringe planet and raise their children together as a family. Despite their previously open marriage, they end up in a highly conventional heteronormative living situation at the end of their narrative. In the last scene we see them, Tessa comes home from a long day of working on a farm, while George is putting dinner on the table while baking bread. This seems like a reversal of conventional gender roles, and could have been Chambers' attempt at keeping their heteronormative lifestyle to a minimum, had it not been for the fact that it is later revealed that George works at a construction site.

Having a household where both parents work, and the husband makes dinner occasionally, is no longer deemed non-normative in our day and age. Despite the openness of their relationship at the beginning of the novel, Chambers ends up furthering – in this instance – the heteronormative tradition in science fiction through the Santosos.

Chambers has written many monogamous couples into her novels, from all spectres of sexuality. The first – and only – canonically stated polyamorous couple is Rosemary and Sissix. These two enter into a sexual relationship in *Long Way*, but remain uncommitted to one another. Sissix comes from a species where polyamory and polygamy are normal, whereas Rosemary is Human, and Humans are suggested to be more heteronormative. When the two choose to get physically involved with each other, they discuss the parameters of the arrangement before entering into a more intimate relationship.

> Rosemary gave a little smirk[.] 'Sissix, I'm not asking you to marry me. I'm not in love with you. I like you. […] I understand that you don't limit yourself to one person. I understand that our notions of family are different, and that they probably won't fit together down the road. But I'd like to be part of your notion for a while, all the same.' (Chambers, *Long Way*, 276-277).

This passage shows an understanding of how intricate and complex a purely sexual relationship can be, especially when one party identifies themselves as a polyamorous individual. The passage also effectively shows Rosemary consenting to having an open relationship, after Sissix has made sure that she understands what polygamy entails. Later in the conversation, the two talk about Sissix hypothetically having sex with other Aandrisks at a *tet* (the Aandrisk equivalent of an orgy) later on, and Rosemary does not mind it at all. Again, Rosemary is the instrument Chambers utilizes when prompting the reader to examine otherness, or, in this case, queerness. As we read about Rosemary, the young and inexperienced Human clerk, who initiates a sexual relationship with an Aandrisk woman and still remains (at least somewhat) composed and level-headed, we learn that not all sexual relationships have to be of a romantic nature. Through the rest of the novel, we see Rosemary and Sissix develop a close relationship (by Human standards, at least), and are taught that just because they are not monogamous with one another, that does not mean that their relationship is any less valid than other peoples' relationships.

Gendered Bodies

As in the real world, the Humans of Chambers' universe operate with the assumption that a person is either male, female, or somewhere in between, although the majority identify as

male or female. When talking to or about a person whose preferred pronoun they do not know, most people in Chamber's universe use the gender-neutral pronouns "xe" and "xyr" (instead of "he/she" and "his/her"). In reality, it has become more common to use "they" and "their" in such situations, the word "they" even going so far as being voted "Word of the Year" in 2015 ("Gender Pronouns"). Chambers has invented species with far more complicated sex and gender conventions than that of Humans, however, such as the Aeluons:

> Among their galactic neighbours, Aeluons used the usual set of male-female-neutral pronouns that any species would understand. But among themselves, they were a four-gendered society. At Shimmerquick, their clothing reflected this: black for those who produced eggs, white for those who fertilised them, dark grey for the shons, who cyclically shifted reproductive roles, and light grey for those who could do neither. (Chambers, *Common Orbit*, 73).

What Chambers does with the Aeluon species is incorporate representation of several real-life identities, and give them validity. The Aeluons do not prescribe to the binary gender system that real-life Humans do, and it is made clear that none of their four genders are deemed less valid than the others. People in the real world who identify as gender-fluid would find representation in the generally androgynous appearance of the Aeluons, as well as the shons and neutrals among the species. The shons change their sex several times over the course of their lives, and in this way can fill both male and female sex and gender roles. This appeals to people who feel their gender identities shift and fluctuate over time. The sexually neutral Aeluons appeal to real-world people who view themselves as gender-neutral, and can also be seen as a symbolic representation for asexuals, as they do not reproduce.

Chambers' Aeluon species, and especially their reproductive customs, bring to mind the Gethenians from Ursula LeGuin's 1969 science fiction classic, *The Left Hand of Darkness*. The sexual cycle of Gethenians consists of 21 days of sexual latency, where their body exhibit neither male nor female signifiers. As they enter *Kemmer* (the Gethenian word for oestrous), their bodies take either male or female form in order to copulate and conceive children with one another. After a period of about five or six days, they revert back to their gender neutral bodies, unless the female becomes pregnant. A pregnant Gethenian remains female until after the child is born and weaned (LeGuin, 72 – 74).

LeGuin wrote about an entire planet where the dominant species is generally genderless. Only when it comes to procreation do they change sex, becoming what is needed in that moment in order to conceive children. *Left Hand* has become a staple in science fiction culture, going so far as to be voted the third best novel of all time by Locus Magazine (Locus). It is not unlikely

that Chambers has read it, or at least read about it in some form or other. Given that she created a species that bear such obvious similarities to LeGuin's Gethenians, it stands to reason that she has been influenced by *Left Hand* in one way or another. Her Aeluons, or more specifically her shons, seem conspicuously similar to LeGuin's Gethenians. The shons also change their sex and gender over the course of their lives, although Chambers indicates that the shons have far less of a choice in the matter than do the Gethenians.

All genders are equally important in Aeluon society, especially when it comes to childbearing and -rearing. As the females have only two or three chances of getting pregnant during their lifetime, the process is taken very seriously as their time comes. At the Shimmerquick, one of the professional fathers explain the ordeal to Sidra:

> 'Fertility leave is a big deal, and it's a lot of fun, but it's a stressful thing for any woman, at first. It's two unplanned months away from her normal life. […] If she's a spacer she's got to find the nearest place with an Aeluon community before she misses her shot. […] She's got to go live with strangers – and have sex with them – and all the while, there's the worry that she might go through all that trouble and *still* not have a fertilized egg at the end of it.' (Chambers, *Common Orbit*, 81-82).

Once a female Aeluon becomes fertile, she seeks out a *creche*. This is a small community consisting of professional parents, where she can be taken care of while she tries to become pregnant. Should she become pregnant during her time there, she will give birth a month later, and leave her child in the care of the parents there. The parents most often consist of males, but can also include shons and neutrals. To become a parent, one would have to go through extensive schooling and receive a formal certificate, stating that one is fit to take care of a mother and child in this manner.

Another point towards Chambers having drawn inspiration from *Left Hand*, is the similarities between how seriously both Aeluons and Gethenians view their reproductive customs. As stated above, the Aeluons take very good care of their pregnant females. They house and pamper any Aeluon woman trying to conceive, and continues to care for her during the pregnancy, in specialized housing. This is highly reminiscent of the kemmerhouses from LeGuin's novel: large communal houses where Gethenians can go when they experience Kemmer, to copulate with other Gethenians.

> Kemmer is not always played by pairs. Pairing seems to be the commonest custom, but in the kemmerhouses of towns and cities groups may form and intercourse take place promiscuously among the males and females of the group. (LeGuin, 74).

It seems as if Chambers has taken the idea of the communal reproductive housing from LeGuin, removed some of the stigmatized promiscuity, and evolved it into something more "family friendly". Although I have no other evidence for this than my own understanding of the two texts, I do contend that the similarities are too alike to ignore. I would be very surprised if Chambers were to declare that she was not influenced by LeGuin's work, and could then only imagine these similarities being created due to LeGuin's overall influence on the science fiction genre in general.

Where LeGuin has described the Gethenian reproductive cycle through documentary analysis of the species, Chambers has created a more "Human" way of explaining it. In *Left Hand*, the details of the sexual and reproductive cycle of Gethenians are conveyed via the field notes of Ong Tot Oppong, a Terran explorer. In *Common Orbit*, Sidra learns of the Aeluon reproduction customs in a conversation with a father. Chambers has also made the process of pregnancy and childbirth sound positively pleasurable in comparison to the cold, scientific language of LeGuin's explorer. At Sidra's question about Aeluon creches, the father assures her of their professionality in a warm and educational tone:

> We do everything we can to make the women that come to us as comfortable and happy as possible. Our beds are wonderful, our rooms are clean. Our food is outstanding. We've got a beautiful garden and huge salt-water baths. We're experienced lovers, and we put a lot of effort into making sure coupling multiple times a day is something to look forward to. We give our mothers space when they need it, and company when they crave it. We provide quality medical care when it's time to give birth. And beyond that, we assure them that their child is going to be well looked after. (Chambers, *Common Orbit*, 82).

Where LeGuin merely describes the superficial scientific details of a Gethenian's sexual cycle, Chambers delves into the customs of the Aeluon reproductive cycle. So, while Chambers almost certainly have been influenced by *Left Hand*, she has taken the ideas offered by LeGuin and evolved them into her own, separate concepts.

Unlike the ambisexual, genderless Gethenians, the Aeluons have four sexes, where one cyclically changes between "female" and "male" – otherwise referred to as being able to produce eggs and being able to fertilize them – and one has no ability to reproduce. Chambers makes it clear that this is the biological state of these people, and as such should use the term

‘sex’ when discussing them. According to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, ‘sex’ is used when referring to a person’s physiological, biological, and physical attributes, such as sexual reproductive anatomy, hormone levels, and chromosomes, while “[g]ender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions and identities of girls, women, boys, men, and gender diverse people.” (Government of Canada). There are several overlapping areas within these concepts, but as the differentiation still stands, I will be using the above definition going forward.

Chambers continually uses the term “gender” in both situations, even when referring to the physiological state of a person’s being. Her extensive work to include a diverse representation of the real-world queer community suffers from these continued terminological errors. One could assume, of course, that Aeluons operate with different gender standards than Humans do, and that a person who find themselves born with the wrong biological sex could change this with an operation. It would certainly be believable that the affluent and technologically resourceful Aeluons have developed the medical procedures to do this, and as such would just use the person’s preferred pronoun despite what their biological sex happens to be at any given moment. This is, however, never mentioned in the books, and I can therefore not assume that Chambers’ continued use of “gender” in place of “sex” is deliberate. When taking the primary textual evidence at face value, the terminological error reads as a lazy attempt at being inclusive. We live in a world where the difference between sex and gender is increasingly important for certain people, and as the Wayfarer series is aimed at many of said people, Chambers should have taken the time to get her terminology straight.

Chambers’ universe contains several species where the sex and genders operate differently from those of Humans. Take the Grum, for example. Dr. Chef, the Wayfarer’s resident cook, gardener, and medical doctor, is one of the very few remaining Grum in the universe. The species, although physically very different from Humans, is often compared to Humans in that they used to be a violent, warring people. The Grum all but eradicated their own species in a long, brutal war, and at the narrative present of *Long Way*, Dr. Chef is among the last 300 of his kind. When introducing himself to Rosemary, he states that he is currently male.

> ‘Biological sex is a transitional state of being for my species. We begin life as female, become male once our egg-laying years are over, then end our lives as something neither here nor there.’ (Chambers, *Long Way*, 35)

By stating his current gender for Rosemary, Dr. Chef indicates his age as well. Other than in this short passage, the issue of Dr. Chef's gender is not discussed again. Once more we see the character of Rosemary function as the third-person focalizer through which the reader learns about Chambers' universe. Dr. Chef is a Grum, and the Grum have different gender structures and biological sexes in both their society and biology than (both real and fictional) Humans do. Rosemary is as oblivious to the Grum species as the reader would be, making her meeting with Dr. Chef educational for both her and the reader.

Dr. Chef has a nurturing role on the Wayfarer, where he takes care of the crew in all things physical, be it medical or nutritional supervision they need. He also acts as the crew's unofficial psychologist, in that he listens to their issues and offers emotional support. His gender has nothing to do with his work, but it is noteworthy that the position of 'carer' on the ship is filled by a male character. In Chambers' universe, we see several other incidences where a conventionally "feminine" occupation is filled by a male character, such as the professional sex worker, Sunny, or the stay-at-home painter, Blue. In addition to this, we see female characters fill jobs that have previously been thought of as "masculine", such as Tamsin, the zero-g mechanical technician, Sissix, the spaceship pilot, and Pei, the captain of a military spaceship.

Helen Merrick opens her essay, "Gender in Science Fiction", by drawing attention to how the earlier science fiction texts are mainly male dominated, both in terms of authors and characters:

> The argument that at least some sf texts were justified in omitting women altogether was predicated on the notion that their ostensible subject matter – science and technology – were inherently masculine endeavours. (Merrick, 241).

These texts would often have an unmistakably masculine hero who would explore some alien planet or society, invading or attacking the unknown. These narratives almost never included female characters, although the 'otherness' of alien species or distant planets often allude to the 'otherness' of femininity and womanhood. Over the years, science fiction writers gradually started introducing female characters into their narratives. But these female characters were often nothing more than objects for the male protagonists to mirror themselves in, to rescue, to conquer, or even worse, to eradicate. These science fiction narratives often put emphasis on masculinity being desirable in a society, while all things feminine were to be avoided, or even destroyed. Merrick brings up Thomas Gardner's "The

Last Woman" (1932) as an example of this. Gardner's story revolves around a society consisting of only men, where the last woman on Earth is studied, before executed.

> This potentially homosocial society reinforces a heterosexually based model of masculinity through use of an 'Elixir', whereby those 'energies that had been turned toward sex and the emotional side of life were released for thought and work.' Not only women, but all symbolic images of the 'feminine' are eradicated through the removal of these distracting 'emotional' forces. (Merrick, 243).

Like Gardner, many of the earlier science fiction writers viewed their field as inherently masculine, and saw femininity as everything ranging from a distraction from it to a threat to it. Attebery contends that the master narrative of science represents the fields of knowledge, innovation, and even perception as fundamentally masculine, "while nature, the passive object of exploration, is described as feminine." (qtd. in Merrick, 241).

Chambers depicts an entirely different situation with how gender is viewed in her universe. Here we see people of all genders working in all manners of fields, be it mechanical technicians, sex workers, algae specialists, scholars, spaceship captains, or medical doctors. Chambers has moved away from the antiquated way of looking at the future, where the protagonist travels to alien societies and either conquers or destroys them, and instead focuses on the inner exploration of identity. Through her many characters, her readers see that despite vast physical differences, biological variations, and the enormity of space, there is always common ground to be found. Also, the main protagonist of each novel, the one doing most of the "exploring", happens to be female.

According to Merrick, by the 1960s, the amount of female science fiction writers in the field helped turn the tide of science fiction's female narratives away from the previously subjugated arena of the past.

> Increasingly more complex characterizations are evident, with portrayals of women as fully 'human', rather than 'female men', or complimentary adjuncts to, or reflections of, the masculine. (Merrick, 246).

History started changing, giving women in science fiction more agency than they had previously been given, and this, in turn, created a more open era for queerness to be explored within those same narratives. This monumental turn of the tides is evidenced in Chambers' works, where the narrative present's gender norms no longer resemble those of our own reality's past, or even present. Through presenting a universe where it does not matter what

sex you have or what gender you identify as, Chambers is able to show her readers societies where people are judged by the merit of their character in stead of their biological or sexual identity. The general society in Chambers' universe surpass that of the Gethenians in LeGuin's *Left Hand*, as they allow for all different shaped and sized individuals to live as they choose. LeGuin made a society of gender neutral people, where everyone looks alike until it is time to mate. Chambers – while creating a species similar to the Gethenians in the Aeluons – took the idea of a sexually accepting and fluctuating society to another level, in having her species meet and live among one another throughout her universe. Not only does she represent all manner of varying sexualities outright on the page, but she also represents real sexual and biological identities through some of her species' peculiar sexes and gender roles. Through her characters, Chambers explores the idea of an inclusive, safe future for all sexualities, genders, and fluid identities.

The Disabled Body

Much science fiction imagines how disability can be cured in the future, depicting thriving utopias where disability is eradicated, or sombre dystopias where people's disability can only be cured if they are people of means. The protagonist in Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* is put through inhuman experiments in order to reform him from his "young, bold, and vicious" ways (Burgess, 74). In Huxley's *Brave New World*, every embryo is planned out to perfection and grown on a conveyor belt, bringing Humanity "out of the realm of mere slavish imitation of nature into the much more interesting world of human invention" (Huxley, 13). The perfect body of the future seems to be a recurring trope in science fiction, the prevalent narratives that are told focusing either on people with perfect physiques or people who overcome any bodily challenges through "fixing" the "problems". New stories are being told, however, where people with varying degrees of disabilities have a chance to shine just as brightly as people with able bodies. With previously silenced voices now being heard, the market for science fiction with characters who represent differently abled people has never been greater.

Chambers has created many species to fill her universe, and Humans are represented as a miniscule species within it. Just as she explores many different subjects through her different characters and species, she represents a multitude of real-world issues and people. Although we do not see any Humans who use wheelchairs or hearing aids, there are Humans who struggle with some forms of disability throughout the series: Jenks was born with dwarfism, Blue developed a severe stutter in his youth that follows him into adulthood, Pepper is infertile due to outward interference with her body, and Tamsin has to walk with a cane in her old age because her skeleton is frailer than other Humans' due to her hazardous profession. These characters offer representation for people in the real world with similar disabilities. Chambers' novels include varied forms of disabilities, but are they helpful or harmful? Does she offer good representations of the disabled experience, or does she perpetuate the ableist normativity of our current society?

Scholarship addressing science fiction, and particularly this strand of the genre, repeatedly makes reference to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* as a foundational text. In this 1932 classic dystopian novel, Huxley imagines a future where the world's affluent people gather in the technologically advanced World State. The society here has moved away from natural reproduction, favouring instead technological enhancements that make the creation and customization of Humans possible. In the Hatcheries of the World State, children are

produced and gestated in tubes, and ultimately "decanted" instead of born. During the production process, any undesirable aspect of their physiology is removed or altered, such as intelligence and height in the lower caste children. Huxley did not solely focus on reproductive technology in his novel. He also imagined a society where people were conditioned to act agreeably, by implementing a mixture of drugs and "sleep-learning". These facets of the World State society have been subsequently copied and further built upon by countless science fiction authors. Keeping a society in check by drugging the populous, and indoctrinating and conditioning them through childhood through Pavlovian-like rituals and sleep-learning, have all become so familiar in the science fiction genre that it can be hard to remember where the original ideas came from.

The perceived utopian way of governing the World State seems to have inspired one of Chambers' many societies, Aganon. As Huxley's novel has inspired countless other science fiction writers, it is not far-fetched to believe that Chambers also took inspiration from it. I will be exploring the similarities between the two societies more thoroughly later. First, let us take a look at how science fiction represents and engages with issues concerning disability.

In her article, "Marginalized Bodies of Imagined Futurescapes", Josefine Wälivaara argues that the disabled body is eradicated from the futures of science fiction through representation of disability as a medical issue requiring a cure. In order to acquire the perfect body, a person with disability must "fix" or "cure" their body in order to make it "normal". Many science fiction writers create worlds where people can "fix" the medical issue of an imperfect body, thus removing the presence of people with disabilities from their narratives. The practice of "fixing" characters with disabilities through medicine or technology in science fiction is called the "medical model" (Wälivaara, 229 - 230). Nasrullah Mambrol argues that "disability is produced as much by cultural and environmental factors as by bodily conditions", subscribing to the "social model" instead (Mambrol). This model focuses on how people with disabilities are treated by society, and how society reinforces negative stereotypes around certain disabilities. Tobin Siebers argues that disability disqualifies people from being thought of as "quality human beings" (1487), stating that this is a medical issue, not a social one, because our society views the physical and mental otherness of disabled bodies as the problem. "At the current time, we prefer to fix, cure, or eradicate the disabled body rather than the discriminatory attitudes of society" (Siebers, 1488). These perceptions have made it into science fiction, where imagined futures are left without disability, thereby erasing people with disabilities from our shared futures. Breaking with the tradition of curing disabilities in

science fiction, Chambers addresses the issue of ability and disability head on in her novel with the character Jenks.

Jenks was born while his mother lived with a cult on Earth. This cult wanted to kill Jenks when they realized that he had Dwarfism, but his mother fled the planet and saved his life. She raised him in a colony with other Humans, but refused medical alterations to Jenks' physique for any reasons other than health, despite being offered many medical procedures for free. In his adult years, this attitude towards gene tweaking has followed Jenks, as he still refuses to alter his body, and takes great offense to anybody suggesting he "fix" his dwarfism.

> 'I don't want the body everybody else told me I should have. Dr Chef is 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.' (Chambers, *Long Way*, 58).

When writing this thesis, I had to ask myself whether or not dwarfism could be considered a disability. As I personally have been taught through my upbringing, people with dwarfism are not *dis*abled, but rather *differently* abled than people without dwarfism. Should I have considered using another term for the sake of transparency and linguistic correctness? According to Little People of America's website, dwarfism is recognized as a disability, although the issue is complicated:

> Certainly many short-statured people could be considered disabled as a result of conditions, mainly orthopaedic, related to their type of dwarfism. In addition, access issues and problems exist even for healthy LPs. Consider, for example, the simple fact that most achondroplastic adults cannot reach an automated teller machine. (FAQ, lpaonline.org)

As my thesis will focus on disabilities in several different forms, I have chosen to use the term "disabled" when referring to Jenks, on the basis of the above classification of the word.

Throughout *Long Way* Jenks meets with prejudice and stereotyping based on his perceived disabled body. He does not see himself as disabled and refuses to make any changes to it in order to resemble a "normal" body. By having a strong-willed character who is proud of his body represent people with dwarfism, Chambers deviates from the tropes of past science fiction works. Jenks is not a token disabled character either; he is one of the main characters of the novel, and as such has a fully developed plot and a character arc of his own.

That being said, Chambers has still created a universe where disabilities are outside the norm. When Rosemary meets Jenks for the first time she cannot wrap her head around his physique, and ends up believing that he has to have done something to himself to look like that.

> While his head was an average size, the rest of him was small, small as a child. He was stocky too, as if his limbs had filled out while refusing to lengthen. […] She concluded that he was indeed Human, but he had to be a gene tweak. It was the only explanation she could think of. But then again, why would anyone go to that much trouble to make himself small? (*Long Way*, 21).

By introducing Jenks to the reader through Rosemary's perspective, Chambers kills two birds with one stone: she lets the reader know what Jenks looks like, in addition to revealing that a person with his looks and stature is uncommon in this universe. When we learn about his mother and the cult on Earth, it is made clear that dwarfism is considered a thing of the past.

> 'That's why he's small,' said Sissix. 'No prenatal therapy.''Oh,' Rosemary said. 'I thought he was a genetweak, but I wasn't sure how to ask.' 'Yeah, no, it *is* a genetic thing, but he was born with it,' Kizzy said. […] '[His mother] almost *died* during childbirth,' Kizzy said. 'Seriously almost *died.* Can you believe it? Who dies in childbirth? Fucking archaic.' (Chambers, *Long Way*, 105).

During this scene, we understand that Jenks' dwarfism could possibly have been "fixed" in utero, and that his mother's choice to forgo any medical treatments while pregnant is viewed as antiquated. Dwarfism is something Chambers' Humans view as a disability, and as such they seek to rid themselves of it through gene tweaking and medical modifications. Like the World State in Huxley's *Brave New World*, the Humans of Chambers' universe use technology to enhance humanity beyond diseases and disabilities, removing undesirable physiological traits that nature created. This, in turn, would erase the disabled bodies from her imagined future, perpetuating the ableist normativity we see in our own, current society. Wälivaara states that ableism is akin to sexism and racism, "a discriminatory power structure that upholds able-bodiedness/able-mindedness as superior and disability as inferior" (232). But is Chambers ableist in her portrayal of disability and people with disabilities?

Mitchell and Snyder argue that some science fiction narratives include people with disabilities in order for their disabilities to be metaphors for something else entirely, stating that disability is present in these narratives as "a stock feature of characterization and, […] as an opportunistic metaphorical device" (qtd. in Wälivaara, 229). This is called "narrative prosthesis" (229), and Wälivaara argues that it erases the person behind the metaphor. I agree

with this, as the person with the disability in such a narrative is seen to struggle with something else, taking away from the disabled experience, and making their disability about something else. Having a disability function as just another narrative device diminishes the gravity of that character having said disability, which again reduces the representation of real people's experience with disability. This is an area where Chambers does not engage in trope tradition. Although many of her characters have issues that translate into real world problems, and some of them struggle with disabilities, none of them can be seen as metaphors for other issues. When Chambers writes about people with disabilities, she does not shy away from describing those characters as they are: Blue stutters, Tamsin complains about her aching bones, Jenks's stature is described several times. It is almost not possible to read these characters' disabilities as anything but what they are unless you employ a heavy dose of imagination.

So where does Chambers stand in regard to the science fiction trope of the perfect body? On one hand, she has created a universe where disabilities are all but eradicated, following the tradition of past science fiction writers. On the other hand, one of the most influential and capable characters of the first novel has a disability that he does not seek to "cure". It is not even his defining characteristic, which is a trope many science fiction writers have a tendency to replicate. Jenks is a fully fleshed out character, with a deeply developed romantic relationship, friendships, feelings, and opinions, and he also happens to have a rare congenital disability. In terms of representation, Jenks is a character who is given both identity and agency outside of his disability. Chambers manages to give the reader enough information about Jenks' situation and deals with the issue of his disability without glossing over any important details or making his disability be his personality. She does not steer completely clear of Wälivaara's "medical model", but she also shows a character that is elevated above it. Chambers creates a universe where disabilities are viewed negatively, but through her characters she shows that they do not need to be. By presenting many different characters that each have their own judgements and reactions to each other, she urges her readers to thoroughly consider the material they are consuming. Rosemary's initial reaction to Jenks' appearance was one of confusion and disbelief, but throughout the book, both she and the reader learn more about Jenks and his condition, and thus gain a different view of what disabilities mean in this universe.

Modified Bodies in Chambers

Although Chambers' universe has eliminated most congenital disabilities through technological advances in medicine, there are still some interventions that are illegal in GC space, such as cloning and heavy genetic tailoring of embryos. Pepper is a character who is a result of both these transgressions. Born into slavery as Jane 23 on Aganon, she was produced for a specific job, along with tens, maybe even hundreds of other girls with identical genetic identifiers. Much like the lower castes of Huxley's World State, these children were designed specifically for the work they would be doing as they grew older, but unlike the Humans of the World State, the children of Aganon are put to work from early childhood onwards. In *Brave New World*, Mr. Foster explains that the lower castes take too long to mature before they are ready for physical labour, and that the experts have yet to crack the code of how to shorten the maturation period.

> [T]hough the Epsilon mind was mature at ten, the Epsilon body was not fit to work till eighteen. Long years of superfluous and wasted immaturity. If the physical development could be speeded up till it was as quick, say, as a cow's, what an enormous saving to the Community! (Huxley, 15.)

Jane 23 and her fellow Janes were put to work well before the age of ten, sorting through dangerous garbage from the surrounding scrapyards to find what could be salvaged. At the age of ten they are being taught to repair the broken technology that the younger girls find for them.

Whilst a tangible influence of Huxley upon Chambers cannot be established with absolute certainty, there are remarkable points of connections and a comparison between the two authors can be instructive and enlightening. The Enhanced Humanity society where Pepper grew up seems to be a further development of Huxley's World State: a world where every person is designed for specific tasks, be it charismatic politicians, clever inventors, or mindless worker bees. The similarities of the two societies are striking. Both have government run facilities where children are produced to order, both strictly observe and control their populace, and both are geographically separated from outside influences. Huxley's World State is separated from the "savage" lands around it where people still practice marriage and natural reproduction, while Chambers' Aganon has taken a whole planet for themselves, cut off from the rest of GC space.

> Unequivocally cut off from the Diaspora and the Galactic Commons, Enhancement colonies bred their people in gestation chambers, basing their genetic make-up on calculations of what

> their society would be in need of once they reached maturity. Their genes were tweaked beyond recognition, improving health, intelligence, social skills – whatever was needed for the jobs they were destined to fill. Menial labour was performed by people bred without any genetic alterations at all, save two: infertility and a lack of hair (to make them easy to spot). (Chambers, *Long Way*, 110).

What is interesting to note here is that the people designed for lower castes in Huxley's World State are deprived of oxygen and given alcohol while gestating so as to make them less intelligent and more docile as adults. In Chambers' Aganon, the factory workers are not tampered with in this way. In fact, the children are expected to be intelligent enough to learn how to repair the scrapped technology they are given daily. They are taught how to do so through instructional videos at the end of each workday. It would seem that Chambers drew inspiration from *Brave New World*, but further developed the ideas prompted by Huxley. While Huxley created a working class filled with docile, mentally impeded people, Chambers created a society where the workers are mentally capable, but their bodies have been tampered with so that they cost less to maintain. Aganon produces people with physical disabilities, whereas the World State produces people with mental disabilities.

Up until now I have discussed the Humans of Chambers' novels and their disabilities, but what about the other species of the series? Although we do not find any mentions of other species that have disabled bodies relative to the other bodies within the same species, there are two distinctive species that could be seen to function as a basis for disabled representation throughout the books. Both the Aeluons and the Harmagians, two of the most powerful and influential species in GC space, have what other species would perceive as disabilities.

The Aeluons communicate with each other through shifting colours in their cheeks, and as such never evolved to have auditory receiving body parts, or vocal centres. One could, of course, argue that this does not make them disabled, as they are still perfectly able to communicate with each other within their own species. This is certainly, on a technical level, true. However, the similarities to real-world people with hearing and speech disabilities are clear enough to warrant a comparison. To cope with a universe where most species have spoken and heard languages, the technologically advanced Aeluons came up with high-tech modifications to their bodies that allow them to process and understand auditory stimuli and reply with audible language. The species as a whole is almost universally viewed as beautiful.

> It was pure chance, of course, that Aeluons so often managed to check all the boxes on the list of Things That Humans Generally Find Attractive. […] Aeluons' long limbs and digits were alien, no question, but they moved with fascinating grace. (Chambers, *Long Way*, 129).

A reader with hearing disabilities might find themselves surprised to be represented not only by one beautiful character, but by a whole species of beautiful people, in Chambers' books. The implants that the Aeluons use are reminiscent of real-world hearing aids and mechanical larynxes, and can as such be seen as representation for the hearing impaired community as well as representation for people who have lost their voice or were born with defective larynxes. The Aeluons are presented as a powerful, resourceful species, who on more than one occasion aid other species by sharing their wealth and technology. A person with a hearing or speech disability in the real world might feel like a minority in our current ableist normative society, as the world is largely accommodated to people who can both hear and speak. In Chambers' universe, one of the most powerful species happen to be naturally deaf and mute, and even though they do have other forms of communication, that real-world person might still feel comforted or uplifted by seeing the societal roles reversed this way.

This is not to say that Aeluons are universally good people. They have a sordid past of technical warfare with the Harmagians, and often view themselves as better than other species. Their society's view on interspecies relationships is reminiscent of the way people viewed interracial relationships up until recent history in the United States, something I will be discussing further in my chapter on race. Their view is explained in the novels by referring to the low number of children born each year, so most Aeluons expect Aeluon women to further the species by having children with other Aeluons. Any interspecies relationship involving a female Aeluon would thereby be seen as selfish at best, and a betrayal of her species at worst.

Wälivaara states that the way people are represented in fiction influences the way those people are perceived in our current society:

> Certain groups, in particular those already marginalized in society, are constantly framed within the same type of story, which contributes to normative understandings of these groups. They are normative in the way they help sustain normative notions about groups, often by clear divisions between us/them and normal/deviant. (232).

By having one of her most affluent and beautiful species use hearing and speaking aids, Chambers flips the narrative in which people with hearing and speaking disabilities are used

to seeing themselves. Here, they are represented as strong and autonomous, a species that others look up to and admire. The normal/deviant dichotomy is discarded in favour of an adaptable, non-dual worldview, where people are not seen as abled and disabled, but as individuals.

Where the Aeluons are a species almost universally admired, the Harmagians are not as lucky. While just as influential and powerful as the Aeluons, the Harmagians are not viewed as attractive. "All Humans could agree that Harmagians were hideous (a sentiment the Harmagians heartily returned)" (Chambers, *Long Way*, 129). The Harmagians are described as almost slug-like people, with soft, slime covered bodies, eyestalks that protrude from their heads, and tentacles under their weak chins. In their natural state they move extremely slowly compared with other species. To combat this, they use motorized carts to move themselves around at a faster pace. These aliens in carts are the closest Chambers gets to representation of a person in a wheelchair. Is it a positive representation? While they are never described as incapable or weak, the attributes of the species are generally thought of as negative.

> The person before her was, like all his species, a mollusc-like blob who couldn't move around quickly without the help of his cart. He didn't have teeth or claws. He didn't have *bones*. Yet somehow, there had been a time when this squishy species had controlled a significant portion of the galaxy (Chambers, *Long Way*, 118).

While being one of the most influential and powerful species, they are also viewed as a brutal, conquering people. Their history is fraught with bloody wars. None of these traits puts them in a positive light, portraying them as an unlikeable species. What does that say about the people being represented? While Chambers may not have set out to represent people in wheelchairs when she created the Harmagians, there are no other mentions of people using mobility aids in her novels, barring Tamsin and her cane. The Harmagian carts bear striking similarities to wheelchairs, as they are the only mobility aid described in the series that cater to individuals, and use wheels. Where the hearing and speaking disability community can find comfort and pride in the Aeluons, people in wheelchairs would find the Harmagians insulting. The only positive depiction of a Harmagian in the entire series appears in the third novel, in the form of the Human-obsessed Ghuh'loloan. For a person with movement disability, having to read through insult after insult for two whole novels before encountering a mildly positive representation is downright harmful. For people with able bodies, the representation of people using wheelchairs in the Wayfarer series does nothing to dissuade us from our set ableist normative worldview.

As with all representation, we have to ask ourselves if it is helpful, healthy, or positive for the people represented. Both Aeluons and Harmagians can be seen as representations of real-world people with disabilities. The fact that these representations are not Human could be an oversight on the authors behalf, signifying nothing more than pure coincidence. It could also stem from some sort of misguided sense of justice, that maybe Chambers wanted to give people with hearing and speaking disabilities interesting and inventive representations in her novels. I believe that Chambers did not set out to create representations for these people when she created the Aeluon and Harmagian species, but that she found inspiration in her own world that she then implemented into her new aliens' physiologies. Real world people with disabilities could have been the inspiration for Chambers' new species, and through her work, some of the same people might take comfort and find their own inspiration.

Pepper, Blue, Tamsin, and Jenks all represent real-world disabilities in one form or another, and have no need for "translation" for the represented to recognise themselves in them. In the case of the Aeluons and the Harmagians, the representation has to go through a number of prisms in order for real-world people to see themselves in the characters portraying their disability. The disabled characters *are* still present, however. Wälivaara contends that the "medical model" of imagined futurescapes eradicates people with disabilities from the narrative.

> The medical framing of disability serves as an effective way for narratives to eradicate disabled bodies from imagined futures. Consequently, disabled bodies are cured and, thus, are no longer part of the future. (Wälivaara, 230).

Chambers deviates from this narrative by having two entire species that operate with their perceived disabilities still intact. Although Aeluons use technical implants to make themselves understood in the greater universe, they still communicate with each other using their colourful cheek skin. This can be interpreted as a deaf-mute person who communicates with hearing people through a mechanical larynx, but who still uses sign language when communicating with other people with hearing disabilities.

As for the Harmagians, they are still perfectly able to move around and function without their motorized carts. In *Record*, Ghuh'loloan's cart malfunctions as she is about to board a shuttle. The Shuttle attendant is not strong enough to lift both her and her cart, so Ghuh'loloan exits it in order for the flustered attendant to carry it onboard for her, to the shock and awe of the gathering Human crowd.

> [Isabel had] never seen a Harmagian leave xyr cart. She knew, logically, that vehicle and rider were two separate entities, but the visual confirmation was cognitively dissonant" (Chambers, *Record,* 114).

This passage not only offers a representation of a handicapable person, but it also effectively portrays the prejudice that comes with only living among able people. Although Isabel does not say anything to Ghuh'loloan about her biased thoughts, it shocks her to see that the Harmagian is capable without her cart. Although she remains composed, Isabel is confronted by her own, ableist way of thinking in this scene. Chambers highlights the ableist normative society of the Humans in the Fleet through Isabel's reaction to Ghuh'loloan's cart-less ableness. The scene puts the spotlight on a way of thinking that has been – and continues to be – prevalent in our own current society. More often than not, we think of people in wheelchairs as incapable of functioning without their chairs. Many people who use wheelchairs are able to move around on their own, but (much like in Chambers' universe) due to a society where we value efficiency and speed, most of them choose to use the aid of a wheelchair.

While Chambers' representation of people with disabilities is not universally positive, she does include people with clearly stated disabilities in her stories. She does not eradicate the disabled bodies in her universe, although her universe seeks to "cure" most disabilities. In this way, Chambers challenges the medical model commonly used in science fiction narratives, while still following the trope to an extent. Her universe seeks to rid itself of disabled bodies, but through characters like Jenks and Tamsin, Chambers shows that not all disabilities are in need of a cure. Jenks could have altered his physical form through early childhood surgery, or adult genetweaking, but he chooses not to. He often states that he is proud of his body, and is shown to have a complex identity outside of his disability. Tamsin has a frail skeleton, and could have had her body modified using technology and mechanical body parts, but she chooses to walk with a cane. This suggests that she does not want to tamper any more with her body than her work has done already, and accepts her disability for what it is. Chambers never focuses long on each of these characters' disabilities, but makes them clear for the reader to understand. Each have lives and identities that encompass their disabilities, but do not revolve around that alone, giving them fully fledged personalities and story arcs. The disabilities presented in the Wayfarer series are never twisted into metaphorical stand-ins for something else, but allowed to portray the disabilities in their own right. Chambers' emphasis on the individuality of her characters, and the pluralism of their identities, suggests that she wants a society that does the same. A person might have a disability, and we should

acknowledge this disability for what it is, accepting the one who has it as a whole person, and not as a representative for their disability.

The Intersectional Body

Science fiction has for several decades been the perfect platform on which to explore societal issues such as gender equality, sexual freedoms, and political struggles. The literary critics of the past have often focused their attention on one or two separate issues, homing in on the minutiae of their field and explored the intricate details of their topic. This has been rewarding research within literary criticism, resulting in incredibly worthwhile theory that we still use to this day. But as our society evolves, we find that people – and their literature – are not as one-dimensional as we previously have treated them. Is it sufficient to analyse our societal issues separately? Many recent critics, feminists prevalent among them, subscribe to the idea of working intersectionally. Kimberlé Crenshaw, a leading scholar within the theoretical fields of race and feminism, introduced the term on which intersectional theory was built in 1989 ("Kimberlé"). In a video for National Association of Independent Schools' People of Color Conference, she defined it as such:

> Intersectionality is just a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and they create obstacles that often are not understood within conventional ways of thinking about anti-racism or feminism or whatever social advocacy structures we have. Intersectionality isn't so much a grand theory, it's a prism for understanding certain kinds of problems. (Crenshaw, 00:00:08 – 00:00:36)

When writing about an imagined future, how do we deal with our current societal challenges? Chambers has created a whole universe – set hundreds of years after our reality's present – where Humans have left Earth in search of other planets to inhabit. What would be the results of having Humans live on spaceships for generations, where the issues of race, gender, culture, and sexual identity had to be faced head-on in stead of fought out in long-drawn wars across country borders? Chambers shows us some of these results, but does she show us the equations behind them?

In his essay, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory", Hans Robert Jauss argues that literary texts have long been analysed with too much emphasis on the words themselves or the author's intent, and too little on the audience's reception. He contends that the reader's experience is vital to the impact of a work, and can be described professionally without venturing into the "threatening pitfalls of psychology", through a heightened focus on the framework of the audience's expectations:

> A literary work, even if it seems new, does not appear as something absolutely new in an informational vacuum, but predisposes its readers to a very definite type of reception by

> textual strategies, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics or implicit allusions. It awakens memories of the familiar, stirs particular emotions in the reader and with its "beginning" arouses expectations for the "middle and end," which can be continued intact, changed, re-oriented or even ironically fulfilled in the course of reading according to certain rules of the genre or type of text (Jauss, 11 - 12).

An author sets a certain series of expectations for their reader by writing about certain types of issues. Chambers advertises her novels as science fiction, and as such gives her audience expectations of space travel, aliens, and foreign planets. These expectations come from the familiarity her audience has with the genre, based on other novels, as well as tv shows, movies, and comic books. Chambers also writes about people with disabilities, people of colour, and queer people. The expectations she sets for her readers about these issues are mostly fulfilled, but in some places her silence on a subject works against her.

Racial Bodies in Chambers

Many science fiction writers choose to create imagined futures which have evolved beyond racial problems, to where the notions of race and cultural heritage no longer bear any poignancy. Others choose to delve into our current struggles, develop the ideas and societal pressures we already find ourselves facing, and expand on those tensions. According to Elizabeth Anne Leonard, "Most English-language science fiction is written by whites." (253). In her essay, "Race and Ethnicity in Science Fiction", she explains that while many non-white authors write fantastical or futuristic fiction, it is almost never treated as fantasy or science fiction. Instead, their works are grouped as African American literature, or Indigenous literature, or even Magical Realism. This suggests that our current social climate, and the science fiction community within that climate, has yet to embrace writers of colour as anything beyond their cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Their narratives are put into every other box than the science fiction box, merely because of the racial component of either author, text, or both.

So, is the genre of science fiction mostly defined as a realm of white authors? If so, the question of race is often tackled by people who have never been oppressed, persecuted, or judged for the colour of their skin or their cultural heritage. This creates a dangerous precedent, as the stories of racism are not told by the people who experienced it, but by people belonging to the dominant culture, and at worst, by the ones enacting it.

> [S]inse racism often appears different to members of a minority than to members of a majority or dominant culture, what one white writer or reader perceives as a socially progressive work

> might be seen by a reader of colour as engaging with racist tropes or as an appropriation of the values and concerns of a minority culture. (Leonard, 254).

I do agree with Leonard, that white authors writing about race often can come across as appropriative or insensitive. I also believe that the miscategorization of futuristic texts by writers of colour has caused the field of science fiction to be perceived as mainly white. However, as we are made aware of these factors, it will be easier to take steps to avoid them in the future, both for me personally, and for our society as a whole.

How does Chambers deal with the issue of race? Chambers is a Caucasian woman, born and raised in California, USA. Her view on racial issues would be one coming from a place of privilege and dominance, according to Leonard. Since Chambers is not a person of colour, she can only imagine what it means to be one. Maybe that is why the notion of racism within the Human species in her novels does not come up? In the Wayfarer series, the Human race has been mingling for thousands of years, almost eradicating any notion of race. Leonard states that many science fiction writers do this, in order to either side-step the racial issue altogether, or to build a realistic future society.

> [E]ither motive avoids wrestling with the difficult questions of how a non-racist society comes into being and how members of minority cultures or ethnic groups preserve culture." (Leonard, 254).

Most of Chambers' Humans all have dark skin, eyes, and hair, but there are racial differences despite the years of intermingling. For example, the people of the Exodus Fleet most often have black, curly hair and amber skin, while people from the Sol system tend to have copper skin and varying dark hair types. While Chambers has chosen to make the Human race a more unified-looking species, she does maintain small differences within it. In addition to the mostly blended general populus, there are some people who are described as something akin to Caucasian: pink-skinned Humans, a result of living on Saturn, where the sunlight is scarce. I found no mentions of there ever being challenges in conjunction with race within the Human species. The novels state that Earth was destroyed because of the warring peoples, and that Humans realized their folly as they left the planet. There are no mentions of race being the reason for those wars, and neither are there mentions of racial clashes after the Exodus. Why? Would Chambers have us believe that Humans just realized that fighting amongst themselves was bad on the journey into the great unknown, and that no squabbles or differences lead to greater difficulties within the species after that? At the narrative present, the Exodus happened several centuries ago. Would Chambers have us believe that in all that time, no wars were

fought within the Human species at all? That the Humans had become so capable at peace-keeping during the Exodus, that war was not a problem and that the racial differences that occurred after it had no impact on the species' social and cultural societies? If so, why is there no textual evidence of this? Why does Chambers not explain this to her readers? As the novels stand, Chambers glosses over the "hows" and "whys" of Human history after the Exodus, and focuses on the narrative present instead. This suggests that she does not want to engage in racial issues, or that she does not know how. Either way, it is a lack in her otherwise highly developed world building.

Pepper is one of the Humans who is described as having pinkish skin, resembling what we would call Caucasian. One possible way to interpret her heritage could be that Aganon, the Enhanced Humanity society where she grew up, consists of Caucasian Humans that strive to keep the races "pure" by only making a certain type of people. This would not be too far-fetched to surmise, as our own history is riddled with examples of Caucasian people trying to keep races from intermingling. Aganon is not presented in the best of lights, as the only things we know about the planet are that they engineer people there, and that they use children as slaves in factories. The brutality of Aganon's factories – where girls would "disappear" if they misbehaved too badly – could be compared to the slave encampments and concentration camps of World War II. And from that comparison, the "racial purity" connotation is not far behind. Once Pepper's story progresses, however, we learn that her boyfriend, Blue, also escaped from Aganon, and he is not described as Caucasian:

> Blue's golden brown skin could've been anything from Martian to Exodan to the product of any number of independent colonies – but from sight alone, it was clear that none of those heritages were his. There was something different about him, something a little too smooth, too polished. (Chambers, *Common Orbit*, 19).

If they both were created by the same Enhanced Humanity society, then why are their racial signifiers different? Is there any reason why Pepper is described as pink while Blue is described as brown? Did Chambers have a reason for their difference, other than highlighting the difference in their stations? Blue was created on Aganon, just as Pepper was, but as his intended vocation was to be a politician, his appearance was put more thought into than Pepper's. This implies that his golden brown skin is seen as attractive on Aganon, or at least more accepted than Pepper's pink skin. Maybe the engineers of Aganon want their prominent people to look like Exodans, and therefore put more effort into making Blue's appearance resemble that of an Exodan. Further, one can then speculate that Pepper's pink skin has

nothing to do with the planet's preference, but that it may be the more cost efficient hue of skin to produce. None of the factory slaves are supposed to see the outside world, and therefore do not need melanin-rich skin. This is all conjecture, however, as their appearances are never explained in a racial context. The reader is left without explanation as to why Pepper and Blue look the way they do, and where the author would have an opportunity to offer one, she stays silent. Could this be an oversight, or a conscious effort to steer the reader's attention towards other factors of the characters' lives? Either way, Chambers' silence on the topic could be interpreted as lazy writing, or – at worst – a purposefully negligent choice to omit racial context for her characters.

Chambers does mention that the Humans that come from different places in the galaxy tend to look and act differently from one another, but she avoids talking about any present, race-related struggles between them. This begs the question: are there any race related issues among Humans at this stage in their history, or has the author simply steered the focus of her novels towards other issues? Leonard states that the avoidance of racism in science fiction can stem from an author's wish to put emphasis on other issues. Creating a world where all races have mingled for so long that they all turn to one can readily be seen as "a gesture to 'political correctness' by an author whose interests in the story lie elsewhere" (Leonard, 254). It becomes a token mention of race, just to "get it out of the way" before engaging in other issues, and could as such be seen as a misguided, cheap attempt at racial awareness.

There are no mentions of racism within the Human species in Chambers' novels, but this may be due to the dwindling numbers of Humans. The Galactic Commons function as a space version of the European Union, where several species work together for the greater, bureaucratic good. The Human race entered into the GC relatively late in the game, and due to the harrowing journey from the uninhabitable earth their numbers had dwindled significantly. The Human technologies were considered antiquated and useless by the rest of the GC species on arrival. Because of their low numbers and outdated technologies, the Humans are considered a minority in the GC, and are often treated as a lesser race when compared with the more influential ones. This may be Chambers' way of integrating racism into her universe, but there are few mentions of any real difficulties Humans have to undergo as a result of their minority status. This leads me to believe that the low influence Humans have in the GC is a symbolic token of racism. Instead of actually addressing racial issues between Humans, all of Humankind are treated as inferior by other species, and have no racial issues amongst themselves. It is also important to note that disputes and trouble between species, while

interesting and thought provoking, do not address Human racial issues, and can therefore be seen as empty attempts to create rounded racial conversation.

Chambers does try to differentiate between Humans based on where they grew up. Depending on whether a person grew up on a planet, a moon, or a spaceship, they have small quirks and preferences that set them apart from others. People born and raised on homesteaders, the ships that make up the Exodus Fleet, have strict feelings of duty and society, and tend to be willing to share their food and goods. People raised on Mars tend to be wealthier than others and have a more elitist world view. There are many small Human colonies, both in the Sol system and other places. If a person grew up in one of the lesser colonies, the chances are that they have an "every man for himself"-kind of world view, since life in the colonies tends to be harsher than in other places.

Dialects also set Humans apart from each other in the books. Martian speakers tend to be described as "cute", or "mellow", while Homesteaders are more "direct". Despite all these titbits of diversity among Humans, nowhere is it mentioned that some Humans are viewed as lesser than others. Their diverse looks and behaviours do not lead to any conflict, and in the few places where tensions arise between Humans it is clear that the basis of the problems stem from other factors than race and culture. Chambers' universe is filled with a diverse, unified Human race, where racism seems to be eradicated.

> The majority of living Humans were descended from the Exodus Fleet, which had sailed far beyond the reaches of their ancestral sun. Many, like Ashby, had been born within the very same homesteaders that had belonged to the original Earthen refugees. His tight black curls and amber skin were the result of generations of mingling and mixing aboard the giant ships. Most Humans, whether space-born or colony kids, shared that nationless Exodan blend. (Chambers, *Long Way*, 5).

The Wayfarer series tackles a myriad of important issues, where race seem to take the backseat for most of the narrative. Perhaps Chambers felt, as many other science fiction writers do (according to Leonard), that her focus should not be on the Humans' internal conflicts, but on the struggles between all the different alien species that make up the inhabitants of her universe. This may be an attempt at exploring the issue of race through a new lens, to separate it from pertaining to Humans and transfer it to a galaxy of different species. Instead of putting emphasis on race in her series, Chambers aims to create a world in which our current social issues have evolved into new, more diverse concerns. By doing this, is she blazing a new trail, or falling into the same category as most of science fiction writers

do, according to Leonard? Is she presenting her readers with complex characters that have multifaceted problems in a "conscious model for a future society", or does she merely avoid "wrestling with the difficult questions"? (Leonard, 254).

Intersectional Bodies in Chambers

People are not made up of only one feature in real life. Race is an important part of identity, to be sure, but so is sexual orientation, ethnicity, culture, upbringing, gender, and a multitude of other factors. In Chambers' novels, how are the different identities mapped out? There are attempts at showing layered characters, but are the difficulties they face shown to be intersectional? Merriam-Webster's website defines intersectionality as "the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups" ("Intersectionality").

In Chambers' novels, we see people from a myriad of different species, genders, and social backgrounds. Despite the multitude of peoples, the issue of race within the different species does not come up often, and when it does it is not in any elaborate effort to discuss discrimination or racism. While Rosemary and Ashby accompany Sissix to her homestead, they are greeted by Aandrisk children who have never seen Humans before:

> She looked between Rosemary and Ashby. *'You're a different kind of brown than she is.'*
>
> *'That's right,'* Ashby said.
>
> *'Aandrisks are like that,'* she informed him, as if he, too, were meeting a new species for the first time. *'We have lots of different colours. I'm blue-green, Vush is green-blue, Sissix is green-green. I know all my scale colours.'* (Chambers, *Long Way*, 262).

While this interaction effectively highlights the racial differences between the two Humans, and between the three Aandrisks, there is no further discussion surrounding their races. The scene remains purely descriptive, and functions more as a way to draw similarities between the two species than anything else. There is no further reference to differing cultural or ethnic groups within the species, leaving the scene without in-depth examination of either. This silence suggests either one of two things: either the issues of race are not important to the narrative, and therefore remarked upon merely to inform us that differences do exist, or Chambers is trying to suggest that racial issues within each species do not exist. Either way, despite all of the intricate and imaginative details of Chambers' universe, her Humans fall short of representing any real peoples. In the novels, all species are seen as unified wholes,

without acknowledged inner divisions or racial issues. In the real world we are used to seeing so many different races and cultures within our own species, that Chambers' Humans seem flat and one-dimensional in comparison.

In reality, people do not just stick with their own race or social group. Improved ease of travel has made it increasingly easy for people to reach destinations far from their birthplace. This has resulted in cultures being mixed, as well as children being born to mixed race couples. These children grow up with a whole different set of discriminations and disadvantages than their parents did. In the Wayfarer series, people not only travel between cities and countries, but they also travel between planets and solar systems. Despite this, there is no talk of interracial couples, either among the Humans or among species. The Humans are said to have slight differences in looks and social backgrounds, but it is never mentioned in relation to their marriages or children. The lack of acknowledged interracial couples in the series does not mean that everybody only marries people who look like themselves, however. That there is no mention of interracial couples or children from mixed race parents, most likely stems from Chambers' established evolved universe: the races have mixed for so long that it seems insignificant to comment on it. Chambers' method of not engaging in certain issues, such as interracial marriage, may have the opposite effect of her (presumed) intention: the reader could assume that since there is no indication of interracial marriages, they do not happen, instead of thinking that they are so common as to not merit a comment.

What is new and different for Chambers' reader is the myriad of inter-species couples in the series. Most notable among them are the relationships between Rosemary and Sissix and Ashby and Pei. While both of these relationships are sexual in nature, none of the characters discuss the possibility of having children together. In fact, there are no interspecies children in the entire series. This points to an important clue about the natural laws of Chambers' universe: people cannot procreate outside of their own species. Unlike many fantasy series, where Humans tend to procreate with other species such as Elves, Dwarves, and Orcs, Chambers' science fiction universe lack textual evidence of interspecies children, suggesting that children can only come from same species intercourse. As such, we see no characters who are discriminated based on a split parental heritage.

The first real inter-species couple we read about in the series, is Ashby and Pei. The relationship between this couple is interesting, when looking at it through an intersectional lens. They come from different species, Ashby being Human and Pei being Aeluon. Since Pei's work consists of transporting cargo for the Aeluon military, and Aeluons view inter-

species relationships negatively, they keep their relationship secret. If we assume that Chambers' way of tackling racism in her novels is by transferring it to be between all species, not just between Humans, this relationship becomes even more interesting.

The readers of Chambers' series are most likely used to a world view where men are seen as the dominant part of a heterosexual relationship, and would perhaps expect that if anything, it would be the Human side that looked down on inter-species relationships. In the case of Ashby and Pei, we see this situation a bit differently.

> As open and generous as Aeluons generally were to their galactic neighbours, interspecies coupling remained a mainstream taboo. […] An Aeluon could lose her family and friends over an alien relationship. She could lose her job, especially when on a government contract. (Chambers, *Long Way*, 116).

In the grander scheme of things, Humans are viewed as a minority species that has little to no influence in the GC. Aeluons, on the other hand, are among the most powerful, most influential species out there. Ashby and Pei are keeping their relationship secret because of how Pei's people would ostracise her if word got out, not the other way around. This unusual dynamic prompts the reader to see the world from the minority's perspective, by reversing not only the gender dynamic we are so used to seeing in such relationships, but also the way we view Humans and aliens. Here, the female alien is the dominant part of the relationship, while the male Human is accommodating his life around her specifications.

This dynamic could also be a representation of racism, in that the dynamic invokes thoughts of the miscegenation laws in the United States. These laws prohibited people of different racial and cultural backgrounds to marry one another, and while the laws were deemed unconstitutional in 1967 ("Miscegenation"), the general view of interracial marriages was negative for decades still. Although Chambers never states that the Aeluons have strict laws about interspecies marriages, the fact that Pei could lose her job indicates that the species view it extremely negatively. Chambers presents a couple who have to be secretive about their relationship due to one of them being viewed as "lesser", undeserving of being the other's partner. These views sound familiar, bringing to mind the countless relationships between Caucasian and African-American people that were kept secret due to racist attitudes in the United States in our not-so-distant past. Although we never see Ashby or Pei face any consequences for their relationship, even after being open about it, the fact that they kept it secretive suggests a serious, interspecies dogma. This could be Chambers' attempt at

addressing racial issues, but seeing as the couple does not face any problems with authorities or judgemental comments from their crews, it seems a half-hearted one at best.

The characters from organic species in Chambers' series have multidimensional lives and problems, but very few of their problems relate to race or gender. Has Chambers created a world without racism or sexism, then? Not quite, as it turns out. Throughout the series, we encounter several different forms of sentient lifeforms, and most prevalent of those are the beings with artificial intelligence. It could be argued that Chambers represents racism through how the organic people in her universe view AIs, as the common conception is that they are lesser beings that were created to serve the organic species. This is not so different from how the western society viewed slaves from Africa and other continents during the height of slavery in Europe and the Americas.

In Chambers' novels, AIs have reached such high levels of sagacity that many consider them just as alive as any organic person. An example of this is Lovey, the AI programmed into the main hub of the Wayfarer. She is referred to as her own person by the crew, and has a romantic relationship with Jenks. There is even an intergalactic organisation of individuals who fight for AIs to gain the same legal rights as everybody else, the Friends of Digital Sapients, or FDS for short. This organisation is brought up when Jenks is talking with Lovey about whether or not she wants a body.

> On paper, Jenks believed a lot of the same things they did, namely that AIs were sapient individuals worthy of the same legal rights that everyone else had. But the FDS went about it all wrong. […] Jenks was all for proper recognition of AI rights, but the FDS's inability to speak about digital minds in any sort of accuracy was more a hindrance than a help. (Chambers, *Long Way*, 57).

According to Jasbir Puar, the idea of the cyborg is the perfect intersection between Human and technology. She comes to this conclusion through remembering Donna Haraway's statement from her 1985 essay "A Cyborg Manifesto", that she would rather be a cyborg than a goddess. The idea is that a cyborg is a melding of Human anatomy and technology, pointing to the future, while a goddess is a "reclamation of a racialized, matriarchal past" (Puar, 1006). What Haraway was talking about, was a criticism of conventional feminism, and the language of essentialism. Using the cyborg as a metaphor for the Human – and especially the female Human – condition, Haraway criticized the traditional dichotomies:

> In the traditions of 'Western' science and politics — the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other — the relation between organism and machine has been a border war. (Haraway, 292).

Puar states that although Haraway was trying to move away from the established dichotomies in feminist language of the past, for her example she used a being that, in essence, was a culmination of the binaries she was trying to avoid. “Even though Haraway’s cyborgs are meant to undermine binaries […] a cyborg actually inhabits the intersection of body and technology” (1006). The cyborg cannot be anything other than what it is, which is an amalgamation of its parts, both organic and technologic. Just as we cannot separate the intersecting parts of Humanity and evaluate each part on its own, so too must we see the representations of ourselves as wholes, with every part combined. Both Haraway and Puar agree that the embodiment of the cyborg hold the marriage between organic and in-organic matter. And it is exactly this, the *body* of the cyborg, that is interesting when looking at Chambers’ works. How does she represent the cyborg in her novels, both metaphorical and literal?

Cyborgs, androids, and other Human-technology hybrids are a known staple of the science fiction genre, often seen as either the pinnacle or downfall of Humanity’s technological savvy. In Chambers’ novels, we do not come across any cyborgs as such, but there *are* mentions of Humans who modify their bodies with technology. These people are called “Tweakers” and “Modders” interchangeably, and the general consensus among the novels’ main characters is that tweaking is not necessarily a good thing. Most Humans have some forms of technology in and on their bodies, such as miniscule Immubots that flow through the bloodstream and keep them healthy, and a wristpatch imbedded under the skin on their wrist that contains their social information, and health and identity records. These additions to the Human anatomy are not considered tweaking, as it is required by law that every GC citizen has them. More severe adjustments to the Human physique such as swapping one’s natural organs for mechanized ones, or operating wires into one’s head so one can plug the internet directly into one’s mind, would be seen as heavy tweaking. In GC space, these Tweakers are few and far between, but when the crew of the Wayfarer stop at a tidally locked moon called Port Coriol, that changes. As Jenks ventures into the underground tech district, he feels more at ease about his small stature, compared to the people around him:

> Many of the folks there were hardcore modders, people prone to removing their own limbs in favour of synthetic replacements. Walking through the caves, you might see metallic exoskeletons, or swirling nanobot tattoos, or unsettlingly perfect faces that betrayed a weakness for genetweaks. Facial patches, dermal ports, home-brewed implants. It was hard to feel weird in a place where *everybody* was weird. (Chambers, *Long Way*, 109).

Although Jenks makes it perfectly clear on multiple occasions that he is strictly against modding his own body just to fit other peoples' views of how he should look, he feels at ease when surrounded by people who have had their bodies altered. These people would perhaps be the closest Chambers gets to describing cyborgs. People walking around with heavy body modifications, but still with their own minds attached to their own body.

The AIs in Chambers' series are not so fortunate. By GC law, AIs cannot inhabit Humanoid bodies that they alone control. If an AI with their own, autonomous body kit were to be apprehended by GC law enforcers, they would be removed from said kit and deleted, effectively killed. A "body kit" is the term used in Chambers' novels for an organic-looking, mechanized body that can house an AI. These kits are often so lifelike that the AI can pass as an organic being through most of central, GC controlled space. Only a thorough medical examination would uncover the truth.

Chambers has created a universe where the embodiment of an AI is outlawed. She makes it clear from early in the first novel that AIs can be just as cognitively present and individualistic as an organic sapient. These two realities of her world building can be seen as opposites, or at least prompt the reader into examining the reason for outlawing bodily autonomy for AIs. As readers, we learn to love and respect Lovey as a person, and see the fact that she is not allowed to have a body of her own as injustice. We are also invited to examine the morals of AI identity, to investigate the ethics of creating artificial life. If we condone creating AIs and giving them autonomous bodies, why do we condemn cloning or gene modification?

At the end of *Long Way*, Lovey is transferred into body kit after a terrible accident. She leaves the Wayfarer with the help of Pepper, and throughout *Common Orbit*, the reader is shown her struggles with body dysmorphia and prejudice towards AIs. As she is trying to pass as a Human woman, she takes the Human name Sidra. Through Sidra we learn a lot about different species, both their customs and cultures, but also their view of AIs.

When Sidra is taken to an Aeluon fertility festival (called a *Shimmerquick*), it becomes clear to her that her body kit has certain drawbacks. Aeluons communicate with one another through flashes of different colours in their cheeks, but the Human body kit is not equipped to register the minutia of the changes. She feels outside of their tight knit community and envies the certainty they exude about their place in society.

> She wasn't jealous of what the woman was receiving, exactly, but of how confident she looked, how confident they all looked. They each had a role, a place, a colour. They knew where and how they fit. (Chambers, *Common Orbit*, 84).

While this passage does not showcase any prejudice towards AIs, it shows that Sidra is experiencing a feeling of being left out of a social event by a dominant culture. Her misfit in this society is manifold: she is an AI, she is highly uncomfortable in her body, and her body is portraying a Human woman. Not only is she unable to communicate with the Aeluons in their native language, but she can only observe the events from an outsider's perspective, she is highly aware that her existence is illegal, and she feels foreign to both the Aeluons, and to herself. Although there are no outright racist, sexist, or "speciest" actions in this scene, Sidra's feelings of otherness can be seen as an intersectional issue, however unintended it might appear. ("Speciest" is a term used in Chambers' novels, about prejudice surrounding other species than your own. It is used in the same way as we Humans would use "racist".) The inner struggle Sidra is experiencing is a faceted ordeal that many real-world people face daily. Her feelings of foreignness towards the body kit have a clear real-world parallel in the body dysmorphia that many trans people experience. Sidra also feels like an outsider next to the Aeluons, something that can be seen as a comment on racial or cultural otherness. In addition to these factors, her illegal existence can translate to a multitude of lives in the real world. However far our society has come at the time of writing this, it is still illegal to be certain ways in many countries and cultures. According to Jamie Wareham in an article on Forbes.com, it was still illegal to be LGBTQ+ in over 70 countries as of May 17th, 2020. Not only that, but 12 countries still execute people for being homosexuals (Wareham). Just by inhabiting a Humanoid body kit, Sidra runs the risk of being apprehended and either reprogrammed or even deleted. The constant fear of being discovered and punished for her existence easily translates to the same fear in people who are part of the LGBTQ+ community in the real world. Chambers may have intended these points of recognition between Sidra's difficulties and real-world issues, but if that were the case, would she not focus more on each

segment of Sidra, instead of merely commenting vaguely on them? However unintended it might present itself, Chambers happened to create an intersectional character in Sidra.

Where I contend that Chambers does endeavour to create an intersectional understanding of her characters is with Rosemary Harper. Being the first character we are introduced to in the novels, she easily slides into the role of "main character", although *Long Way* has more than one main character. Acting as a focalizer, we often see the world through Rosemary's eyes, and as she is young and inexperienced outside of her home planet, we get to learn about different things through her. Chambers uses Rosemary as a device for teaching her readers about her world in a natural manner, without it coming across as heavy-handed or awkward.

When the Wayfarer is boarded by Akaraks, a minority species in the GC, it becomes clear that the crew cannot communicate with them until Rosemary shows up. She speaks their language, and through her we understand that the Akaraks have a long history with oppression and inequality in the GC. In the past, one of the more hegemonic species of the galaxy – the Harmagians – colonized the Akaraks' planet and used their people as slave labour. When the Harmagians left, they scorched the earth, poisoned the waters, and took everything of value with them. As a result, the Akaraks had to venture into space as destitutes, speaking the language of their oppressors, having to take any jobs they could find.

> They were a rare sight out in the galaxy, but they could be found here and there, working in scrap-yards or begging on corners. Or, if they had run out of options, boarding ships and taking what they pleased. (Chambers, *Long Way*, 159).

The relationship between the Akaraks and the Harmagians easily translates to the relationship between any colonized country and the colonizers. A poignant comparison is African countries' relationship to Britain, as the oppression of African people did not cease after British colonisation ended. The way Akarak people from Chambers' novels are treated, and their history, in many ways resemble how African American people were treated after slavery was abolished in the United States. Another comparison worth mentioning would be the relationship between Harmagians and Akaraks, and the relationship between colonizers in the Americas and the indigenous peoples there. The scorched lands and poisoned waters evoke thoughts of how Europeans destroyed much of the indigenous peoples' land when first arriving. These narratives are not new to Chambers' readers, but wrapped in a foreign species-package we might have new reactions to them.

Rosemary is the only person onboard the Wayfarer who knows Hanto, the Harmagian language, and can therefore mediate between the crew and the pirates. She does not recall much from her schooling about Akaraks, but what little she does know comes in handy.

> Rosemary knew little of Akarak culture, but from what she had read of them, she did know that they greatly valued the concepts of balance and fairness. The idea of taking more than you could make use of hadn't even occurred to them until the Harmagians showed up. (Chambers, *Long Way*, 161).

Rosemary pleads with the Akarak leader to only take as much as they need, leaving the Wayfarer with enough supplies to reach the next market. She also asks whether they have children onboard their ship, as she wants to make sure that the food the Akaraks get contain the right nutrition for their children's particular diets. The Akarak leader agrees to Rosemary's terms, and the negotiation becomes much more civil. This passage shows another allusion to the colonization of the Americas. Much like the smallpox blankets and alcohol the early settlers are said to have given the native Americans, the outer influence of the Harmagians corrupted and destroyed much of Akarak life and culture. The fact that the pirates that boards the Wayfarer just happen to keep their old traditions of fairness intact, is a stroke of luck for Rosemary, and a clever way for Chambers to showcase Rosemary's cultural awareness. By showing understanding for the Akarak culture, and knowledge about their children's specific nutritional needs, Rosemary is able to not only calm the heated situation and save the Wayfarer, but she also portrays a complex awareness of, and acceptance of, cultures and societies different from her own. Coming from the affluent settlements on Mars, Rosemary has grown up with privilege, even among Humans. In this particular situation, Chambers highlights this privilege through a meeting with a less fortunate person from a minority species in the GC. Where the Akarak leader is physically imposing, they lack any real education outside of their own language and culture, leaving them with only one option when it comes to negotiations like this: violence. Rosemary, while weaker and more vulnerable in every physical way, has the privileged option to seek a peaceful solution to their dispute, and she does so with great understanding and respect for their differences. Through Rosemary, Chambers teaches her readers how to think about privilege and power in an intersectional way. Although the crew of the Wayfarer is terrified of the Akarak pirates, Rosemary never blames them for their misfortunes in life, and seeks a peaceful compromise instead of trying to trick them or talk down to them. Chambers shows her readers that coming from a place of privilege does not equate to being oppressive.

Chambers represents bodies in a multitude of variations. Some of them succeed in showing an intersectionally sound character, while others fall flat in the attempt. Throughout the Wayfarer series, Chambers' characters remain the central focus, despite everything that occurs around them. There are characters from all over the galaxy, and although many of them are similar, Chambers shows us their differences, however minute or insignificant they seem. Her attempt at intersectionality is lacking in some places, due to the shallow depictions of diverse races and racial issues within the various species. In the case of Ashby and Pei, we do see allusions to real-life segregation and miscegenation, although the couple never face any real consequences for their relationship. Some of her characters, however, such as Rosemary and Sidra, succeed in highlighting the varying degrees of privilege and oppression a person's identity brings with it. Rosemary functions as an expositional focalizer, while also being a role model for the readers in how to use your privilege for good. Sidra is a multifaceted character that faces a multitude of challenges, all highlighting a different aspect of her disadvantages. Her being an AI housed in an illegal body kit could easily represent any trans person living in an area where being LGBTQ+ is punished by death, and her alienation from other sapient species could be seen as an attempt at representing racism. It is also Sidra who comes closest to representing a truly intersectional character. Her body dysmorphia is prevalent in all her chapters, which puts a lot of focus on her own body, but also other bodies in comparison. Throughout *Common Orbit*, the readers are shown how alien all bodies are to everyone else's body, and we gain insight in the struggles Sidra has with her own. She faces many challenges that translate to real-world challenges, but is treated as an equal by the only people who know her secret: Pepper and Blue. The fact that the authorities view her existence as illegal seems cruel and idiotic at the same time, as we as readers get to know Sidra as a person. We see her peers treat her as an equal, and criticise the laws that outlaw her. By using her main characters to state these opinions, Chambers suggests to the reader that Sidra should be allowed to live as she, herself, chooses, and by extension, her real-world LGBTQ+ equivalents should as well.

Closing Thoughts

Becky Chambers has created a universe in the distant future, where Humans have journeyed to new galaxies, meeting a myriad of different aliens. Through these aliens, Chambers shows her readers many different modes of embodiment, be it through the scale-clad and befeathered Aandrisks, the shimmering Aeluons, or the amorphous Harmagians. She showcases a Human race where racial signifiers have become more homogenous than they are in the real world, and highlights Human characters with non-normative body issues such as disabilities and queer sexual identities. Through her characters, Chambers' non-normative readers find important representation of themselves, while her normative readers find educational representations of minority cultures in our society.

Many of Chambers' species have traits that bear similarities to real-world abilities and disabilities, such as the mute and deaf Aeluons and the slow-moving Harmagians. By having these species use their superior technology to adapt to the universe around them, Chambers presents to her readers indirect representations of real life disability aids and thereby gestures towards issues of disability in the real world. Representation is important not only for the people who are represented, but for people who learn how to treat the represented people through literature and other media. Positive representations bring about positive change in the way we view each other in society, and many positive representations are to be found in Chambers' novels.

In the case of the Aeluons and the Harmagians, however, the representations are not equally positive. The Aeluons are portrayed as almost universally adored, being beautiful and affluent, while the Harmagians are thought of as hideous, arrogant, and hostile. Through representation of minority groups on tv shows, in comics, movies, songs, and books, we are taught how to treat these groups. Helpful, healthy depictions of people with disabilities and their disabilities can help change the ableist normativity that permeates our current society. Chambers' depiction of people with hearing and speaking aids is one such representation, but where she succeeds with one species, she fails with another. There are no people in Chambers' novels who uses wheelchairs, but the Harmagians' motorized carts resemble wheelchairs enough that the comparison is made in lieu of a better alternative. Since the Harmagians are viewed so negatively by almost an entire universe, people in the real world who use mobility aids can find their representations in Chambers' series being both repelling and insulting. This particular embodied representation ends up being more harmful than helpful.

Chambers follows in the footsteps of earlier science fiction authors by creating a universe where disabled bodies are erased by superior medical technology being able to cure them, turning them into "normal" bodies. This trope has existed since the early years of the science fiction genre, but through writers such as Chambers, the tide is changing. For while Chambers has created a universe where congenital diseases and disabilities can be "cured" before a person is even born, she has chosen to feature several people with disabilities in her gallery of main characters. Most prominent is Jenks, who proudly refuses to "fix" his dwarfism. Through Jenks, Chambers is able to show her readers that having a disability is just part of your identity, it does not take up every part of who you are. Jenks' disability does not define him, but it *is* a big part of who he is, and he is proud of having it. Here, Chambers succeeds in having a healthy, well-rounded character represent a real-world disability. The fact that she has made her universe one where most people want to cure their disabilities, yet has Jenks as one of her main protagonists, suggests that Chambers wants to contest the outdated view on disabilities in the science fiction genre. Other characters highlight this as well.

Chambers includes representations of people all over the LGBTQ+ spectrum, showing an understanding for the otherness many queer people are made to feel in our current society. Through her depiction of the AI Sidra, Chambers emphasizes one of the most contested laws in her universe's GC controlled space: AIs are not allowed to inhabit artificial bodies by law, and anyone found doing so is removed from said body and either rebooted or deleted, thereby killed. Chambers shows Sidra as being a complete person in her own right, but one who does not feel comfortable in the body she inhabits. Sidra's feelings are strikingly similar to feelings being described by countless trans-people from around the world, and can easily be seen as a representation for the unfortunate ones who live in areas where being on the LGBTQ+ spectrum can get you killed by law. Chambers dedicates almost the entirety of *Common Orbit* to showing her reader that Sidra is a fully fledged person, with her own opinions, feelings, and personality. The other parts of the novel focus on the relationship between young Pepper (then Jane) and the AI that raised and rescued her. Chambers thus emphasises the legitimacy of her AI characters' minds by accentuating their humanity and personalities and by giving them deep, emotional connections with organic characters. This makes her readers think of AIs as equals to the other characters of the novels. By having Sidra represent the trans experience, then, Chambers prompts the comparison between AIs and people on the LGBTQ+ spectrum, suggesting to her readers that they should treat everybody, regardless of what body they inhabit at the moment, with equal respect and kindness.

When addressing the racial body, Chambers glosses over any racial issues within the Human race of her novels, choosing instead to describe different racial signifiers on a surface level. This is in step with many other science fiction authors, suggesting that Chambers wants her readers' attention to rest on other matters than race. While she acknowledges that the years of intermingling has brought the Human race to a more homogenous looking species, she avoids dealing with any real racial exploration, choosing to ignore one of the most integral parts of being Human: our cultural and ethnical heritage. Her lack of exploring race in any real detail makes Chambers' Humans seem flat in comparison to her alien species, and makes her attempts at inclusivity look hollow.

Where her racial issues are dodged, Chambers does engage in conversations about cultural privilege across species. She shows characters with varying degrees of privilege in her novels, and by comparing them in certain scenes she shows her readers the power of viewing events and people intersectionally. When the Wayfarer is boarded by Akarak Pirates in *Long Way*, Rosemary is the only one who is able to communicate with them. Through her, we see the injustices done to the Akarak species by the Harmagians, and understand that they have very little choice in how to survive in the galaxy due to their underprivileged background. The Akarak struggle in Chambers' universe represents the struggle many colonized countries have experienced in the real world, highlighting Chambers' dealing with interracial issues through different alien species instead of her Humans. Chambers makes it clear to her reader that the Akaraks who board the Wayfarer, while seemingly threatening and violent, have complex motivations behind their piracy, suggesting that her readers should offer the same curtesy to people from marginalized groups who turn to crime. By looking at the Akarak pirates through Rosemary, the readers can understand them intersectionally. Rosemary uses her privileged upbringing for good, something that encourages Chambers' readers to think of minorities from reality in the same manner as her, using their privilege to understand others.

Although the culture of science fiction for the better part of its existence has been permeated by male-dominated, heteronormative narratives, Chambers' novels are part of a new direction of stories being told, stories which challenge their readers to think of people's different identities as fluid concepts instead of a set of rules that are determined at birth. Due to the increase in number of female and queer writers over the past decades, voices that have previously been silenced are now heard, and their stories are told. Chambers fall into both of these categories, being a lesbian woman. Although one should be careful about reading an author's personal life into their work, Chambers has admitted to drawing inspiration from her

own experiences as the child of scientists. This leads me to believe that the strong presence of characters who are on the LGBTQ+ spectrum in her novels is – at least in small part – due to Chambers' own experiences with queer culture. In building a universe where every sexuality is welcome and respected, Chambers has created a utopia for herself and her queer-identifying readers, as well as a learning ground for her straight, cisgender readers. The many characters' conversations with each other – through which the readers learn the social and political rules of Chambers' universe – reveal that different sexualities are so ordinary that they are nothing to be commented upon. Chambers manages to let the readers know about her characters' sexual preferences in passing comments without going into detail, something that suggests that her wish is for the general society to act as if no sexuality is prohibited, that every sexual identity is welcome. In conversations throughout the series, whenever a character's partner or sexuality is brought up, it is handled as a non-issue, much in the same way mainstream fiction handles conversations between heteronormative people. This suggests that Chambers feels a lack of acceptance for people on the LGBTQ+ spectrum in our own, current society, according to Russ: "The positive values stressed in the stories can reveal to us what, in the authors' eyes, is wrong with our own society. (qtd. in Hollinger, 129). Chambers dedicates whole species to exploring queerness, such as the polygamous Aandrisks and the four-gendered and four-sexed society of the Aeluons. Lesser known sexualities – such as technosexuality – are explored respectfully throughout the novels, indicating a certain acceptance of them to her readers. The sexual bodies of the Wayfarer series are treated reverently, by the author giving them enough space and attention so as to be clearly present, while letting each individual identity speak for itself without going into excessive detail. By not engaging in unwarranted explanations, Chambers lets her narrative speak for itself, erasing the heteronormative/other dichotomy through making every sexual identity the new normal. Through her own universe, Chambers is able to express the openness and acceptance for the LGBTQ+ community that she sees lacking in our own society, finally giving it a place to be normal.

Chambers offers many and varied representations of embodiment throughout her novels. What does the embodiment of her AIs tell us about earthly embodiment? Taking into account that Haraway wrote about science fiction being a mode to explore representation of women and female issues through the use of the metaphorical cyborg, I contend that Chambers shows us fragments of the female stereotypes we are used to seeing in science fiction, but in new ways that challenge these same stereotypes. We see the incorporeal, female voice of a

spaceship be more than just another digital assistant, instead having meaningful relationships with the rest of the crew, and a loving romantic relationship with a Human man. We see the continuation of this AI's program be loaded into a female body kit, and yet her physical form is never sexualized. This body was a result of her previous installation's choices because she wanted to be with her Human lover, but it was ultimately her own choice, breaking with the trope of a man creating his own, perfect girlfriend. We see the AI robots called "Mothers" be harsh, sterile, violent wardens of the Human slave girls in a nameless factory, flipping the idea of the nurturing automaton many roboticists envision. We also see the warm connection between AI and child through Owl, who manages to raise Jane from early childhood into her late teens, functioning as a mother should, despite not having a physical form.

Men's eternal attempt to find the perfect woman dates back to the time of Ovid's Pygmalion myth. As authors started imagining futures through literature, speculating in technology and societal changes as they did so, the narratives often took inspiration from this perpetual pursuit for perfection. The trope where a man cannot find himself a suitable wife, and therefore has to create her, has been seen in countless science fiction narratives throughout the ages. These stories feature highly sexualized, yet warm and nurturing female automata, leaving the too loud, too opinionated real women by the wayside. Chambers turns this narrative around, showing a varied gallery of female automata that present in ways that challenge the familiar tropes. Owl is never shown to have a body of her own, yet she displays far more nurturing warmth and parental love towards Jane than the embodied Mother androids in the factory does. The only bodily focus we find in Sidra's narrative is that her body does not match with her mind, we never read any description of her physique. By avoiding description of Sidra's body, Chambers refuses to sexualize her, opposing the way female robots have been portrayed in the past.

Jenks and Lovey's relationship showcases an integral part of what Chambers wants her readers to take away from her novels: the value of a person does not come from their physical manifestation, but from the contents of their mind. Jenks is shown to love – and mourn – Lovey as strongly as any other character loves their organic partner. By having Jenks treat Lovey as an equal, in respecting her choices and supporting her wishes, Chambers shows her readers an example of both a healthy relationship, and the importance of consent. She also steers clear of any trope that would further Jenks' story arc using Lovey as a device, such as the Damsel in Distress or the Fridged Girlfriend tropes. This is a refreshing challenge to countless other narratives, both in science fiction and other genres, where female characters

act as the male character's motivation for furthering their own plot, either by being brutalized, raped, or killed off.

Becky Chambers' novels explore different bodies of our own, earthly society through the varying embodiments of her characters. She does this by representing earthly embodiment without any re-imaginings, meaning that some of her characters represent real-world embodiments identical to their own, as with Jenks' disability representing people with dwarfism or Isabel's sexuality being representative for people who identify as lesbians. Chambers also represents earthly embodiment through interpreting bodily issues into new forms, such as the robotic AI Sidra being a representative for trans people, Aeluon shons representing genderfluid people, and Harmagians representing people in wheelchairs. Her representations are not always positive, but she does manage to make her readers think about the issues at hand. And as an author within the field of science fiction, is it not befitting that she should start conversations about our shared futures?

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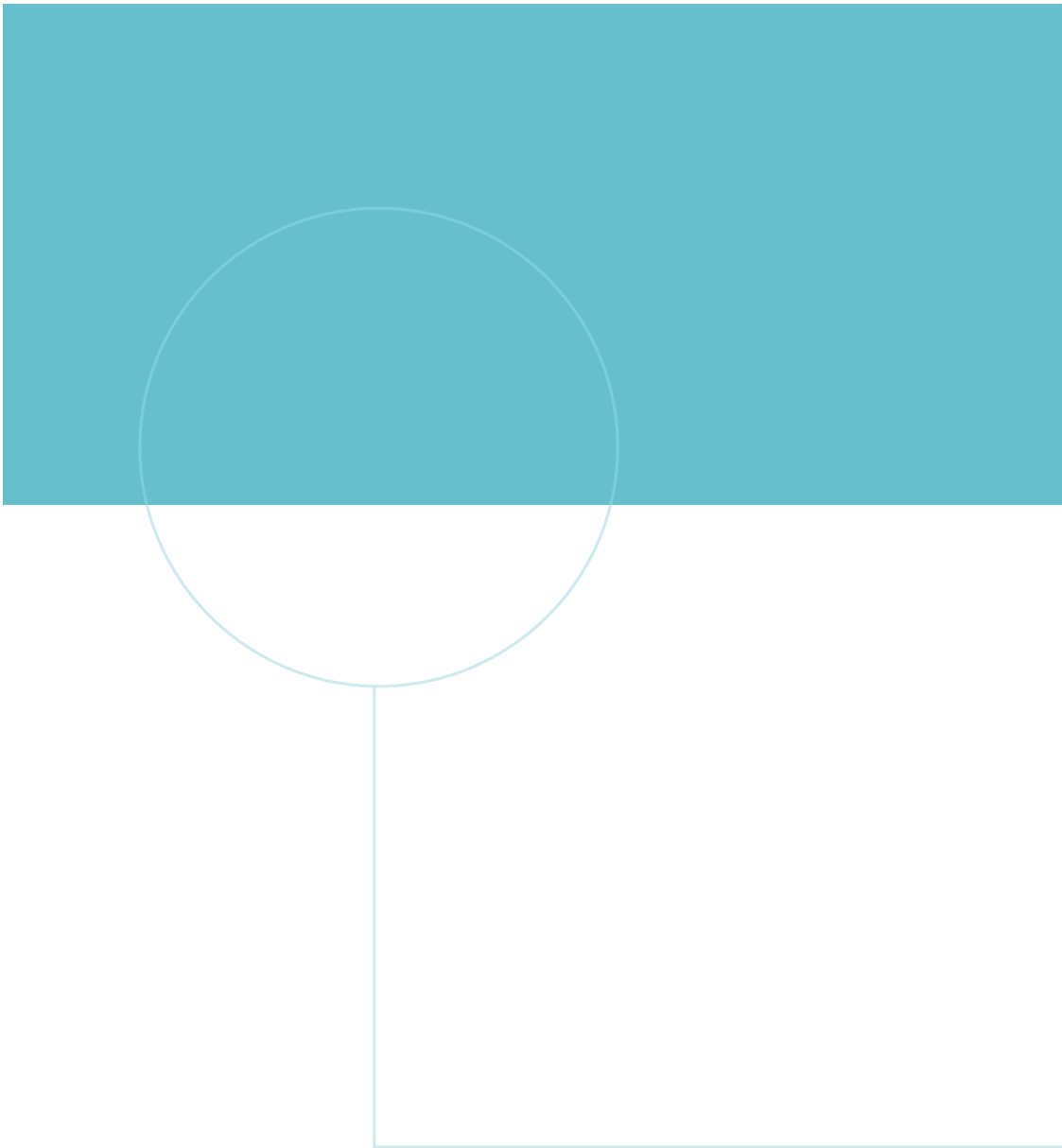

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