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## **“Pain in Someone Else’s Body”: Plural Subjectivity in *Stargate SG-1***

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### **Abstract**

Lennard Davis, in his work on visualizing the disabled body, argues that at root the body is inherently and always already fragmented. The unified “whole body” is, therefore, hallucinatory in nature—an imaginary figure through which the body’s multiplicity is repressed. There is much in this view that is consonant with posthumanism, which so often seeks to destabilize the “whole” and singular one in favor of the multiple, the fragmentary, and the hybrid. Yet despite these considerations of the body as fragmentary, little attention has been paid to the value of considering the body not only as fragmentary, but also as potential fragment. What might we learn by rejecting anthropocentric assumptions about the body-mind’s inherent completeness, and exploring the radically plural ontologies offered by visions of shared, joint, or group body-minds? This paper turns to science fiction as a source of such visions, considering depictions of symbiotic and hive minds through the non-traditional models of ontology and agency. While science fiction has traditionally represented plural being as a troubling and fearful injury to wholeness, this paper aims to highlight the symbiotic Tok’ra<sup>1</sup> of television series *Stargate SG-1* as a model of excess being that not only challenges the naturalization of the “complete” body, but also asks us to interrogate presumed boundaries between self and other.

**Keywords:** *Plural Subjectivity, Phantomatic Ontology, Posthumanism, Science Fiction, Stargate SG-1, Disability Studies, Environmental Humanities*

“Science fiction films,” as Susan Sontag writes in her seminal 1965 essay “The Imagination of Disaster,” “are not really about science.”

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<sup>1</sup>The term symbiote (or *symbiont*) refers to a Goa’uld parasite living in a host animal such as a human or Unas. The Goa’uld are biotrophic which means they rely on their host to survive, as the long life and physical healing benefit is provided to the host for the sole purpose of serving the Goa’uld. The Tok’ra, on the other hand, live in a mutualistic symbiosis with their hosts, because both organisms benefit by sharing control of the body. Both are called endosymbionts, which means that they live inside their hosts.

They are about a great many other things Sontag suggests that they “normalize what is psychologically unbearable,” they represent the extraordinary, they “reflect world-wide anxieties, and serve to allay them” (42–45). Perhaps most significantly, Sontag sees science fiction as offering a moral and moralizing simplification: one that both allows us to “look[] at freaks, at beings excluded from the category of the human,” and provides us with a message “about the proper, or humane, uses of science.” Though Sontag does not say so, this theory of science fiction transcends science fiction films and has its roots in what is broadly considered the foundational work of the science fiction genre, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. It’s in this novel that we see the trope of the “mad scientist” emerging—the man who puts science to an improper use and creates a monster; however, more importantly, we also see a nascent fixation on what is subtext in Sontag’s description: science fiction tells us what is human and what is humane. *Frankenstein* is interested in what is *natural*—Frankenstein’s “fervent longing to penetrate the secrets of nature” gives way to an awareness that in doing so he has trespassed and committed an unnatural act—but, as Cary Wolfe points out, “concepts of nature are always inseparable from those of *human nature*” (29), and, building on this, attempts to universalize and reify the natural are always simultaneously attempts to stabilize the human, a human whose nature has been called into doubt. However, written in 1965, Sontag’s attempt to see science fiction as chiefly concerned with the problem of human/e behavior in an era anxious about the affordances of science: how we behave humanely when granted power that exceeds the scope of traditional ethics; where does the inviolable boundaries between nature and the human lie? The years since then, have seen the genre expand its scope to include the problem of human/e *being*: how to regulate what might be called “proper, or humane, ways of being” when alternative possibilities, in the form of ‘trans-’ or ‘nonhuman’ ontologies, are increasingly visible, as alien life forms or as the transhuman future in which “some altogether unrecognizable ‘human nature’ would take the place of this one” (174), as Fredric Jameson (2005) characterizes it? Sontag, writing in 1965, sees science fiction as chiefly concerned with the problem of human/e behavior in an era anxious about the affordances of science: how we behave humanely when granted power that exceeds the scope of traditional ethics; where does the inviolable boundaries between nature and the human lie. The years since, have seen the genre expand its scope to include the problem of human/e *being*: how to regulate what might be called “proper, or humane, ways of being” when alternative possibilities, in the form of ‘trans-’ or ‘nonhuman’ ontologies, are increasingly visible, as alien life forms or as the transhuman future in which “some altogether unrecognizable ‘human nature’ would take the place of this one” (174), as Fredric Jameson (2005) characterizes it. In

this new era, a principal threat appears in the form of being-which-is-not-like-our-being, very often (indeed perhaps *most* often) in the form of a collective consciousness (cyborg or alien), presented as an actively sinister and existentially horrifying Other against which the ideals of modern liberal humanism can be articulated and naturalized. Interestingly, in spite of science fiction's inherent potential to imaginatively engage with the Other, it is rare for depictions of collective, or what we might call more broadly "alternative" consciousness, to stray very far from this characterization. A posthumanist reading of the genre prompts us to ask why this is the case—why science fiction seems to resist nonhuman models of consciousness, and what we might gain from overcoming this resistance. This paper therefore looks closely at one of the rare examples of science fiction media that offers a more ambivalent vision of alternative consciousness: the 1997–2007 TV show *Stargate SG-1*.

*Stargate SG-1* chronicles the adventures of a U.S. military team that travels through space with the aid of the titular ancient alien "Stargate." The show's signature alien villains—the pseudo-Ancient-Egyptian outer-space warlords against which the heroes of the show must eternally fight—are introduced in the first episode of the series (a spin-off from 1992's *Stargate* film). Called the Goa'uld, these snake-like aliens are creatures that possess the capability to attach themselves to the brainstems of humanoid "hosts," dominating the host's consciousness and body. Their depiction calls back to the uneasy psychosexual tropes of the body horror genre: incubated in the artificially incised and wound-like "wombs" of servants, they emerge as damp, undulating, and fleshy before penetrating their unwilling hosts through the mouth or neck. This physical penetration, so suggestive (in the tradition of Ridley Scott's *Alien*) of rape, makes the host's psychic invasion and subjugation visceral. This is not death—though it is suggested early on that "nothing of the host survives," we later learn that the host is conscious but inert throughout the process: capable of surfacing, and able to access its invader's memories, yet stripped of agency. In other words, somewhere between violation and death lies this state of enforced plural being—in which the oneness or wholeness of the subject does not survive, yet in which the subject is not extinguished—in which one is not oneself and yet not *other*, at least not completely.

If this suggests a "living death," it is in line with previous depictions of such a state. Enforced plurality through assimilation into a shared or "hive" mind is one of the principal threats presented by collective consciousness in science fiction. The Borg Collective of the *Star Trek* universe (who first appeared in *Star Trek: The Next*

*Generation* in 1989 before continuing on to feature in *Star Trek: Voyager* and the 1996 film *Star Trek: First Contact*) achieved memorable villainy through their policy of “assimilating” those they encountered into a cybernetic whole, eliminating their singular consciousness while simultaneously marking their physical bodies with connective mechanical implants. The loss of “freedom of choice and the ability to act independently of the collective mind” is, Mia Consalvo observes, “allegedly worse than death for the individual involved” (193), and something that, Katrina Boyd notes, fixes the Borg as “entirely alien” (1996). *Star Trek: The Next Generation*’s captain, Jean-Luc Picard, articulates this in his first encounter with the Borg: “My culture is based on freedom and self-determination,” he declares. Yet what the Borg represent is not really a cultural difference, but something more fundamentally threatening. They appear, argues David Gunkel (2000), as unstable beings who are “relational subjects constructed and reconstructed based on the vicissitudes of the network,” and are constantly reconfigured “in relation to the discursive arrangement of the occasion” (345). The Borg therefore “can appear as nothing less than monstrous, dangerous, and terrifying, for they interrupt and undermine the assumptions of individual subjectivity and agency” (345).

Two significant characters in the *Star Trek* universe, both “rescued” former Borg, serve to emphasize the Borg as “improper” way of being. The first, Hugh, appears in a 1992 episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* as a captured Borg drone who effortfully learns to be a subject, and then (twenty-eight years later) reappears in *Star Trek: Picard*, counseling other Borg through the de-assimilation process. Hugh’s narrative is notable for the fact that his use of the first-person singular pronoun (“I,” rather than “we”) and, more generally, his demonstration of independent subjectivity result in his re-recognition as someone who possesses the right to life. Consequently, the Borg Collective as a being and the various fluctuating loci (as the name of the Picard-turned-Borg entity “Locutus” suggests) that emerge as beings-to-some-extent within it are not beings that have a right to life. This idea is further elaborated through the narrative of *Star Trek: Voyager* character Seven-of-Nine, which revolves around her journey from assimilated Borg “drone” who finds human community “small” and “insufficient” to full member of the “human collective” who embraces individuality (including, as Consalvo notes, the idea of gendered embodiment) and seeks to free other ex-Borg from collective existence even at the cost of their lives, stating that “survival [in and of itself] is insufficient” (*Star Trek: Voyager* 00:4:02; 00:6:02). Enlightenment here, as in the bildungsroman tradition, involves recognition of the proper way of being a person—specifically, here, the recognition of

individual subjectivity is the only proper way of being, and that the hive mind is an abnormal and injurious fate.

Elsewhere in science fiction, plurality that doesn't threaten to assimilate is still figured as transgressive and horrifying, often in the form of an insectoid alien hive mind. Larissa Budde, writing about the Aliens of *Aliens* and the Wraith of *Stargate Atlantis*, argues that the insectoid quality of hive mind aliens "not only exemplifies and justifies their moral destitution and inhumanity; it also allows the equation of inhumanity and non-humanity" (126), as the unindividuated hive comes to signify the abjection of the human. Indeed, many examples of collective consciousness in science fiction take the form of insect-aliens: the extraterrestrial Chitauri invaders of 2012's *The Avengers*, the transdimensional kaiju of 2013's *Pacific Rim*, the many-limbed Mimics of 2014's *Edge of Tomorrow*. It is fair to ask, as James O'Sullivan does (writing about the Aliens of *Aliens*), whether these can truly be considered collective *intelligences*, as they are largely portrayed as "unintelligent, and rel[iant] on instinct for governance of their actions" (82); however, more than anything, this is emblematic of how alternative consciousness is equated with imperfect/insufficient consciousness—an issue that is perhaps made more complicated by the *Stargate SG-1/Stargate Atlantis* villain the Replicators, who appear as an insectoid mass of crawling robotic spiders, but coalesce in humanoid forms that speak intelligibly for the collective. It is not the animal unintelligence of the hive mind that is objectionable, but its lack of individuation, which becomes not only a marker of monstrosity, but also a diminishment of the act of killing: killing cannot be wholly or absolutely killing if the killed subject was only partially or imperfectly alive to begin with. In a similar vein, the death of a Goa'uld's human host in *Stargate SG-1* is often framed not as a death but as the death of an opportunity: the lost possibility of reinstituting the host to full life. The host is therefore mourned but not completely—the moment and agency of death are dislocated and diffused so that mourning begins to occur at the point of subjugation or, in other words, at the point of plurality.

This presentation of plural subjectivity as deficiency is consistent with an ideological framework that, for Mergrit Shildrick, regulates the subject as a "sovereign mind" in an "appropriate body," an "inviolable self/body that is secure, distinct, closed, and autonomous." Those who are "inappropriate/d others" (who violate the norm of "one body/one mind"), Shildrick argues, "cannot occupy unproblematically the subject position" (51). Never can plurality, in this context, figure as surplus or repletion; instead, to have too many minds or too many bodies is the same as having too few. The blurring of boundary between self

and other disqualifies the ‘bodyminds’ involved in plurality from the category of subject, instead positioning them as “monsters” who both threaten the stability of subjectivity and serve to re-constitute it through their vigorous and continual othering.

Such a view of subjectivity is unsurprising within a mainstream popular consciousness that draws its models from broadly humanist ideas about what the proper subject is. However, what is surprising is the extent to which posthumanism<sup>2</sup>—a field or genre that prides itself on its openness to non-human forms of being, that vocally prizes multiplicity, and positions itself as rejecting the individual, the object, the atom, the fixed and unitary act, as well as the dualisms implied by these divisions—has allowed this view to go so little criticized or addressed. Indeed, posthumanism seems to evince a general uneasiness with too-radical explorations of subjectivity, instead hewing very close to traditional humanist notions of how we constitute a subject. The multiplicity of posthumanist scholars is often related in some sense to Deleuzian multiplicity; this multiplicity, Deleuze writes, “must not designate a combination of the many and the one, but rather an organization belonging to the many as such.” In other words: “everything is multiplicity, even the one, even the many” (182); there is nothing that is outside multiplicities. A multiplicity “has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature” (8). The posthumanist subject, under this influence, often figures as a multiplicity coalescing out of multiplicities, a vital process, material and nomadic, “[...] actualized by the relational vitality and elemental complexity that mark posthuman thought itself” (Braidotti 189). Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “becoming-other/imperceptible” presents itself as an approach that “decisively breaks with the notion of an atomistic and corporeal subject,” marking the “I” as a “contingent project” that is “[...] one part of the cycle of becoming that extends beyond the human and the singular body to figure a non-temporal and unstructured coalescence of creative forces” (Shildrick 175). Ontological emphasis is thus placed on touch, interaction, and connection between desires and flows rather than on the provision of the body or identity—what Shildrick terms “a stable centre, a reference point for agentic actions” (175). For Deleuze and Guattari, becoming is synonymous with multiplicity insofar as a multiplicity “is defined not by its elements, nor by a center of unification or comprehension” but by

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<sup>2</sup>The term “posthumanism” is used here in a sense that encompasses what others have called the “nonhuman turn,” in other words, the turn away from humanism and the centering of the “human” and towards an approach that challenges both the category of the human and its privileging over the nonhuman. (See Grusin)

“the number of dimensions it has,” and therefore “cannot lose or gain a dimension *without changing its nature*” (251–3).

Yet this deterritorialization of the self, while productive in its critique of the stable subject, has proven a remarkably unfertile ground for theorists seeking to reconceive problems of subjectivity. Braidotti maintains that the posthuman subject as *the* singular, stable subject “needs at least *some* subject position” (*The Posthuman* 102). In her articulations of subjectivity, she further argues that the nomadic subject is “a spatio-temporal compound which frames the boundaries of processes of becoming” (3). It is a “sustainable self” that “inhabits a time that is the active tense of continuous ‘becoming’” (3) and takes for granted a fundamentally human vision of the subject even as she makes it plain that this is the opposite of her goal of arguing that her “non-unitary” (multiplicitous/becoming-based) vision of the subject allows for the recognition that “the life in me is not only, not even human” (6).

Braidotti is not alone in seeming to embrace the breakdown of the unitary subject at all levels except that which is most pertinent in this writing, which is to say the level at which the boundary between self and other collapses in a more than philosophical sense. One might say that the default position of posthumanist theory is that there can be an *I* or there can be an illusory, infinitely multiplicitous and shifting “*I*,” but there can never be a *we*. N. Katherine Hayles writes of the “‘we’ of autonomous agents operating together to make a self” as a plural that is “meant ironically,” in other words it is too absurd an idea to be taken seriously. Annemarie Mol, in her influential study of ontology in medical practice, emphasizes that “the body multiple,” the multiplicity of bodies that are produced through sociomaterial practices, “[...] does not fit into a Euclidean space” (119) and cannot be reduced to a single “whole” body, yet also explicitly rules out this model as pertaining to “[...] two different persons or one person divided into two” (82). The cyborg body that is equally at the root of many anti-anthropocentric approaches, and that is iconic for its capacity to transgress boundaries, remains—even if one accepts its power to destabilize relations between wholes and parts, between the “natural” and the “unnatural”—the body of *someone*. *Mixotricha paradoxa*, the “mixed-up” microbe that raises, for Donna Haraway, all kinds of questions—“What constitutes *M. paradoxa*? Where does the protist stop and somebody else start in [the] wood-eating insect’s teeming hindgut?” (xvii)—can teach us about origins through its “paradoxical individuality,” but its form of life, which “[...] makes a mockery of the notion of the bounded, defended, singular self,” does not ever quite challenge us to rethink our assumptions about the nature of the subject. The perverse and fabricated “cyborgs, hybrids, mosaics, chimeras” that, according to Haraway, we

find ourselves to be are always singular creatures, albeit fluid, composite, and unstable in nature. Pramod Nayar, in his description of the human as “congeries,” perhaps comes closest to articulating the idea of “a subject that is essentially intersubjective and intercorporeal [...] the human [as] a node, one that is dependent upon several other forms of life, flows of genetic and other information, for its existence and evolution” (76), yet his survey of critical posthumanism is primarily interested in the human’s biological and environmental intercomposition rather than the potential of this intercomposition in terms of subjectivity and agency.

The takeaway from posthumanism’s view of the subject is that we are multiplicities, and we participate in other multiplicities, but at the same time *we are*, and we are not other people, however materially (through the interchange of molecules) or figuratively (through shared vulnerability or situation within larger social and ecological bodies) entangled we may be. The understanding of the self as multiple and fluid does not do away with the nonsensicality of the statement Wittgenstein offers in *The Blue and Brown Books* when considering the grammar of the subject in pain: “To ask ‘are you sure that it’s *you* who have pains?’ would be nonsensical” (67). Within anti-anthropocentric frameworks, this grammar persists. However chimeric or mosaical the subject may be, one person cannot have another person’s toothache, or be confused as to whose toothache they are feeling. In some sense there is a limit here that organizes our grammar of the subject, and it is a limit on ontological plurality. Some aspect of my body can pain me, and forces outside of my body can cause me to have pain—in other words, forces outside of my body can be involved in the phenomenon of my pain—but fundamental to the definition of how personhood works is the notion that I can’t have pain in another person’s body, and another person’s body can’t have pain in me.

The way this definition operates regarding the self and the other is fundamentally related to a similar delineation in terms of the physical constitution of the body, one that has been productively explored, in disability studies. Writing about the amputated bodies of Classical nudes, Lennard Davis suggests “the disabled Venus serves as an unwanted reminder that the ‘real’ body, the ‘normal’ body, the observer’s body, is in fact always already a fragmented body” (140); in other words, to see the statue as a damaged version of some “pristine origin of wholeness” is to engage in a “[...] repression of the fragmentary nature of the body” (135; 138), a willful hallucination that represses the fragmentary or multiple reality of the body (which constantly threatens to reappear). The disabled body, by drawing attention to the fact that the body is always already multiple and



composite, evokes cognitive dissonance (139). This is similar to and consistent with readings of the cyborg body that perceive it as troubling or threatening because its equation of biological and mechanical parts (the interchangeability of these parts) suggests the fundamentally illusory status of an integrated human whole. Machines, being “merely” made up of parts, will, when made part of a human body, “[...] always seem to mark a process of disintegration,” as R. Rawdon Wilson writes (147), echoing what the film theorist Giuliana Bruno (characterizing the aesthetic of *Blade Runner*) calls the “dark side of human technology, the process of disintegration” (63), and what Fred Botting characterizes as essential to the science fiction genre: “[...] horrible visions of psychological and corporeal disintegration in which known boundaries collapse and bodies are transformed” (38–9).

Yet, to acknowledge the hallucinatory quality of wholeness, and the disintegrated manifold body, does not address the obverse of the situation that Davis describes: what does it mean to look at a body not only as a fragmentary body—that is, not only as a multiplicitous assemblage, capable of disintegrating into parts—but as a potential fragment *of a body*? If disintegration, as a process, is marked by drawing attention to the fragmentary body, then what is the process that draws attention to the body as itself a potential part of a larger whole? What we might call the annexation that involves, for instance, feeling “pain in someone else’s body” struggling to identify whose pain a particular pain is? (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 222). This paper suggests that the failure to imagine such a process of superintegration instead of disintegration—a failure to imagine plurality, a many-being—has been responsible for this process’s representation in terms of loss, penetrability, and violation rather than in terms of surplus, plurality, and fruitfulness. Science fiction’s representation of plural consciousness as living death or diminished being relies upon and reinscribes normative visions of a subject that must abstain from plural subjectivities in order to be understood as complete or “whole.” Embedded within these visions of the subject is an implication that to be other than the discrete ordained whole is to be *part* of someone or something else, and therefore less-than-whole, subject-*ed* rather than subject. A surplus of subjectivity is therefore always the same as a deficit.

As previously described, the *Stargate* universe’s treatment of shared consciousness begins in a manner consistent with humanist models of enforced subjectivity. The rhetoric of possession and rape that is used to depict the Goa’uld as a species operates on the assumption that the experience of multiple consciousness *must* naturally be experienced as a diminishment. In the series’ second season, however,

*Stargate SG-1* begins to offer a second and markedly different interpretation of this experience. Episode 2.02, “In the Line of Duty,” introduces a benevolent faction of alien symbiotes who wage war against the Goa’uld despite sharing the same genetic roots. One of these Tok’ra (as the show refers to them), fleeing an assassin, enters and assumes control of the body of lead character Samantha Carter, a co-embodiment that Carter at first rejects and resists, but eventually mourns the loss of when the symbiote dies to save her.

The Tok’ra, as viewers learn, are biologically identical to Goa’uld, but behaviorally distinct in the way they choose to join only with willing human hosts. “Blending” with a human host is a delicate and serious process that requires careful matching, and that affects both human and symbiote identity. Symbiotes, for example, have no gender as such, but may develop a lasting preference for a certain gender of host; when a symbiote blends with a new host, the blended person who was the lover of the symbiote’s previous blending may continue to love—or fall in love with—the symbiote-in-new-host. Carter, having been briefly joined with the symbiote Jolinar, later meets and experiences romantic feelings for Martouf-Lantash, the blended Tok’ra who was the lover of Jolinar-in-its-previous-host.

The blending of Tok’ra symbiote and host does not create a third, separate, *discrete* subject—or not one that is in any sense stable. Both symbiote and host retain a distinct sense of self and can distinguish (though sometimes with considerable trouble) between their memories. Symbiote and host are also capable of speaking in individual voices, which *SG-1* demarcates by using a deep sound filter on the “symbiote” voice, though more frequently the “human” voice speaks for both the human individually and for symbiote involved. Internal communication of some form takes place between the joined symbiote and host, with hosts occasionally making reference to the symbiote “saying” or “thinking” something. Yet the blending does not wholly respect previously established boundaries of self, insofar as it draws together and influences the identities of both symbiote and host, causing personalities and self-perceptions to shift. When lead character Jack O’Neill is temporarily joined with the symbiote Kanan to save his life, the blending of O’Neill and Kanan results in a form of existential crisis that causes O’Neill-Kanan to storm a dangerous fortress, seeking to rescue an enslaved woman who had loved and been abandoned by Kanan-in-its-former-host, and whom the newly blended O’Neill-Kanan finds it morally unacceptable to leave behind.

The blended Tok’ra person is thus neither two minds in one body nor two bodies with one mind—the more common figurations that violate the norm Shildrick has elucidated of “one mind/one body”—but

rather two overlapping body-minds that resist conventional demarcation. The discrete physical bodies of symbiote and host persist and can survive separation (albeit with difficulty), yet together form a symbiotic system that is stronger, healthier, and more sustaining than the life that either may enjoy alone. The discrete psychic (conscious, discursive) bodies of symbiote and host also persist, yet these bodies are supremely “leaky” and continually intermingle with one another, resulting in what one might refer to as a superposition,<sup>3</sup> a state in which shared identities are simultaneously self and other until an attempt is made to distinguish them. For all the emphasis that *SG-1* places on markedly different voices as a means of signaling the communicating personae of symbiote and host, the show depicts frequent uncertainty regarding who exactly is speaking when a Tok’ra speaks. “Is that Jacob speaking? Or is that Selmak?” O’Neill asks of the Tok’ra character Jacob-Selmak (“Reckoning”), while a Tok’ra leader questions another’s judgment by observing that “[i]t seems I am talking to a human host” (“Death Knell”). Such questioning suggests that, in the absence of explicit distinction, the Tok’ra should be understood as speaking from this superposition of identity; it is a marked distinction from the representation of symbiotic existence offered by *Star Trek* in its “Trill” characters—joined Trill, who are the product of unions between a humanoid alien race and slug-like symbiotes who are surgically placed in their hosts’ bodies, are singular identities comprising the blended personalities and memories of host and symbiote. The Trill symbiote does not retain a distinct subjectivity within the joining—while Trill character Jadzia Dax, as Kathy Ferguson has explored, refers to past joinings as both self and other with the mixture of third and first-person pronouns (187–192), she does so from the standpoint of Jadzia (the host)-who-has-become-Jadzia-Dax (the host-symbiote joining). Dax, the symbiote, never emerges as a subject with a voice. Moreover, Trill strictly regulate identity by enforcing a taboo surrounding contact between joined Trill and anyone who enjoyed a close relationship with previous joinings of the symbiote. As this paper will relate, the fluctuating uncertainty of the Tok’ra superposition produces a very different experience of intimacy.

This superposition in which the Tok’ra body exists bears many resemblances to the “prosthetic body” that is excessive rather than merely restorative. The prosthesis may be regarded, Elizabeth Grosz writes, “[...] as an opening up of actions that may not have been possible before, the creation of new bodily behaviors, qualities, or abilities” (147). Prostheses “[...] may actualize virtualities [...] inducing a mutual metamorphosis, transforming both the body supplemented and the

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<sup>3</sup>Apologies to quantum physics, whose terms are so often abused by theorists.

object that supplements it” (148). The prosthetic part draws attention to the body’s diverse capacity, to its excess potential, that is, not *potential for excess*, in the sense of the “whole” human body *plus*, but *excess potential*, in the sense of potential for bodies in excess of the “whole” body. The choice to forgo a prosthetic part thus also highlights this potential “to accept a body with parts that are missing is to reorientate our relation to our bodies” as Sara Ahmed writes (184). The refusal to use a prosthetic part is to embrace bodily difference—“a refusal [...] to aspire for the right things in the right way” (184). Ahmed categorizes this kind of choice as willfulness, an excess again, here of will, in line with Grosz’s prosthetic vision. Just as Grosz, expanding on Henri Bergson, describes the prosthetic part as “‘feel[ing]’ different from the organic limb” (151), so too the absence Ahmed discusses *feels* different, causes the body to feel different, generates a different body that one feels and a different body with which to feel.

Grosz in her exploration so far raises the question of whether other living beings can be construed as prosthetic, but her examples (a virus and its host, slave ants and ant masters) betray a preconception of the prosthetic as unconscious or lacking what we understand as subjectivity (153). The default human assumption is that ants and viruses do not have selves. The vision that Grosz presents is thus one of a subject that “makes use” of an object: a body that makes use of a part. The prosthetic is annexed by the subject body, made part of that body. The use of the prosthetic becomes an act of domination: to establish or maintain the wholeness of the body requires that the whole subject dominate the object-part. It is difficult, in this framework, to conceptualize a symbiotic dynamic wherein each of two bodies mutually makes use of the other as prosthetic.

It is particularly interesting to examine the Tok’ra character Jacob-Selmak in this regard. The human host, Jacob Carter, is initially introduced on *Stargate SG-1* as lead character Sam Carter’s father: a retired Air Force Major General who is dying of cancer. The previous host of the Tok’ra symbiote Selmak is also dying, and the symbiote cannot live without a new host (“The Tok’ra (Part Two)”). Blending is thus a life-saving option for both Jacob and Selmak—a dynamic that is revisited in later episodes when the dying symbiote Lantash blends with a wounded airman to save both their lives (“Last Stand”), and when the symbiote Kanan, whose host has died, blends with O’Neill to heal him from a fatal virus (“Frozen”). In each case, host and symbiote function as life-sustaining extension of one another’s bodies. Yet in the case of Jacob-Selmak, host and symbiote also make possible new forms of life for one another. When Jacob was ill and retired from military service, Jacob-Selmak becomes a vital force in the interstellar Tok’ra resistance,

opting to leave Earth behind and travel across the galaxy. When Selmak was (in its former host, Saroosh) previously a female councilor of the Tok'ra, Jacob-Selmak becomes a distinctly male hard-bitten soldier. Both (symbiote and host) enjoy a renewed and close relationship with Sam Carter, whom Jacob had previously been distant from. "In a way, Selmak gave me the father I never thought I'd know," Sam says, commenting that she and her father "[...] have been closer than we ever were in my whole life" ("Threads"). Blending not only causes Jacob and Selmak to "feel [their bodies] different[ly]" and to physically feel through the means of a different (joined) body, but also generates new possibilities of affective feeling: new closeness, new commitment, and new loyalty.

These new possibilities of feeling do not arise solely in or from the time and space of the joined body. The intermingling of symbiote and host consciousness means that a symbiote may retain the memories and feelings of a previous joined body or human host, while a human host who has been separated from a symbiote may retain the memories and feelings of the symbiote or the symbiote's previous blended bodies or hosts. As mentioned, Sam Carter develops romantic feelings for Martouf-Lantash following her brief blending with Jolinar, whose previous joined body was the lover of Martouf-Lantash. She continues to carry many of Jolinar's memories, particularly those associated with strong emotions, and at times becomes confused as to whether these are Jolinar's memories (which is to say Jolinar's memories of being in a different host) or her own. Blending therefore cannot be easily delineated as an event, nor even "ended" by separating the joined bodies. This indeterminacy is consistent with the flux of identity suggested by the ability of symbiote, host, and host-symbiote to emerge as distinct subjects within the blending. The Tok'ra thus disrupt expectations both of stable, linear, and constant body-mind alignment and of stable, linear, and constant subjectivity.

The philosopher of science Astrid Schrader has offered one possible approach to this form of disruption, which she terms "phantomatic ontology" and specifically positions as an alternative way of understanding what otherwise might be deemed multiple or uncertain ontologies. The phantom (the subject of phantomatic ontology), she writes:

[...] is importantly distinct from all those kinds of objects that suggest a specific topology as either fixed, such as the atemporal Euclidean volume, or variable *in* time, such as 'fluid objects' that may reshape their configurations in different contexts. Phantoms rather challenge our conception of time as homogenous flow of self-identical moments, in which a cause

by definition precedes its effect... Phantoms are ‘agentially real’; they contribute to their own materialization and make demands on us to be accounted for. (278–9)

Schrader’s phantom is conceived of as scientific object, designed to account for and grapple with problems of ethics and responsibility in scientific practice. The particular “phantom” to which Schrader addresses herself is a microorganism: the dinoflagellate *Pfiesteria piscicida*, which cannot determinately be ruled as the “fish killer” responsible for mass mid-Atlantic fish deaths in which it is implicated. *Pfiesteria* can potentially undergo a large variety of transformations, some of which may be “naturally” occurring parts of its life cycle, and some of which are environmentally induced “morphs”; it is difficult to untangle one from the other, the “real” *Pfiesteria* from the effects of environment. It is also not possible, Schrader argues, to “capture” *Pfiesteria* in its entirety at a single moment in time—what Schrader breaks down into *Pfiesteria piscicida* and *toxic Pfiesteria* (responsible for killing fish) are in some sense related organisms, but attempts to detect or measure this are limited to recording either an organism that *is*, but does not *do* (*Pfiesteria piscicida*, which does not kill fish) or an organism that *does*, but seems not to *be* in the sense of pre- and post-existing its doings. Thus not only does the “[...] distinction between internal or innate characteristics and externally or environmentally induced behaviors implode[] in *Pfiesteria*’s life-histories” (283), but so too does, more generally, any attempt to construct a linear, continuous, and unitary being that is, will be, and has been the subject of all of the actions associated with *Pfiesteria*. The many morphs that take part in *Pfiesteria*’s complex life cycle (which is not truly, as Schrader points out, a cycle) are not “parts” of a larger “whole” being, and neither are they stages of transformation through which a sustained single being passes. Schrader describes them, in fact, as coming together in “[...] a superposition of various, partially overlapping temporal and spatial scales that cannot be easily disentangled” (281). This difficult ontological map is strikingly similar to those required for the types of subjects the paper has discussed, and Schrader’s singling-out of agency and responsibility as areas that must be re-addressed in the light of such an existence identifies them as relevant, too, to the paper’s concerns.

In the case of the Tok’ra, *Stargate SG-1* itself offers a tentative awareness that agency has been thrown into question, acknowledging the difficulties inherent in abiding by a traditional understanding of the agent when actions may emerge from a complex network of bodily associations over time. Is it “really” Sam Carter who is attracted to Martouf-Lantash in the aftermath of her blending with Jolinar? Who is responsible for O’Neill-Kanan’s actions during their blending? To what

extent can Jacob-Selmak be relied upon by the U.S. Air Force? The same elusiveness that Schrader notes when arguing that the *Pfiesteria* dinoflagellate cannot be captured in their entirety at any one moment in time is characteristic of and visible in the Tok'ra. A Tok'ra symbiote is born separate and will progress through many different blendings over the course of its life, undergoing and actioning many transformations as it intermingles identities and memories with a series of human hosts, each of whom has a preceding separate life that they bring to the blended identity, and any one of whom might diverge from the blending, carrying away a post-blended identity and memory. Aspects of the Tok'ra self are constituted not simply by the two overlapping body-minds of a single blending, but also by the range of intersubjectivities between symbiote and host. It is therefore not always simple to parse the agency underlying the actions. And, in fact, being and doing here are entangled: subjects become differentiated chiefly through specific acts, as we see in the case of speaking, which "collapses" the subjective superposition. Yet in contrast to the ways in which this kind of entanglement is often read by posthumanist scholars as necessitating the all-or-nothing acknowledgement-or-abolition of the subject, subjectivities continue to cohere in such an existence.

This, the current paper argues, is what renders the Tok'ra form of life especially alien. It's a form of life that is even, when juxtaposed with Wittgenstein's observations, grammatically nonsensical: not only does the blended body mingle and intercross the pains of subjects, but the symbiote may remember pain in the host's body, the blended body may remember the first-person experience of pain in other blended bodies, and a separated host may remember pain in previous host or blended bodies. To talk about the grammar (as Wittgenstein would put it) of pain experience is to reveal that all of these bodies are at once each other's body—that a phantomatic unified/ing Tok'ra subject emerges under certain conditions, at certain points, and certain times, and that this might then be put forward as an intermittently, if fluidly constituted, singular subject—at the same time as they are someone else's body/ies to each other. The subject(s) thus comprised is/are paradoxical, and cannot easily be fitted into even a posthumanist understanding of what a subject is and means.

Perhaps this is why an element of uneasiness surrounds the Tok'ra in the world of *SG-1*. Despite Tok'ra culture's strong taboo against or even horror at the idea of symbiotes "taking" unwilling human hosts, and despite the show's depiction of the group as often-heroic human allies, human characters frequently express discomfort with the notion of the symbiote-host blending. Early in the Tok'ra-human alliance, one of the Tok'ra observes to a human, "The very

thought [of becoming a host] sickens you,” and identifies a human “[...] distaste for our very being,” asking, “If you’re so disgusted with the very thought of blending, how can we be associated with one another?” (“The Tok’ra (Part Two)”). O’Neill in particular is dubious that any human would freely volunteer to host a symbiote, referring to the symbiotes as “snakes” and continually attempting to differentiate the human host’s opinions from those of the (presumably less trustworthy) symbiote (“Crossroads”). Some element of O’Neill’s, and indeed the general, unease is almost certainly tied to the symbiotes’ physical form: a writhing, damp, spiny, insectoid creature whose penetration of the human body strongly evokes the same rhetoric of violation that is so integral to the depiction of the Goa’uld. Yet it’s difficult not to wonder if the form of life associated with blending is simply perceived as violation regardless of the consent of those involved, their contentment, or the potential benefits. This default assumption that plurality is either penetration or deficiency is particularly provocative to consider, given the ways in which Tok’ra blending is, in at least one episode, suggestive of a very different kind of bodily joining: pregnancy.

When Sam-Jolinar is attacked and badly injured in the episode “In the Line of Duty,” the symbiote Jolinar heals Sam at the cost of its own life. Their still-blended body is rushed into a medical bay, where doctors monitor the two brain waves and “energy levels” in a manner similar to that in which a medical show might depict the monitoring of maternal and fetal heartbeats. After Jolinar’s death, Sam remains in the medical bay, where the child of another character comes to visit her. It’s explained to the child that Sam’s body is “absorbing” the remains of the symbiote, and that Sam is “just a little sad right now,” but that a visit from the child will cheer her up (“In the Line of Duty”). When we see Sam, she is exhausted and wet-eyed in a hospital bed, and responds with visible emotion to the presence of the child. The framing of the scene can easily be read as that of a miscarriage, which in some ways seems apropos: Sam is mourning her return to life as a separate body, mourning a life she only briefly knew through the blending, and mourning the life she might have had with Jolinar had she remained blended. Jolinar and Sam, of course, shared more than bodies, and Jolinar was an adult symbiote with a complexly constituted identity. Yet the suggestion that losing a symbiote or host is akin to the loss of a pregnancy codes blending as a feminine way of being. In-universe discomfort with the Tok’ra thus takes on a gendered and perhaps transphobic element: fear of pregnant bodies and bodies that can become pregnant; anxiety surrounding the “wrong” bodies possibly becoming pregnant. These fears are unsubtly present in depictions of the Goa’uld, particularly when warrior-caste “Jaffa” soldiers—sometimes women, but more often hyper-masculine men—are shown to incubate larval Goa’uld in



womb-like pouches as part of their degradation and enslavement. This discomfort seems inextricably linked to uneasiness surrounding the instability of the subject: the pregnant body threatens insofar as it points out the unfixed nature of bodily boundaries. Like the disabled body, as considered by Lennard Davis, it draws attention to the illusive and hallucinatory quality of wholeness—in this case, however, not by reflecting the reality of the fragmentary body, but by reflecting the potential of the body to be part of another body; a potential that has, of course, also been universally actualized through gestation.

Iris Marion Young has argued that the pregnant body is a body that challenges insistence on a unified subject as precondition for experience. Young suggests that the pregnant woman experiences her body as “[...] de-centered, split, or doubled [...] herself and not herself. Its inner movements beyond to another being, yet they are not other” (45–62). In other words, pregnancy “[...] blurs the individuated/unindividuated distinction,” as Pramod Nayar puts it, writing of what he terms the “parturition Gothic” (117). Margrit Shildrick notes that pregnancy is one of two cases (the other being organ transplants) in which distinctions are drawn between self and non-self material within the body—distinctions that fluctuate as the fetus undergoes a splitting that transitions it from part of the mother’s body to a whole “other” body (18). This uneasy ontological condition of self-and-otherness is governed by strict normative expectations: the mother must experience a complete ontological “cut” at the point of birth, just as a transplant recipient must “[...] incorporate the alien material into her own embodied experience, no longer as foreign, but as an integrated element of her own identity” (18), regulating the unity and inviolability of the subject in this zone of ambiguousness and instability. Yet this normative regulation is not enough in an era of new reproductive technologies of visualization. Susan Squier in her essay, “Fetal Subjects and Maternal Objects: Reproductive Technology and the New Fetal/Maternal Relation” observes that recent years have seen the increasing subjectification of the fetus, which she attributes to technologies that, as they render the fetus a self, transform the mother into “[...] something less than a self [...] an antagonist, an obstacle to fetal health, an object” (516). “The maternal, or more precisely the potentially maternal, body,” Squier writes, “is no longer conceived of as a discrete entity under the control of the mother. [...] Rather, it is seen as a being that colonizes another marginal and oppressed being, the fetus” (“Fetal Voices: Speaking for the Margins Within” 17). The language of colonization and antagonism here is consonant with the rhetoric of science-fiction collectivity; as in fictional depictions of hive minds, the collective body of the pregnant person is figured as a battleground where subjectification of one must objectify the other—where one self, in

order to be whole, must render the other a part in order to survive. The impermissibility of acknowledging a more expansive plurality that the pregnant person may feel herself to be part of, means that the identity or subjectivity of the pregnant woman becomes wholly displaced by that of the fetus; for her to assert her subjectivity injures the fetus insofar as the nature of the whole subject means that her subjectivity must come at the cost of its own. Even without the element of plural subjectivity that science fiction adds, the boundaries of subjectivity—like the boundaries of the body—must be rigorously policed.

The fear and anxiety that attach themselves to the pregnant body are thus linked to uneasiness surrounding the instability of the subject: the fear and anxiety provoked by the idea of losing the wholeness of one's subjectivity, or of having it forcibly taken away—the child as parasite, the pregnant body as Borg Collective. Figured alternatively, it is the mother who becomes parasitic—Squier describes the ways in which representations of the fetus as “impossible” and “ventriloquizable” subject, work to render the pregnant person as antagonist (“Fetal Subjects and Maternal Objects: Reproductive Technology and the New Fetal/Maternal Relation” 532). The perception of subjectivity as a zero-sum game<sup>4</sup> tends to result in the inability to think a state of pregnancy that is not a kind of “living death,” resulting in the figuration of mother as “vessel” or “host” (here, again, a machinic part)—and a tendency to perceive certain kinds of (chiefly female) bodies as inherently impregnable and haunted by violation.

The Tok’ra, by figuring plural subjectivity as a way of being that all bodies have the potential to participate in and by explicitly associating blending with a range of gender expressions, offer a way of degendering the experience of plurality. However, they insist on demilitarizing the relationship between “competing” subjects, and disavowing the idea that such a linear and delineated model of the plural subject could ever make sense. Their depiction affirms the intermingling and simultaneous excessiveness of many that are always *more than*, not *reducible* to a unitary whole. In order to account for this mode of life, we must reach beyond models of parts and wholeness and grapple with a grammar and vocabulary that encompass new understandings of subjectivity. As Schrader writes in the different context of environmental science, responsibility in the realm of such subjects “entails not responding to a particular other, who may not exist as such, but the *enabling of responsiveness* within particular relatings” (297)—a complete reenvisioning of, perhaps, relationship.

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<sup>4</sup>In a zero-sum game, the player's gain is exactly balanced by their opponent's loss, and vice versa.

The bioethicist Carl Elliott writes that “[p]art of what we mean by the word ‘person’ entails a certain moral attitude” (160). Perhaps this is one reason why explicitly-other ontologies are so often depicted as damaging and sinister onscreen. To acknowledge a subject that does not remain single or linear, or that may or may not consistently exist, is to extend personhood in a way that not only challenges the naturalization of the humanist model, but that also potentially commits us to recognizing the moral agency of nonhuman life in ways that we currently resist. As Pramod Nayar details, not only is it the human who has “[...] determined which qualities *count as human*” (88), and “the human cognition of what the animal (or human) *is* that determines who ‘possesses’ or ‘deserves’ rights,” but that arguments in favor of extending personhood to animals center around the idea that “because animals demonstrate subject-like traits, they should be given the same moral consideration as humans” (92). However, “[p]roceeding along this line of thought,” he observes, “it would then follow that the very concept of subjectivity and the subject implies *human* subjectivity and the *human* subject” (92). By depicting other forms of being as undeserving of the moral attitude extended to persons, we implicitly reaffirm our right to withhold the language of personhood—and thus preserve the illusion of the stable, whole subject as universal being. Hence, the reluctance of posthumanism to properly engage with the question of truly nonhuman subjectivity, as previously detailed, is problematic: it is a failure to grapple with the full set of demands that the central aims of posthumanism make upon us to rethink our assumptions about the different ways of being [a person]. The example of the Tok’ra is therefore useful insofar as it explores the affordances that might result from expanding our understanding of the shape and temporality of personhood. We are asked to consider not only the potential for new feeling that might thus be produced, but also the potential for new feeling-with that emerges from nonlinear, discontinuous forms of embodiment. How does one regard the *other*, whom one has been; the other beloved of the *other*, whom one has been; the other, who will become the other, whom one has been? When it is conceivable to experience pain in someone else’s body, and thus face the paradoxical incorporation of someone else’s body into/with oneself, what is the moral attitude demanded by inter- and intra-action? These questions invite us to envision a world in which excessive life is not excessive, but merely expansion: in which an abundance of feeling is not a diminishment of self, but rather a natural part of a wider universe.



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