

Anna Temel

University of Warsaw

THROUGH THE EYES OF THE MACHINE: RETHINKING HUMANITY, LANGUAGE, AND THE SOCIETAL STATUS QUO IN *THE MURDERBOT DIARIES*

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Introduction

Discussing social change and progress can be a challenging part of public discourse, one sparking controversy, heated discussion and even leading to phenomena such as culture wars. Such discussions can, therefore, often be difficult to conduct and may be limited by entrenched beliefs, ideological divides, and the reluctance to consider alternative perspectives. Literature, especially speculative fiction, however, can offer endless possibilities for exploring signs of change and the manifestations of difference through a lens of imaginary worlds, creating space for the examination of scenarios that might seem too abstract and controversial for contemporary society. For many decades, the science fiction genre has been a platform for such imaginary explorations of change, often using the themes of alien worlds or species as metaphors for pertinent social issues. Historically, classic science fiction novels, such as *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin or *Dune* by Frank Herbert have utilised the genre to discuss the themes of gender, intersectionality, or environmental crisis by bringing relevant social issues to a “vacuum” of the future and places seemingly distant from Earth. As societal issues and concerns evolve, and the perception of the new and unknown shifts,

science fiction continues to explore them to reflect the ever-changing societal landscape

An example of such an exploration can be found in *The Murderbot Diaries*, a series of science fiction short novels written by Martha Wells, which premiered in 2017 and as of now, consists of seven parts. The series has been widely and positively received, winning the prestigious Hugo Award in 2021, and being praised not only for its main storyline, centred around space adventure, but also for its insightful take on humanity and various aspects of human behaviour. The philosophical potential of the series is often noticed by reviewers, such as Jason Sheehan, who, while reviewing the first book of the series, points out the numerous possible interpretations of the story and states that among the biggest strengths of the book lies the fact that “Martha Wells did something really clever. She hid a delicate, nuanced, and deeply, grumpily human story inside these pulp trappings, by making her murderous robot story primarily character-driven.” Adding to this notion, another reviewer, Andrew Liptak, calls *Murderbot* a “story about a machine coming to understand what it means to be human.” The themes of relatability and reimagining what constitutes humanity are often said to be the strongest, possibly most interesting aspect of the stories, one which makes the main character into a powerful social metaphor. *The Murderbot Diaries*, through its depiction of technology that exists beyond human biases, utilises the exploratory potential of the science fiction genre to deconstruct the societal status quo and its elements such as binary gender and heteronormativity, and perform pertinent social commentary.

The series is centred around a Security Unit, a cyborg created for the purpose of combat, named Murderbot, who goes rogue, hacking its controlling module, and, as a result, becomes autonomous. Each part of the series presents a different adventure, but all are connected by the main character. Throughout the series, Murderbot becomes progressively more human in its appearance, through various alterations that replace its generic, robotic look with more

unique characteristics. It also gradually starts to display more human personality traits as it learns to function independently in society. As Sheehan notices, part of the phenomenon of Murderbot is “that something so alien can be so human,” highlighting the multidimensionality of the character’s personality. As a rogue machine entering society, Murderbot becomes an external observer of human behaviour, who chooses to adopt certain characteristics and reject others. It progressively develops relations and friendships with humans and other bots, and through its unique perspective, constantly offers new remarks on how human relationships and societal roles work. As Murderbot develops a complex identity that rejects numerous widely accepted societal norms, it starts to, in many ways, engage with queerness.

Although the story might appear simple and adventure-centered at first sight, upon closer investigation, the various possible interpretations of *The Murderbot Diaries*, many of which connect to queerness and intersectionality, become apparent. In his review, Sheehan draws a parallel of the character’s experiences and journey to functioning in society as a coming-out narrative, that “mirrors the lives of trans people, immigrants, those on the autism spectrum or anyone else who feels the need to hide some essential part of themselves from a population that either threatens or can’t possibly understand them.” Additionally, connecting to Veronica Hollinger’s (25) idea that “our critiques of sex and gender polarities often leave those polarities in place,” *The Murderbot Diaries* avoid making gender and sexuality the central focus of their narrative. Instead, these issues remain in the background of the main character’s adventures and experiences. As Misha Grifka Wander (151) observes, this approach allows the story to bypass the problem of reinstating the status quo of Western perceptions of gender and transcend the subconscious limitations imposed by social constructs. The undermining of the societal status quo becomes even more apparent, as Wander (151) points out, because of the lack of an arbitrary reminder of what “normal” is, as she states comparing the series to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, “[t]here is no Genly Ai there

to remind the reader of the status quo, and hence, no one there to reify the very system being critiqued.” Therefore, despite, seemingly, revolving around space adventure and light-hearted plotlines, *The Murderbot* series invites a queer reading by imagining a being whose queer identity exists outside of various human limitations.

Murderbot’s queerness, which is the main topic of analysis in this article, manifests on three levels. First is Murderbot’s non-binarity, present in the story in the form of rejecting binary gender categorisation whenever possible, especially by resisting the use of gendered pronouns. Second is the character’s asexuality and aromanticism, expressed through its rejection of any type of romantic and sexual relationships. Third and last is the main character’s take on gender performativity and identity in the understanding of Judith Butler, as Murderbot chooses which aspects of human behaviour to adapt and perform when needed, but rejects those that do not agree with its queer identity. While engaging in such analysis, it is crucial to point out that Murderbot is aware of queerness and performs it consciously; the character is fully capable of understanding the meaning and repercussions of manifesting its queerness and willingly chooses to do so. Simultaneously, because of Murderbot’s status as a being existing in a grey area between a human and a machine, it is stripped of unconscious bias, defined by Sarah E. Fiarman (10) as a set of “unconscious preferences on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation, or other aspects of identity,” further adding to its potential for re-examining such concepts and norms.

The article is centred around the role of Murderbot as an example of an outside, neutral observer of human behaviour. By deconstructing the portrayal of the character through a lens of a queer reading, the article proposes that because of its familiarity with human social constructs, biases, and norms while simultaneously being an “outsider” to them, Murderbot becomes a metaphorical, philosophical device for their deep questioning. The analysis of the three most prominent aspects of Murderbot’s queerness is conducted

through the lens of not only queer theory but also through various gender studies concepts, examining the numerous possible interpretations and implications of the character's approach to social norms. Additionally, the article examines how the series depicts queer identity as a factor that reinforces Murderbot's individuality and agency, humanising the character. The article aims to show that Murderbot's portrayal not only serves as an example of how technology can exist outside human concepts of binary gender and heteronormativity, but also offers a critical perspective on the social processes that shape these concepts and allow them to exist within society, and poses queerness as their empowering alternative. Ultimately, the queer reading of *The Murderbot Diaries* encourages a reconsideration of how the portrayal of marginalised identities, both human and non-human, can disrupt and reshape dominant cultural narratives, offering new ways of thinking about individuality and inclusivity.

Non-binarity

The first analysed dimension of Murderbot's queerness is its non-binarity, a concept understood as the avoidance of identifying oneself as either male or female, identifying as both at the same time or alternating between gender identities (Richards et al. 95). Non-binarity can be embodied in a number of ways, ranging from appearance to preferred pronouns. In the case of Murderbot, the most noticeable way in which it manifests its non-binarity is, in fact, linguistic. Despite its human-like appearance, the pronouns used by everyone when referring to Murderbot are "it/its," which is also Murderbot's preference, indicating its conscious rejection of binary gender. As Pennington (352) notes, literary attempts at exploring genderlessness in SF that are "using a shared language that by its nature is gender charged" can reinstate binary gender's association with language instead of challenging it. However, the choice to assign the genderless pronoun "it" to a sentient, humanoid being, simultaneously undermines the preconceived notions surrounding the pronoun

as well as avoids engaging with binary gender. Such a choice of pronouns serves as an example of how, in many cases, as Robin Anne Reid (98) notices, queerness or any type of widely perceived otherness interplays with language and challenges its set rules. This interplay of language and queerness, according to Reid (98), is strongly embodied by the main character and how the story's narrative "foregrounds the gendered English pronoun system by Murderbot's insistence on 'it' as a chosen pronoun." Additionally, as Gal (2) argues, "linguistic innovation is a function of speakers' differential involvement in, and evaluation of, social change," highlighting the connection between linguistic choices and social progress. The character's choice of pronouns can, therefore, be considered as a form of not only manifesting queerness but also as a tool for challenging the deep engraving of gender binarity and preexisting biases onto language, imagining solutions outside of the existing linguistic norms, and reinforcing social change.

In addition, the choice of "it/its" pronouns can be interpreted as a form of not only challenging the rules of language but also distancing from human concepts, divisions and rules as such. As Gal (1) claims, "sexual differentiation of speech is expected to occur whenever a social division exists between the roles of men and women." Murderbot's linguistic rejection of binary gender therefore represents the rejection of the social construct of gender and gender roles. When talking about the character's preferred pronouns, Holly Swyers and Emily Thomas (286) point out that "[i]t is not a robot, but it clearly does not see itself as human, frequently distinguishing itself from 'the humans' throughout the novella." This leads to a complication in the queer reading of the series, in the form of the dehumanising potential of the use of "it/its" pronouns. However, as Misha Grifka Wander argues, addressing this possibility,

Trans+ activists have had to push against the use of "it" to dehumanize trans+ people, but Murderbot claims those pronouns for itself. While dehumanization is generally seen as a tool of oppression, Murderbot actively chooses to dehumanize itself. It is deeply uncomfortable with the idea of being human. (150)

The active choice of potential dehumanisation, in a queer reading, can therefore be seen as a rejection of what has historically culturally constructed humanity. For Murderbot, “it” pronouns are not treated as derogatory or limiting to its agency, but rather, as Wander (150) claims, “are key to Murderbot’s ability to linguistically express its identity.” Instead of serving a dehumanising function, they signify genderlessness, simultaneously allowing for the bot to be perceived as a conscious, independent “being,” a notion which is confirmed by the reception of the series, as according to the findings of Swyers and Thomas (291) “the majority of reviewers (a) recognised the genderlessness of Murderbot, (b) regarded Murderbot as a being rather than as a thing, and (c) rejected what would have been the obvious pronoun solution of an earlier era (he).” These findings, however, also bring up the question of the difference between being genderless (agender) and being non-binary. When defining non-binarity, Richards et al. (95) claim that it exists as an umbrella term, under which being agender or genderfluid falls. Murderbot can consequently be classified as both genderless and non-binary, and the reviewers’ perception of its gender affirms it. Circling back to the pronouns that affirm non-binarity or genderlessness, while most non-binary people choose the pronoun “they,” Murderbot, as mentioned earlier, refrains from it. As Wander (150) claims, despite its awareness of human diversity, Murderbot “does not include itself in that spectrum. It does not choose the genderless pronoun ‘they’, but the pronoun most distant from humanity and from human ideas such as gender and sexuality.” When interpreting this notion, Wander (150) suggests that “Murderbot’s use of the it pronoun asks us to consider posthumanist potentiality,” building on the idea of Murderbot as a tool for the re-examination of the very concept of humanity. The use of the “it” pronoun for a conscious, anthropomorphic being can be read as a way of escaping and opposing human norms and constructs and performing what is perceived as queerness, in resistance to them.

While analysing the series' take on non-binarity and the main character's distancing from human concepts such as gender, it is crucial to examine Murderbot's original purpose and its relation to both gender and sex. When looking at Murderbot and SecurityUnits (also called SecUnits) in general, it is important to begin the analysis by discussing the differences and connections between the terms "gender" and "sex." As Amy Blackstone (335) explains, building on the separation between sex and gender initially defined by Ann Oakley, "gender parallels the biological division of sex into male and female, but it involves the division and social valuation of masculinity and femininity." Further interpreting this notion, Blackstone (335) concludes that "gender is a concept that humans create socially, through their interactions with one another and their environments, yet it relies heavily upon biological differences between males and females." SecUnits, including Murderbot, can be said to exist both outside biological sex because of a lack of bodily functions relating to procreation, and outside of the concept of gender because of a lack of socialisation, as they do not need to independently exist in human society, showing the possibility of the existence of anthropomorphic technology that does not engage with either sex or gender in any way. When examining the reason for their existence, it is apparent that Murderbot's and other SecUnits' clear purpose is combat, which is crucial when interpreted through the lens of the concept of gender roles, which assign beings with social purpose based on gender. As Blackstone (335) points out, "[g]ender roles are based on the different expectations that individuals, groups, and societies have of individuals based on their sex and based on each society's values and beliefs about gender." SecUnits, by being both sexless and genderless, can be said to break the traditional connection between masculinity, male-gendered body, and being a fighter bot, connected to the idea of "violent but ultimately good masculinity" introduced by Samantha Holland (165). According to Holland (165), popular culture texts cannot divorce the idea of a cyborg from existing social gender preconceptions, and portrayals of such technologies are always heavily

influenced by the concept of binary gender, with the emphasis on the observation that fighter cyborgs tend to be portrayed as hypermasculine, exaggerating stereotypical gender characteristics. However, the portrayal of Murderbot is a “perfectly androgynous,” post-gender statement in the understanding of Haraway, a cyborg existing above gender and therefore above limitations of gender roles and biases, and plays into Lisa Yaszek’s (7) idea of a cyborg as an ideal metaphor for modern political activists. Murderbot’s very existence outside these limitations is an activist statement in itself, one which also enables a queer reading from an “outside” perspective, allowing for a deep rethinking and re-examining of the understanding of the concept of gender and gender roles through a character with no pre-existing human biases.

However, while Murderbot’s sexless and genderless physicality is initially predetermined, later on in the series, it has an opportunity to acquire a gendered body and let go of its “perfectly androgynous” status, which becomes a crucial plot point for manifesting its queerness. The centrality of the body to queerness is described by WG Pearson, who claims that:

[i]t is on the body—whether human body, alien body, virtual body, body politic, body of work, body of writing—that queer exerts its greatest effects. But it is also the body (in all of these senses) that is threatened by queer’s potential disintegration in the face of a defensive and frighteningly powerful heteronormative hegemony over lives and meanings. (73)

The “heteronormative hegemony” manifests itself very clearly when Murderbot is faced with the choice to gender its body. After gaining autonomy, Murderbot encounters ART, a highly intelligent transport bot, and after talking to it, realises it needs to look “more human” to complete its current mission. This element of the plot is closely connected to and can be interpreted through Pearson’s (72) concept of “livable life,” where queerness, among other factors, can limit the potential of fitting into certain socially accepted categories, and, consequently, makes it harder to be perceived as human. Murderbot’s initial reaction to ART’s suggestion of alteration is negative, as it claims that SecUnits

are never altered and that the act of alteration is associated with the inferior bots called Sexbots. The alteration is presented as a derogatory concept based on a stereotypical view of what it means to be human, which connects with Ashley Barr's (53) claim that lack of gender and asexuality are often equated to inhumanity, and that such connection to inhumanity often becomes a reason for correction, both medical, and through the enforcement of societal norms aimed at integrating asexual individuals into the conventional path of human development. Despite evident repercussions of the choice, Murderbot opts not to acquire a gendered body and receives an alteration to its arm and legs that makes it appear more human without making its appearance distinctively masculine or feminine. The choice of such a correction, which still performs the humanising role but, simultaneously, does not relate to binary gender, presents a possibility of non-conformism to gender as a humanising agent. Additionally, when Murderbot discusses the alteration process, it clearly states its feelings towards both its body and sexuality, saying:

ART had an alternate, more drastic plan that included giving me sex-related parts, and I told it that was absolutely not an option. I didn't have any parts related to sex and I liked it that way. I had seen humans have sex on the entertainment feed and on my contracts, when I had been required to record everything the clients said and did. No, thank you, no. No. (Wells 2018: 30)

The quote strongly suggests that Murderbot consciously and fully rejects the possibility of acquiring gender not only because it has negative connotations with such alterations, but also because it simply likes its non-gendered body. In a queer reading, Murderbot's rejection of binary gender, interpreted as a rejection of conforming to the stereotypical societal standard of it as "more human," intertwines with the concept of a "livable life," and Pearson's (72) observation that if the aspects that make the "non-normative" lives "unlivable" are, among others, gender and sexuality, then "surely we may look to sf to posit worlds in which it is possible both to live differently and to think differently about how we live." This is exactly what Wells does in *The Murderbot Diaries*,

utilising the science fiction genre to create a world and a character that allows for a reexamination of numerous norms that can potentially make a life “unlivable.” Muderbot’s unique situation of not being born in a gendered body and consciously rejecting one when presented with an opportunity to acquire it is one of the examples of such reexaminations that allows for a reimagining of the necessity of performing gender in stereotypically acceptable ways to exist in society and questions the cultural power dynamics behind such necessity.

Asexuality

Sexuality is the second analysed aspect of Murderbot’s queerness, which connects to and undermines the aforementioned stereotypical connection between heteronormativity and humanity. As a cyborg, Murderbot exists in what Barr (45) calls a “contested state between human and machine,” and therefore can serve as a “useful starting point for considering both how we confer humanity, in general, and the role sexuality and desire play in that process” (45). In the series, Murderbot is portrayed as an outside observer of human concepts of sexuality, which it first encounters in the media. Murderbot’s favourite form of entertainment is watching TV series, but it always skips over parts with romance. This is the first time when the reader learns of Murderbot’s asexuality, which is a sexual orientation characterised by a “lack of sexual attraction to anyone or a disinterest of being sexual with others” (Antonsen et al. 1615). In its own words, Murderbot states:

I’d watched three episodes of Sanctuary Moon and was fast-forwarding through a sex scene when Dr.Mensah sent me some images through the feed. I don’t have any gender or sex-related parts (if a construct has those you’re a sexbot in a brothel, not a murderbot) so maybe that’s why I find sex scenes boring. Though I think that even if I did have sex-related parts I would find them boring. (Wells 2017: 19)

In this passage, Murderbot explains that it does not relate to romantic plots on the show as it has no interest in any form of sexuality; it is not something Murderbot misses or wishes to have. Therefore, in addition to asexuality,

aromanticism, defined as the lack of any romantic attraction (Antonsen et al. 1616) also applies to the character. As previously mentioned, the lack of sexuality is true for all SecUnits and not unique to Murderbot, but because of Murderbot's rebellion against its controlling module, it possesses more agency and autonomy than other SecUnits, such as its ability to watch media freely, making its view on sexuality informed and personal. It is also important to point out that the fact that Murderbot's asexuality takes the form of being repulsed by both sexual acts and sexed bodies is not unusual for asexual people. As Mark Carrigan (8) explains, "[s]ome asexual people are entirely indifferent to sex, some are viscerally repulsed by it, while others can derive enjoyment from sexual act without these acts being motivated by sexual attraction." Consequently, Murderbot's portrayal can be considered an accurate depiction of an asexual individual.

While Murderbot openly manifests its asexuality despite the potential repercussions, it simultaneously knows that heteronormative sexuality is an easy path to appear more human and make its life in the human world easier. The negative social consequences of manifesting one's asexuality connect to the notion that asexual individuals are socially perceived as less human. Barr (53) notices that in science fiction narratives, "cyborgs are put on a path to humanity when they demonstrate an ability to feel emotion and sexual desires," while in real life, "individuals who identify as asexual are placed on a similar progression and aligned with the original inhumanity of cyborgs in the process" (53), an idea confirmed by Holland (163), who claims that human desire is perceived as the "central difference between humans and machines." Despite being aware of this phenomenon, Murderbot purposefully rejects the concept of desire in human understanding. In a queer reading, this rejection can be interpreted as resistance against the othering of asexual and aromatic individuals. Such a reading engages with Barr's (58) idea of otherness and the position of humanity, where the "interjection of otherness (whether in the form of a cyborg or an asexually identified individual or occupants of many other

positions)“ is not destructive, but instead highlights that traditionally understood humanity “was always unattainable in the first place because it maintained itself, in part, through the exclusion of otherness” (58), therefore deeply questioning the connection between heteronormativity and humanity.

Another concept present in the series that closely connects to the rethinking of the meaning of humanity is the role of rationality in being perceived as human, and rationality’s connection to queerness. SecUnits’ rationality opposes sexuality, and, as a result, humanity; as mentioned before, Murderbot’s original purpose contradicts any need for it. The interplay of sexuality and rationality is also explained by Barr (51), who claims that “mechanical rationality and competence are described as ‘asexual’ so that asexuality becomes associated with inhumanity.” However, it can be argued that further in Murderbot’s journey when it gains full control over its fate and body, the rational choice would be to accept certain aspects of sexuality to make its life in human society easier and more “livable.” Despite this, Murderbot executes its agency and refuses this idea. The character’s conscious choice to reject sexuality once it gains full autonomy removes the mechanical, inhuman aspect and replaces it with empowerment through the asexual aromantic identity, reimagining what truly constitutes agency and, as a result, humanity. Murderbot connects a cyborg and an asexual individual, portraying asexuality not as an othering, pre-existing condition that is deemed undesirable by society, but as what can be interpreted to be its chosen form of resistance against the humanising function of stereotypically understood sexuality, challenging the notion that some sexualities are inherently “more human” than others.

Performativity and Identity

The final analysed aspects revolve around performativity, identity, and their interplay within the series. Throughout the story, it is apparent that Murderbot does not like to be perceived by humans and is not used to being looked at. However, as it enters human society, it realises it is expected to adjust its

behaviour because of “the gaze,” which, in this case, could be called “human gaze.” As Moe explains, building on Mulvey’s concept,

[t]he gaze represents the notion that something happens inside of us (within our cognitive and psychological processes) when we become conscious of others’ observations of us and that we often alter our physical presentation, language, demeanor, and behavior in response to such changes. (1)

In accordance with this idea, humans’ approach to Murderbot visibly changes when it saves one of them and shows the team its (human) face, prompting deeper reflection on its identity. In that moment, it starts being perceived by humans, and considered to be, to a certain degree, a person, and as a result, becomes an object of their expectations and their gaze. Murderbot’s response to the situation clearly defines its stance:

He said, ‘Why don’t you want us to look at you?’ My jaw was so tight it triggered a performance reliability alert in my feed. I said, ‘You don’t need to look at me. I’m not a sexbot.’ Ratthi made a noise, half sigh, half snort of exasperation. It wasn’t directed at me. He said, ‘Gurathin, I told you. It’s shy.’ (Wells 2017: 60)

The response, especially the mention of Sexbots, suggests that it associates human perception with sexualisation, and it has no interest in performing sexuality for the “human gaze.” Even when later on in the series Murderbot adjusts to functioning in human society and develops emotional relationships with humans, and, to a certain extent, alters its appearance, it repeatedly states that it does not want to be perceived by humans nor is it interested in abandoning its queer identity for their comfort. This notion is especially visible when Murderbot rejects affectionate physical contact, or expresses a strong dislike for any sexual allusions made towards it, further rejecting the very core of “the gaze.”

The rejection of being perceived is also a further rejection of any possibility of being gendered and connects to non-binarity, as Zach C. Schudson explains that “[s]ome non-binary identities (e.g., agender) might involve not having a gender identity at all or rejecting aspects of gender/sex as a social category

more broadly;" this could include being perceived by humans, who tend to impose their norms on all beings. Performing sexuality and gender for the human gaze would make Murderbot appear more human (in the eyes of humans) but would be against its identity. The performance of gender, even though it is potentially socially gratifying and "humanising," is therefore damaging to the unit's integrity. Such a power dynamic connects to Butler's concept of discrete genders. Butler (1988: 522) claims that "as a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right." Murderbot chooses its identity over the benefits of performativity, using queerness as a tool of resistance against the social construct of gender.

Additionally, Murderbot's unchanging rejection of conforming to performativity gives space for imagining a "liveable life" outside of gender and invites a questioning of the necessity of socialisation into gender performativity. As Pearson explains, connecting Butler's theories, as well as gender and sexuality to the concept of liveable life,

[g]iven the extent to which gender is conflated with sexuality in contemporary thought, either because gender is seen as an effect of (hetero)sexuality or because it is understood as the same as sexuality (so that gay people, for example, are seen as having become another gender entirely), Butler's argument points to the extent to which the doing of gender regulates, enables, and limits the capacity to have a livable life and to be recognized as human. (76)

Performing gender correctly or incorrectly is therefore closely tied to the "livability" of life. As brought up by Swyers and Thomas, such a notion can also be noticed among the voices of contemporary LGBTQ+ activists, such as Taylor Alxndr, who claims that "[t]hose of us who don't perform gender correctly—whether cis or trans—are often told to pick a side, or become tossed to the side entirely. We're generally invisible to the wider community." Connecting to the concepts of livable life and discrete genders, Alxndr adds that "[a]nyone living

in-between or outside of the binary is disqualified or forgotten.” In the series, however, Murderbot rejects the potential safety, acceptance, and other benefits of performing gender for the “human gaze,” and despite this rejection, manages to function successfully within society, highlighting its non-conformity and individuality, and contrary to the stereotypical belief, imagining queerness as humanising. By analysing the series and its depiction of a possibility of a “livable life” that rejects heteronormativity and gender performativity, it becomes apparent that these concepts do not have to be permanently tied to existence in human society and, crucially, are not a natural construct. As Hollinger claims,

when gender is theorized as performative, in a move which re-situates the ‘tragedy’ of the masquerade of femininity and turns it into ironic contestatory practice, we become less dependent upon essentialist ontological categories and, at least theoretically and imaginatively, we can initiate a more radical inquiry into the nature of the individual sexed and gendered subject. (28)

Examining Murderbot’s rejection of performativity through a lens of queer reading, therefore, enables a questioning of human concepts such as compulsory heterosexuality and binary gender, and allows for the deconstruction of gender and its performance as artificial social constructs from a perspective of a being whose identity can exist outside of them.

The sense of identity, which interplays closely with the concept of performativity, is central to the series. Crucially, Murderbot’s perception of its own identity does not change significantly despite the many external and internal changes it undergoes throughout the story. Even after its physical “humanising” alteration, which, as it states “would make it harder for me to pretend not to be a person,” (Wells 2018: 34) Murderbot tries to keep its identity as unchanged as possible, connecting to Pearson’s (76) idea that “[s]ometimes a normative conception of gender can undo one’s personhood, undermining the capacity to persevere in a livable life” (76). Personhood can, therefore, be reinforced by the rejection of conformist alteration of its identity

and the rejection of performativity. As mentioned before, Murderbot embraces certain aspects of humanity, such as developing friendships with humans; however, it continuously purposefully rejects the socially imposed limitations and forms of performative self-categorisation that tie to humanity, but go against its identity, such as the various manifestations of the gender binary. Some of the examples include how when picking clothes, Murderbot considers both clothing traditionally associated with women and men or how it continues using “it/its” pronouns throughout the series, even when its legal status is more equal to that of a human. A seemingly turning point in its avoidance of self-identification comes when Murderbot has to specify its gender to obtain a job. By portraying this situation, the series does not refuse to consider gender and self-identification as an integral and compulsory part of existing in human society but shows that from the perspective of Murderbot, such categorisations are not necessary, and not an integral part of its identity. As Butler (1999: 164) claims, connecting the act of categorisation to the body, traditionally, “sex/gender distinction and the category of sex itself appear to presuppose a generalisation of ‘the body’ that preexists the acquisition of its sexed significance” Murderbot, however, is detached from the human bodily aspect and, therefore, free to decide its identity, existing above physical limits, its gender identity (or lack thereof) not connected in any way to biological sex. In the story, when forced to specify its gender, it chooses a way to omit categorisation, saying “[I] listed my job as ‘security consultant,’ and my gender as indeterminate,” (Wells 2018: 37) showing a possibility of an official, purposeful rejection of binary gender when being forced to self-identify. This example depicts how Murderbot only engages with the stereotypical human identity frames when necessary, and even then, does not abandon its true, queer identity to conform to social norms, imagining a way of existing outside of them while still living a “livable life” and embracing its personhood. Murderbot’s simultaneous “humanisation” and entrance into the human world, and constant, unchanging refusal to perform gender and sexuality as

understood by humans can be read as a rejection of the interweaving of human identity and gender performativity. The character serves as an example of a being that exists beyond human bodily limitations and can fully decide its own identity by completely detaching it from physical sex and its social implications, such as preexisting biases. Murderbot's case, therefore, imagines how in a society that imposes a certain set of norms and expectations on anyone who wants to exist within it, queerness can offer a form of opposition that undermines these very norms and allows for the existence of gender performance-free identity.

Conclusions

This queer reading of *The Murderbot Diaries* shows the various ways in which the series, and, in particular, the main character, perform social activism and propose queerness as a tool for opposing the societal status quo. Each of the three analysed dimensions of Murderbot's queerness undermines different culturally accepted societal standards connected to gender and sexuality and rethinks the social power dynamics that maintain them. Murderbot's unique, "outside" perspective serves as a philosophical device for questioning the cultural mechanisms within the social norm system and allows for a rethinking of concepts deeply engraved into the perception of "normality" and "humanity." The analysis of the stories shows how contemporary science fiction can not only critique current power structures but also empower marginalised identities through illustrating how they can hold the potential to drive meaningful social change and foster a more inclusive understanding of what it means to be human. The series portrays queerness as a potential source of empowerment and a tool for truly deconstructing heteronormative, patriarchal structures, as well as undermines the connection between queerness and inhumanity, showing the strong relation between agency, personhood, and queer identity, and shows how the science fiction genre can be used to explore potential social change.

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Abstract

Engaging with social change and progress within public discourse often encounters resistance due to entrenched beliefs and ideological divides. Literature, particularly science fiction, provides a unique platform for contemplating societal transformation through the exploration of imaginary worlds and scenarios detached from the contemporary status quo. This article is centred around the philosophical potential of science fiction and the role of technology as a powerful metaphor for change and difference, focusing on Martha Wells' series *The Murderbot Diaries*. The article delves into the role of Murderbot, a cyborg embodying an outsider perspective on human behaviour, as a metaphorical device for a deep questioning of the status quo. The article claims that through a queer reading, Murderbot's familiarity with human social constructs, biases, and norms, juxtaposed with its status as an "outsider," makes it a potent tool for societal critique. By analysing the portrayal of Murderbot's queerness through the lens of queer theory and gender studies, this study examines its profound implications for understanding social norms. Additionally, the article explores how the

portrayal of queer identity in *The Murderbot Diaries* strengthens the character's individuality and agency, thereby humanising it and questioning the very concept of humanity. The article aims to show that Murderbot's queerness not only challenges conventional notions of binary gender and heteronormativity but also offers a critical perspective on the social processes at the source of these concepts. Furthermore, it posits queerness as an empowering alternative to conforming to the status quo. Through this analysis, the article contributes to a nuanced understanding of social change and identity within the context of speculative fiction, inviting a reconsideration of established paradigms and embracing diversity.