

Women at Warp Episode 203: Aspec and Trek

Sue: Hi, and welcome to Women at Warp, a Star Trek podcast. Join us on our continuing mission to explore Intersectional Diversity in Infinite Combinations. My name is Sue, and thanks for tuning in. With me today is my co-host Andi...

Andi: Hello!

Sue: ...and our guest Anna.

Anna: Hey!

Sue: Anna, would you like to introduce yourself and tell our listeners where they might have seen you before?

Anna: Yeah. I guess if they've seen me before, it's probably through social media or at Vegas, or Mission Chicago, as the salt sucker cosplayer. That was a big thing for me, as far as people going, 'That was you? Oh, okay!' But other than that, I am a member of Lambda Quadrant, which is a queer-focused group about Star Trek but media representation in general, specifically focusing on the queer community and representation—where it's lacking, and where it's good.

Sue: And that's what we're talking about today, specifically asexuality and aromantic characters in Star Trek, or the asexual or aspec umbrella.

But before we get there, we do have some housekeeping to do first. As usual, our show is made possible by our patrons on Patreon. If you'd like to become a patron, you can do so for as little as a one dollar per month and get some great rewards, from thanks on social media up to some silly watchalong commentaries and some non-Trek podcast episodes. Visit us at patreon.com/womenatwarp. If you're looking for podcast merch, you can check out our TeePublic store. There are tons of designs with new ones being added all the time, and on so much more than just t-shirts. You can find that at teepublic.com/stores/womenatwarp, and our convention patches and enamel pins are also available online at womenatwarp.com/shop. All of those links are also available just by going to womenatwarp.com.

And we have now two giveaways happening at the same time. The first one is the New York Comic Con exclusive Murf plushie giveaway—that is still going

on. The giveaway is open to everyone, and no matter where you live. Just email us at crew@womenatwarp.com and tell us what you're looking forward to in the second half of the first season of Star Trek: Prodigy. We also now have three copies of Dr. Erin Macdonald's new board book for kids ages 2+, called *My First Book of Space*, to give away to listeners. To enter this giveaway, send us an email and tell us your favorite episode of Trek that features a spatial anomaly. For this one, you do need to have a U.S. address to enter the giveaway. For both giveaways the entry deadline is midnight Eastern on Sunday, November 6th [2022]. You can enter both, but please send separate emails. Each valid entry goes into a different hat or folder for that specific giveaway, and winners will be chosen at random. If you only send one email, it can only go into one hat.

All right, so, asexuality and Star Trek. Or the ace umbrella and Star Trek, cuz I don't wanna leave anybody out. Seeing as we're the "A," we often get tossed back behind that plus sign. I'm ace. Anna, you're ace?

Anna: Yeah, I'm more gray than strictly ace, but I tend to use "ace" as a short term, just because people tend to just go, 'Well, what is that?' And I don't feel like giving them a dissertation every single day.

Sue: Yeah. I often use "queer" just because it's easier.

Anna: Yeah. The other part of my identity is that I'm bi. I'm bi and ace, and I find that it's just very much easier to just say I'm queer. I used to say—and I still say it often—that everyone's hot, but please don't touch me. *Sue & Andi laugh*

Sue: I love that so much.

Anna: And before I even properly came out—I'd come out to people in my life, but not really any more formally than that—I used to say my sexuality was the shrug emoji. So just very like, 'Alright. We're just vibing. Leave me alone.'

Andi: Yeah. I'm the emotional support bisexual that was assigned to Sue.

Sue: It's true. *Anna laughs*

Anna: It's so real. It is. Bi-ace solidarity is very good, as two identities that I think get overlooked a lot within the queer community even.

Andi: Yeah, for sure. Bi & ace and bi & trans are like PB & J.

Anna: Yeah. Yeah. That's so true.

Sue: So talking about being bi and ace, if I'm entirely honest, I have an even longer...demipanromantic asexual. Those descriptors are examples of what we, when we get into it, we call the split attraction model—but a little bit more on that in a minute. Because I feel like we should hit some definitions. And the thing about definitions, especially inside the queer community, is that they aren't a test; they're tools. So they might not be exact for everyone who identifies this way, but they help us to find these communities.

I think the first thing when we're talking about the ace umbrella is that there are different types of attraction. There's sexual attraction, romantic attraction, aesthetic attraction, and sensual attraction. There are probably more, but those are the main ones that people talk about. And an asexual person, in general, is someone who does not or rarely experiences sexual attraction. An aromantic person is someone who does not or rarely experiences romantic attraction. And for a lot of people who are not part of this community, it's really hard to break those things apart.

Anna: Especially when, even just when it comes to asexuality, they don't understand the difference between asexuality and celibacy. Celibacy is your choice to abstain, whereas asexuality is genuinely not having the urge. And then the discussion of like, 'Oh, well, are you traumatized?' And it's like, 'Well, no.' If you're so sex-averse or sex-repulsed, that's a different thing that doesn't even necessarily mean you're ace. That can come from trauma, or it can just be your natural aversions. But it really varies. And some aces are sex-repulsed, but some are fully... I have so many friends who have the wildest kinks and things like that, and I'm like, 'Just tell me, I'm fascinated. You can tell me it all. I'm fascinated.' To me it's, like, anthropological. I'm just like, 'I don't know what it is, but...' And there's no repulsion. It's just more like, 'Wow. I don't wanna see it, but I'd be curious. But I'll hear about it. I'm fascinated.'

Sue: The analogies that I think we use the most often is when it comes to food, where there's the act of eating, there is hunger, and then there is knowing that something tastes good, I guess. And in this thing, a libido would be hunger itself. Sexual attraction would be hunger for a specific food. Eating the food is the act of sex. And, you know, no analogy is perfect, so it breaks down at some point, but yet nobody's experience of asexuality is the same. There are sex-repulsed aces. There are sex-favorable aces. But being asexual itself does not mean that somebody is abstinent or celibate. That's not the same thing.

Andi: I also think that there's, like many things in the queer community, a spectrum. So I know when I was first coming to my bisexuality, for a while I was identifying as biromantic because I was like, 'No, that makes sense. I am romantically attracted to women, but am I sexually attracted to women?' And then I saw a specific woman and I was like, 'Yes. Yes I am.' And it's kind of funny that we're talking about this with Sue because it was literally on the way to the airport to see Sue, and I saw this woman with the coolest ankle boots and amazing hair, and she smiled at me and I was like, 'Ohhh my god.' And then I got to New York City and saw Sue and I was like, 'I swooped, Sue! I swooped, you know what I mean? Swooped.' And she was like, 'No.' *Sue & Anna laugh*

Anna: For me it was Janelle Monáe that made me go, 'Yeah, this is more than just liking—than just thinking women are pretty.'

Andi: Yes.

Sue: There are lots and lots of identities that fall under the aspec umbrella, but I think the two others that we hear the most frequently are demi or demisexual or demiromantic, which is someone who only experiences sexual attraction or romantic attraction after an emotional bond has been formed. And then gray, grayromantic, or graysexual, or grayasexual may experience attraction rarely, under specific circumstances, or of a low intensity. And as I mentioned previously, when we break it down like this, it's what is referred to as the split attraction model, where your romantic attraction may be different from your sexual attraction.

Anna: Yeah. And then, speaking on gray—cuz I should, as someone who's gray—I always describe it as like, the few times I get aroused, I'm genuinely surprised. *Sue & Andi laugh* I'm almost offended by my body. I'm like, 'What? We don't do this.'

Sue: I think what's—I don't know if "interesting" is the right word—different about the ace community—and I am using "ace" as the umbrella term here, so just making that clear—is that we're defining ourselves by a lack of something, which, I mean, just starting from that position is unusual.

Anna: Yeah. We're almost forced to identify with these labels by the fact that our society is so sex-obsessed. And then it kind of sucks cuz sometimes within the queer community people say, 'Well, because you're being defined by a lack of something, or you're not being oppressed, or you're not really queer.'

Andi: I have issues with the idea that an intrinsic part of being queer is oppression. No thanks.

Sue: But I think it's also inaccurate to say that asexuals do not face oppression or discrimination. It's different, I think, than several other queer identities, but that doesn't mean it can't be harmful, you know? When you grow up with everyone around you and the media around you and everything telling you that you're gonna fall in love and get married and go through these certain steps of life, and then you don't?

Anna: Have 2.5 kids, you're gonna...yeah, white picket fence.

Sue: Yeah. And so many ace people describe themselves as feeling broken—specifically using that word “broken”—before finding the community, before figuring out their identity. And that's incredibly harmful.

Anna: And also, I would love to be in a relationship. And dating has this other difficult element. And the amount of times I've felt pressured—like I should have sex with someone, so that way I could potentially find love—is really upsetting.

Sue: It's difficult too, if you're trying to form a relationship with an allo person, or someone who is not ace. The opposite of ace is allo, A-L-L-O. So often the way the allosexual community forms relationships is in almost a different order. Or doesn't understand how a relationship could work if sex isn't involved in it.

Anna: They understand celibacy right, but they don't understand the just never-want-it... And then there's also people who will almost comfort me, like, ‘Well, you'll find someone someday.’ It's like, ‘No, if I wanted to have sex, I'd get it very easily.’

Sue: Right. It's not about waiting for the right person. It's not about being a late bloomer. It's not about being afraid or ugly or sick or having a hormone imbalance. I had, for quite a long time, just used either ‘too busy’ or ‘not currently interested.’ When somebody, especially a family member [asked], ‘Are you dating anybody?’ ‘No, no. Thank you. I'm too busy.’ I found the term and definition of “asexuality” through Tumblr in my late twenties. And I was like, ‘Oh, it makes a ton of sense now.’ And for that exact reason, that's why I defend labels. I know not everybody wants them or uses them or feels the need to apply them to themselves, but when you are somebody who feels out of place and you find a word that resonates with you, automatically you know that there

are enough other people who experience that that there's a word for it, which also means that there's a community for it.

So let's talk about television, what we're here for. I wanna talk a little bit, just a smidge, about representation in media in general, and then specifically about Star Trek. There's not a lot of ace representation in specifically television and film media. The one that I know gets talked about a lot is BoJack Horseman, or what's the character's name, Jeff [Todd]? And there are a couple from some more-recent streaming shows. But our mainstream television doesn't have it. And when it does...I'm thinking about, I don't know, characters like Sheldon from The Big Bang Theory.

Anna: Yeah.

Sue: I'm sorry. I have to sigh when I talk about that show.

Anna: But yeah, no, we all do. They even made the mitosis, asexual reproduction joke about Sheldon. And then also he went on to have a romantic—and I believe sexual—relationship with a female character later on.

Sue: That's what happens. When we think about Sheldon or like Jughead on Riverdale, they start out with real ace vibes, right? And then go on so that their character development involves a relationship. And it's presented in such a way that—as we were saying before, being in a relationship does not negate somebody's asexuality—but it's presented in a way that they're a better person now because they have found their sexuality. And that's the problem.

Anna: Or they were unfulfilled. I wanted to talk about, in Sherlock, BBC's Sherlock, he specifically hadn't texted Irene Adler back, and Watson or John says something like, 'She's out there, she likes you, and she's alive, and do you have the first idea how lucky you are? Just text her back.' And then he, Sherlock says, 'As I have explained to you many times before, romantic entanglement, while fulfilling for other people...' And then John cuts him off and says, 'Would complete you as a human being.' And I was like, 'That is so acephobic.' And sure, you could say, 'Well, they didn't intend Sherlock to be asexual.' But on the DVD commentary of the very first episode of Sherlock with Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat, they specifically call Sherlock Holmes asexual. They specifically say, 'Oh, well he's asexual in the novels and he's asexual on our show.' They specifically say it, and they continue to say it to the point where, in 2014, I think it was an Elle article—yeah, it was in Elle magazine, I believe—Benedict Cumberbatch was asked about it, and he said he's asexual for a purpose, not because he doesn't have a sex drive, but because it's

suppressed to do his work. That's not asexuality, that's celibacy. And so it's this blatant misunderstanding what asexuality actually is. And there are people at cons, there are people on the internet saying, 'Hey, that's not what ace is,' for years. And then flash forward to 2017, I believe, when the episode came out. It just sucks that they had John Watson literally just saying, 'Oh yeah, a romantic entanglement would complete you as a human being.' It's like, 'No, that's not how life works. You don't need romance or sex to complete who you are.'

Sue: But yet that's the message we get from all angles.

Anna: That's all mirrors. So even when you think you might be getting some ace representation, we often get stabbed in the back.

Sue: There's also an infamous episode of House where a woman is pretending to be asexual because she wants to marry an asexual man. But, of course, our Dr. House laughs it off and tries to prove that there is no such thing as asexuality—that's not real. And it turns out this man has a brain tumor that is "causing" his asexuality. So, you know, just great stuff all around #sarcasm.

The discussion so often about asexual characters is people—because we have no explicit ace representation in Trek, we have interpretations. But whenever that conversation starts up, there are people who chime in to say, 'Well, that character can't be ace because they're interested in this other character.' Or, 'they've had relationships,' or, 'they make jokes about sex.' I've even seen, 'That character can't be ace: I find them attractive.' That doesn't make a ton of sense. 'That character can't be ace: they're normal.' That has been said too. But that's not what it is. That's not how any of this works.

We get into Trek, and I think the first several characters that come to mind all sort of fall into the same category of what I think of as 'the others' or 'the Spock archetype.' Spock, Data, Odo, and Seven are outsider characters on our first four series. You know, these are all characters who, interestingly, are also often seen as autistic representation. And the commonality here is that the traits that they exhibit that make people interpret them in these ways are intended to make them less-than-human, or at least other-than-human. And that's not great.

Anna: Yeah, it's not great for the autistic community or the ace community. At the same time, I especially understand—it's good in the sense of, like, when you can see yourself in a character, that's so important. And I know many people who are autistic and who are ace, who are like, 'I read these characters as asexual,' and I'm like, 'That's cool, as long as you're the one doing it.' It's

when other people are like, 'Oh, maybe the reason they're not-human-like is because they don't like sex,' you know? It's like, well that's problematic.

Sue: I had never thought about this scene in this way before, but I was doing some research, reading articles, watching YouTube, and a YouTuber named Rowan Ellis points out that in "The Measure of a Man," when Picard is asking about Data's relationship with Tasha, what he's doing is using Data's sexual history to give validity to his personhood.

Anna: And yeah, he's claiming he's sentient. Like, 'Oh, look at that. He even has sex.' Even though I think it would've been more valuable to be like, 'Look at how, even though he knows that she's dead, he's not disclosing something that she asked him not to tell,' you know? Cuz he [Data] was like, 'I promised not to tell.' And then he [Picard] was like, 'I think Yar would understand.' Which like, fair enough, but why is that important? And he's just kind of like, 'Listen, I...' Whereas I think what would prove his sentience moreso would be the fact that he's making the decision to say, 'No, to respect her memory, I'm not going to say something that she didn't want shared.'

Andi: The other thing about Data is so many of his storylines kind of circle around learning how to become human and exploring humanity. And a lot of that can be art-based, and just exploring emotions. But the episodes in which he's specifically exploring romantic and sexual situations or attraction have always... I don't know, I don't find it as interesting as when he's trying to learn how to do Shakespeare. I'll say that. Because it very much feels like he can still be human and not wanna have a sexual or romantic relationship.

Anna: I will say I do kinda like the episode where he has a girlfriend. I forget its name off the top of my head.

Sue: "In Theory," I believe.

Anna: "In Theory." I like that episode in the way that it's an undeniable fact: he doesn't have any interest in dating her. I feel like the framing of the episode needed to be changed, but I think there's an interesting thing of like, everyone around him is... Well, I mean, Geordi's kinda like, 'Ooh, I don't know. I don't know if she's ready. Unless she is ready...' I kind of like that Geordi's like, 'I'm not gonna tell you what to do. I'm just gonna tell you that it's complicated.' And he's actually having a conversation with him like a regular friend, rather than being like, 'But, Data, you're an android. You can't.' And that he's actually like, 'Well, I don't know if she's emotionally ready.' I liked that. But the fact that she knows that one of the number one things he talks

about all the time is that he doesn't have emotions, and the fact that she knows that and that she's gonna just be like, 'Hey, I know that, but we wanna date anyway.' To me, it felt very similar to how a lot of ace people get treated.

Sue: And then that's the exact reason she breaks up with him.

Anna: Yeah. And it's like, yeah, of course that didn't work out. Sometimes people watch that episode and at the end they're like, 'Oh, I felt bad for her.' And I'm like, 'No, that was kind of predatory. I'm not about her.' Honestly, I think Data went into it exactly as he should have. He was like, 'This is an experiment, I guess. I'm gonna try writing a program, I'll be testing out a bunch of things. Oh, we're breaking up? Then I'll delete this.' I was like, honestly, 'What a baller move, man. Nice, bro.' But the framing of the episode is wrong. I feel like the audience views it and goes, 'Oh, it's so tragic that he couldn't find love with this one woman,' who is blatantly misunderstanding who he is as a person.

Andi: Well, there's two things here that I wanna touch on. One is that I feel like in relationships and episodes like that, where they tell you how it is and then you're mad that that's how it is, what they're hoping for is they will be the one to save you. Right?

Anna: 'I could change him.'

Andi: 'I could fix him,' right? So she's a hundred percent... He's like, 'Hey, I don't feel emotion.' She's like, 'Oh, okay.' But she doesn't really believe it. She thinks that she will be able to fix him and make him feel emotions towards her.

Anna: Yeah. It's disrespectful.

Andi: I actually think that Data has emotions. I don't know if by that he has romantic or sexual emotions, but he doesn't need to be fixed, I guess is the point. And I think that episodes like that and framings like that say way more about the people writing them and what their priorities are than anything about the character itself, like the way you were describing. I don't blame Data for this. A hundred percent, Data was just being Data, but both the characters in the universe and the writers still think that it's important for Data to explore this because it's an important aspect of humanity. They connect those things in a way that they don't need to be connected, I guess.

Sue: Yeah. But Anna, you're right too though that this is a predatory relationship, in a way, because Data is doing whatever he thinks will make her

happy, whether he wants to do those things or not. And that is a problem that can crop up when an ace person is in a relationship with a non-ace person. And that bleeds over into coercion. And that's why really open communication is absolutely necessary.

Anna: Yeah. Yeah, it's disrespectful at its core. It's the same as if a woman were to say to a gay man, 'Well, let's just try it. Let's just try a relationship.' And a gay man who has been pressured by society his whole life—you know, 'Maybe you'll just meet the right woman'—he tries to have a relationship and then she gets mad at him because he's not interested in her. It's the same situation. Honestly, I don't know who works at HR of Starfleet.

Andi: Oh, we have thought about that very much.

Anna: Yeah. Troi's their closest and she doesn't do a great job.

Sue: No. But in those types of storylines, there's a lot of similarity with what Seven went through in Voyager, specifically. Especially when the crew is pressuring her to go on dates, and she's in the holodeck practicing and going through the motions. And I think at the time a lot of folks read her as having a lot of ace characteristics. I think, looking back on it now, with what we've seen in Picard, we can take the reading that, 'Well, these relationships weren't working because they were heteronormative relationships,' perhaps.

Anna: Yeah. Or also maybe she just wasn't ready to start dating. Like, girl only found out what her name was recently. Maybe she's dealing with stuff, and that's the whole... I definitely, especially with Picard, read her as someone who is at least—obviously she's interested in women. That's canon. Whether or not it's exclusively women, who knows? But it's very predatory the way they treat Seven as well, the pressure.

Sue: Yeah. And there's an interesting take in a piece actually published on the Women at Warp blog by Claire Rosemary, who wrote, "An asexual Seven could have swerved into the territory of blaming the Borg for her lack of sexual attraction, framing it as something the Borg robbed from her, either directly in the narrative or interpreted as such by the viewers, furthering the notion of asexuality being abnormal, wrong, and something to be fixed."

Anna: Yeah, like a trauma.

Sue: And there are so many different ways to interpret these things, which makes this part of the queer community something that's pretty difficult to portray. Not sayin' it's not.

Anna: I think it's true. And then we wanted to talk about Odo as well. And this is a trope that I see a lot with characters who previously maybe were written as ace but then, as we've discussed, they suddenly now have to have relationships. A lot of them will lose their virginity almost to a random character before they can end up in a committed relationship. I don't know if there's this element of, like, they want them to be practiced. Odo is a character who had shown really no sexual interest ever. They'd established that he had some romantic interest in Kira, but not any sexual interest. And then they had that episode where there was the woman who didn't know she was a sleeper agent. And—I hate this term—but it's almost like the writers are like, 'Oh good, now he's popped his cherry.' And that seemed to be the whole point of that episode, for him to learn about what sex was. And then it was kind of like, 'Alright, now he's gonna get with Kira.' And they had him sleep with the other Changeling, they had him have sex with the other Changeling, and that was a distinct scene where the Changeling was like, 'Ah, so that's how solids have intimacy. It's a pale comparison to the Great Link.' And she's immediately disparaging sex. And he's like, 'It can be pleasurable.' It felt like it was almost like, 'See? Villains! Look at how weird this Founder is; she doesn't get sex.' And she's trying to convince Odo that we're gross for having sex. I kinda would've loved it if Odo was like, 'No, it's gross.'

Sue: Even when he and Kira are in their relationship, maybe it's just my reading, but I don't see the two of them as really being overtly sexual as much as they are sensual.

Anna: Yeah. I mean, we see him giving her massages.

Sue: And maybe that's because it's on nineties network television, but...

Anna: Does he also do the thing where he touches her and goes liquid on her? I know he does that on his first sexual partner, that one woman. Where he just is like, 'Well, the Great link is kinda like this.' And then the woman just goes, 'Ahhhhh.'

Sue: Oh, he light beams at her at one point, doesn't he?

Anna: Yeah, I know he does a shimmer over Kira.

Sue: But honestly, it's in discussions of Odo that I have seen people on the internet get the most mad. If you say, 'I relate to Odo as an asexual person,' people are like, 'But he had a relationship with Kira.' Like, yes and? That doesn't necessarily negate an asexual identity.

Anna: Yeah. I'm sorry—you think that it makes sense for all these other aliens to have been physically compatible, to have had sex with, like, Captain Kirk or Riker or all these other things, that makes more sense to you than maybe Kira was an understanding partner? Kira seems to me to be one of the ideal partners for an ace person. Cuz I think she does have sexual desires—I don't read her as being ace—but the whole thing with her being kind of attracted to O'Brien was because he was having these moments of talking to her intimately and they were having this intimate relationship in other ways—they were living together, they were joking, they were laughing, they were talking about planning a trip to Ireland together, he's massaging her—but it wasn't sexual for them. So she can obviously have those affections outside of sex, and she understands intimacy outside of sex. And we see a scene of Odo giving her a massage and she's like, 'This is the life.' And it's great. I'm not saying they never had sex—I could definitely see that they might have—but it's not something she's pressuring him to do.

Andi: And it also wouldn't negate him being an asexual character.

Sue: Correct.

Anna: Yeah, that's very key. I always explain to people, as an ace person, it's not that I would never have sex. It's more like, you do things with your partner all the time that maybe aren't necessarily your favorite thing, but are their favorite thing, but also you enjoy it because you enjoy doing it with them. Like people who take pottery classes cuz their spouse was like, 'Hey, let's do this,' and you're like, 'I have no interest in pottery, but I wanna do a date night with you,' you know?

Sue: The important thing is that there isn't the pressure, and that there isn't the coercion.

Anna: Exactly. And it can even be—for ace people to have sex with their partner—that can even be pleasurable. It's not like, 'Oh, this person can't orgasm,' or something like that.

Sue: Right. Just because you don't feel the attraction doesn't mean that you don't necessarily feel sexual pleasure.

Andi: One thing that I wanted to bring up that we see with both Spock and Data are episodes in which either their or other people's inhibitions are lowered through some sort of drug. In Spock's case, it was very much the literal pollen, sex pollen that has spawned a million fanfics. And then, you know, Data and Tasha Yar having their good times. But it's almost like, 'What would happen if we made Spock sexy and all drunk and crazy?'

Anna: 'And what if he was hornyyyy?'

Andi: Exactly. 'Wouldn't that be wild?' And they definitely wanted to explore that, and the only way they could feel like they could do that was to have a flower pollen in his face.

Anna: What I do like about that episode a lot, though, is I found her predatory and I think the audience actually felt that she was predatory as well. Cuz he's going off alone with her and I think as the audience you're like, 'Oh, what's gonna happen?' You're like, 'Uh oh, what is she luring him to?' And then boom!, he gets pollen. And I have not had a conversation with someone who was like, 'Oh, you know, if only he'd stayed pollened.' No, I feel like everyone was like, 'Yeah, that was villainous, and Kirk did the right thing by getting him cured, by pissing him off.' And that's the hero story. So in some ways I kinda like that it was like, 'Hey girl, the fact that you changed Spock fundamentally, that's messed up.'

Andi: Yes, a hundred percent.

Anna: Now, I make her less predatory than the other one because she was also under the influence of the pollen thing. Part of the pollen thing was to make everyone else pollinated.

Andi: I guess what I'm trying to think of—and I don't know if I know the answer to this question—is what was the goal of the writers when they were doing this episode? What were they saying? Because I don't know that I feel like it was a, 'Hey, informed consent is important' episode. I don't know that that was the theme that they were going for.

Sue: Yeah, I doubt it.

Andi: It's cool that that theme actually does kind of come through, but then my question remains, 'Okay, but why?' And so then what was the goal of...why make Spock horny? What do we get out of that?

Anna: It was almost more that they were like, ‘Oh, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* was good.’ And how do you show that Spock is not acting like himself? Have him smile.

Sue: Right, that’s the thing.

Anna: But going more into other episodes, obviously we have the pon farr episode. I do love “Amok Time,” because it is just kind of like, ‘Oh no, I’m horny.’ When I do get aroused, I’m like, ‘This isn’t right. Body, we don’t do this.’

Sue: ‘I don’t have time for this.’

Anna: When he has that beautiful scene where they can’t just have him say that he’s aroused, because it’s the sixties, but he has to explain to Kirk that he’s aroused. And he just has that whole, ‘Salmon swim a dangerous trek along your Earth’ and all the different things. And then Kirk says, ‘Oh, well, there’s no shame in that, Mr. Spock. It happens to the birds and the bees.’ He [Spock] goes, ‘Birds and bees are not Vulcan.’ I love it cuz I relate so hard to just how annoyed he is.

Andi: It’s like he’s feeling arousal and he’s angry about it.

Anna: It’s just like, ‘I cannot deal with how much of a frickin’ inconvenience this is.’

Andi: I’m the first to admit that I really like “Amok Time,” if only for the bells and the Plomeek soup. And the whole episode is pure camp and honestly one of my favorite, favorite episodes. But again, I ask, what are they exploring here? And it feels very much like, ‘What if Spock was horny?’ And I just find it very interesting that so many writers in the late sixties were like, ‘Okay, let’s write this very proper character that doesn’t feel very much emotions, but also let’s make him horny as hell for not just one episode, but multiple episodes.’ That was their guiding star, and I’m amused by that.

Sue: That’s how you make it clear that he is acting out of character.

Anna: Yeah. I unfortunately can’t cite this cuz I don’t remember exactly where, but I once read that the concept for “Amok Time” was to address the fact that, unexpectedly, women who were watching Star Trek really wanted to bang Spock. Female fans were into him, and they were like, ‘Okay...’

Andi: ‘Give the people what they want.’

Anna: Yeah. Number one question, you know, TMZ following with cameras, like, ‘Hey, does Spock bang??’ And they were like, ‘This is how we address it. But also do some Vulcan world-building.’ It’s the first time we see them on Vulcan; it’s the first time we really see Vulcan culture. It is also specifically interesting how much they link sex with violence in that episode.

Sue: Not just in that episode. Throughout TOS, that’s a very common link.

Anna: Yeah. But that one especially cuz it’s literally the trope ‘bang or die.’

Andi: Spock was so formative. *Andi laughs* His horny tropes have endured to this day.

Sue: Of these four characters, I think the only time any of the actors have acknowledged potential asexuality was René Auberjonois, who said at Star Trek Las Vegas in 2017 that he always considered Odo asexual and wasn’t quite sure what sexuality or sex really meant to Odo. But you know, not necessarily the others.

Anna: I’ll be honest though. I felt like René felt that, and I definitely felt that from his acting—that Odo was more intrigued by sexuality rather than into it exactly.

Sue: Yeah. One of my favorite Odo lines is, ‘I’ll never understand the human need for coupling.’ So good.

Anna: Yeah, it’s a great line. I felt like René felt that and understood the complications of being an alien and stuff, and I don’t really feel the writers did. Or at least they weren’t thinking about it that way—at least not all the writers, depends on the writer. It’s similar—I’m sure everyone knows about how Andy Robinson was like, ‘Garak, gay.’ But the writers not necessarily—well, specifically the producers were like, ‘Well, that’s not gonna work.’

Sue: But I wanna go on and talk about some of the other characters that people sometimes bring up when we talk about finding ace representation in Star Trek. And, as always, when we go down anything that we call a list, I’m gonna say this is not comprehensive. Just some ones that we have written down.

My favorite recent one that I have heard and now adopted myself is that Picard is demi.

Anna: I could see that. I could really see that. That fits a lot.

Sue: He has to form that strong bond, strong emotional bond with someone.

Andi: It would certainly add a lot more nuance to the “Perfect Mate” episode.

Sue: Mm-hmm.

Anna: I like that episode a lot actually. I don’t know if it’s controversial or not—I’ve never talked to anyone—but I do appreciate... to me Kamala’s kind of demi in a way, because she specifically mentions choosing to bond with Picard. She changes who she is around each person, as we’ve established. And then she says she chose to bond with Picard because she liked how she was the most when she was with Picard.

Andi: Yeah, I think there’s definitely some really interesting things about that episode, and I know we’ve talked about it before and we probably will eventually do a full-on episode about it. I think the part that always kind of sticks with everybody is her lack of agency overall. So it feels very much like she chooses Picard because she’s trying to make a choice before her choices are all taken away.

Anna: Yeah. But it just kind of strikes me that, if Picard’s demi and she chose to mate with Picard, I imagine she would also be demi, or similarly have a not-very-strong sex drive.

Sue: Interesting. What other characters come to mind for both of you?

Andi: I feel like at this point Billups from Lower Decks is almost canon—like an inch from canon. He has not said the words, ‘I am asexual’ yet, but pretty much in every other way they’ve made it clear that he is not driven by sexual attraction.

Anna: The only question is whether or not it’s celibacy because he’s so afraid of becoming king. But I would love for him to just—I mean he kind of, when they went in, they’re like, ‘Hey, you don’t have to become king. She’s not dead,’ so he hadn’t had sex, and he was almost like, ‘Thank god,’ you know?

Sue: What’s really funny is I saw some people saying, ‘Oh, they undid it in this season when he’s down on that planet and Ransom says, “Don’t go becoming a king down there.”’ His response is, ‘I don’t think I’ll have time.’ People are

saying, 'Well, he didn't reject it because he said, "I don't think I'll have time."' So they undid what they did for him.' And I was like, 'I don't see that at all.'

Andi: Seems like it's a joke.

Sue: Yeah, exactly. Especially as someone whose sexual identity for like 15 years was, 'I don't have time.'

Anna: Yeah. I think he's just kinda like, 'Yeah, well, don't worry. I'm excited about everything else that I could be doing.' He's literally saying how excited he is about things that aren't sex. Like, 'I won't have time.'

Sue: So I'm totally on board with Billups, for sure.

Anna: Yeah, I'm into the idea of Billups. I would like them to give us a confirmation.

Sue: Yeah.

Andi: I feel like he's the closest thing we have to a canon ace on Trek.

Anna: I agree.

Sue: That is not an android.

Anna: Yeah. It's nice to have just a human. I mean, that was the thing about just gay representation: they had allegory for the longest time. And then for Stamets and Culber to not only be gay and have it explicitly stated, but the fact that they're human so it's not even like, 'Well they're aliens.' It's like, 'No.' So it'd be nice to have Billups, a human, who's just straight up like, 'Hey, not into it.'

Sue: Sticking with Lower Decks though, a lot of people interpret Tendi as ace. And I'm on board for that as well.

Anna: I'm down.

Sue: Especially, I really enjoy the 'I'm not that kind of Orion' scenes. But there's one in particular when somebody brings up the pheromones, and her response is, 'We don't all have those,' or, 'I'm not even that kind of Orion!'

And that makes it more of a biological/anatomical hormone/pheromone situation, but I find it funny, I guess.

Anna: Yeah. My one thing is whether or not they're trying to have Tendi and Rutherford get together.

Sue: Yeah. There's definitely a scene where he admits to being into her, but she seems totally oblivious.

Anna: He says to Badgey, like, 'Sorry, I was just trying to impress her. She's so cute.'

Sue: I also like the Strange New Worlds version of T'Pol. I really like the reading of her as aro, as aromantic. Yeah.

Anna: I mean, even in TOS, she's just kind of like, 'Hey, why did you do it?' 'For logic.' She wasn't even like, 'Yeah, it's cuz I was in love with this guy.' She's just like, 'He was useful.' I kind of love T'Pol. From TOS, I love her. I'm just like, 'Damn, coldblooded.' She's brilliant. And Strange New Worlds T'Pol is very interesting. I will say I don't love that they were just like, the first time we see T'Pol and Spock together, they're immediately gonna bang. I was kinda like, 'Aw.' I almost liked the idea that Vulcans straight up did not do that unless it was pon farr.

Sue: Yeah. I think though that D. C. Fontana had established that they can and do mate outside of pon farr. *Andi & Anna laugh*

Anna: Yeah, I like the idea of T'Pol as aro. I think it works a lot. But I guess that depends, cuz we just met the next guy she ends up with, I forget his name.

Sue: Stonn.

Anna: Yes, Stonn. 'Oh hey, what's up, Stan [*sic*]?' We just met him in one of the latest episodes of Strange New Worlds. He literally just says, 'Hey, you've got a call.' And she's like, 'Thank you, Stonn.' So we might learn more about their relationship and there might be some more romance to it, but I love the idea of her being aro.

Sue: So I also put the question out on Twitter a couple days ago, and I got answers that included Guinan and Kes and Icheb and Ortigas, and a tweet from Anika, who first identified herself as asexual panromantic and then said, 'I would love Una (and/or La'an) to be the rep I see in my headcanons. Im also the

person who doesn't want Keyla Detmer to get more storylines so I can keep her, too. I prefer these three that I made up in my head to a Data or Odo or any Vulcan." And, interestingly, another response from brother nature on Twitter said, "I feel most comfortable with Vulcan characters as they don't really express sexuality, though they will sometimes express romance. I would really love to one day see a MLM [male] pairing of Vulcans and for Vulcan society to utterly be indifferent to it." So I found it really interesting, as we're talking about how everybody's experience is different, that we have one person saying, 'I'm sick of having Vulcans,' and someone else saying, 'I feel most comfortable with Vulcans.'

Anna: I would just love to see two male Vulcans just doing the hand-holding that Spock's parents did, that Amanda and Sarek did in The Original Series where they had their two fingers out and then they were touching each other's fingers and that's how they walked in. It also was kind of implied that that was how they kissed, where Sarek would hold up the two fingers and she would... I would love to see, even if it was just in the background—I know we deserve better than just background representation—but I would like that, to just see like, 'Oh, look at that couple holding hand in hand.' I'd also love it if Spock was like, 'Oh my god, they're being so shameless,' about a couple that just touches hands. I've always loved the idea of him seeing his parents do that and he's just like, 'Oh my god, Moom, Daaad.' I like knowing that Vulcans are not big on PDA, as someone who's just like, 'I don't need to know the level of people's sex drive in public,' kind of thing. I mean we saw that in Strange New Worlds, where they kiss and then immediately the waiter's like, 'Leave.' It's just kind of like him [saying,] 'Would you mind doing that elsewhere?'

Sue: The Vulcan equivalent of 'Get a room?'

Anna: Yeah, even though clearly a proposal just happened, cuz like, it's right there. They're just like, 'Go. Just get out of here.' You know, I personally like Vulcans potentially as some ace representation, but I do totally understand the, like, 'Hey, I'd rather have these human head canons' because, let's be real, as much as it's great to have the alien representation, it's nice to just be like, 'Look, this is a thing, and it's normal and people.'

Andi: Yeah. And I think the other thing about Vulcans is you run into the trope that the reason that they're asexual is because they're repressed. They're repressing their emotions. Cuz one thing I've always liked about Vulcans is the lore on them is not that they don't feel feelings, it's that they feel them so strongly that they feel like they have to repress them. So if you run into making

Vulcans genuinely as a species ace or aromantic, I think that would be my worry there.

Anna: Yeah. Another TOS episode where they were like, ‘Make Spock horny,’ is the one where they go back in time to the ice age and there’s a woman who’s not wearing enough clothing for the ice age, but, you know, it looks good on her. And immediately he’s just kind of like, ‘I have emotions. And one of those emotions is wanting to bang this lady.’ And then McCoy’s like, ‘What were Vulcans like back at this time period?’ Cuz it seems like he evolved. It’s interesting cuz it’s like, ‘Wait, did the logic philosophy where they repressed their emotions—did that get wired into their DNA or something?’ It’s wild.

Sue: Apparently it only came about in Enterprise.

Anna: Yeah. So it’s got wild repercussions. It’s like, ‘Wait a minute. Just because they went back in time, he’s changing?’ I mean they did establish in that episode that if you go back in time without being prepped the right way, your body’s gonna do weird things and you’ll die. But one of his first things is that he wants to bang, and then when they’re back into their modern time McCoy’s like, ‘Hey, I’m sorry. I know you were in love with that lady. And now she’s gone,’ and Spock’s like, ‘She’s been dead for hundreds of years. I don’t care.’ And again, such a great brutal coldblooded line. But immediately he’s back to being logical, is kind of the thing. Like you said, I would worry that it would be presented as, like, ‘Oh yeah, he’s ace because he doesn’t have emotions,’ vs. ‘Ace people have emotions, they’re just not interested in sex.’

Sue: And similarly, when we’ve got our android or our cyborg, when we’ve got Data and Seven, their whole character arc is being more human and figuring out what it is to live a fulfilled life. And the message that’s given is that having a sexual and romantic relationship—and feeling these things—is part of what’s required for that.

Andi: Yeah. I’m gonna go out on a limb and say that Star Trek’s ace representation isn’t the awesomest.

Sue: No.

So as we come to the end, what would good representation look like? What are you looking for?

Anna: I think what I would love would be even just a throwaway scene, where someone is kind of at a bar, or even an Orion, being like, ‘Hey, it’s this guy,’

and the person just being like, ‘Oh, sorry, I’m ace.’ I would love it to just be stated explicitly. I think it would be nice for the ace person to just say, ‘I’m ace,’ and have it just go. And then maybe if they explained what asexuality is, I would love it for them to be explaining it to an alien culture, cuz I’d like to believe that humanity understands it at this point, and it’s accepted. So I’d love if a character is like... or they’re on a planet and someone’s being like, ‘Oh, and we have all kinds of pleasures for you. Please take a partner and they’ll join you in the bedchamber,’ and the person’s like, ‘Hey, thank you very much. I’m not interested.’ And then it’s like, ‘Oh, well we have same-sex partners as well.’ And it’s like, ‘No, I’m not interested in either.’ And then the person’s just like, ‘I don’t understand’—someone with a thing on their nose to make clear that they’re an alien, and that just be all.

Sue: Yeah. I don’t necessarily need somebody to use the word that we use currently to say ‘I’m asexual,’ ‘I’m aromantic,’ or any of the other identities under the umbrella. But even just stating it in the explanation way: ‘Oh, sorry, I’m not interested in sex,’ or, ‘I don’t feel sexual attraction,’ or, ‘I’m not really into romance,’ just saying it plainly about themselves. And, like whenever we talk about representation, it would be great if ace-identifying people were some of those people writing these characters.

Anna: Hey, I studied screenwriting, just sayin’. If anyone wants to hire me, I’m here, I’m there, I’m ready.

Sue: I think it is also important—or would’ve been incredibly important for me as a kid—to have seen characters living meaningful, fulfilled lives without relationships in the picture.

Anna: Yeah. Having just someone who’s older, you know, they’re not married maybe, and there’s no mention of, ‘Oh, well when my husband died I just couldn’t remarry.’ Or like, ‘Yeah, I live independently and that’s cool.’

Sue: I mean, this is all with the understanding that no one character is ever going to represent all experiences in the aspec umbrella. Just like any other time we talk about representation, no one character is going to do it, and no one character should be expected to do it.

Anna: Absolutely. And you know, representation matters twofold. It’d be one thing to have a character who is ace, but it could also be another thing to have characters who are not ace just mention it. Especially when, again, they get to explain cultural things all the time to aliens. Just having Pike or someone be like, ‘Well, what about people who don’t feel sexual attraction,’ just as a

throwaway line or something like that? Just him acknowledging that that's a thing.

Sue: Imagine if there was an asexual bridge officer during "The Naked Time" or "The Naked Now." Like, problem solved. *Anna laughs*

Anna: Maybe that should be the reading of Riley from TOS. A lot of people were getting horny and doing crazy things and he—I get like Riley sometimes when I'm really drunk. I wanna just lock myself in a room and sing. *Sue laughs* That was great.

Andi: I think that for me any representation would be a step forward. Any explicit representation. So I don't really have anything on my wishlist, I guess, except for it to exist.

Sue: I think that's fair.

Anna: Yeah, it would just be nice.

Sue: I think we have used up all of our time for today.

Anna, if people want to follow you or find out more about what you do or Lambda Quadrant, where can they find you on the internet?

Anna: Yeah, so you can find Lambda Quadrant @LambdaQuadrant across all socials, Twitter, Twitch, YouTube, Facebook, the whole shebang. We've been streaming once a month lately, doing game nights, sometimes talks about different queer identities and things happening in the Trek universe and fandom. So please check us out. You can also follow me personally on Twitter @Anna_M_Kelly. I mostly post when I'm angry at something in the news, or about queer Trek things—there's really not a lot in between. And I'm thinking about streaming some video games soon on Twitch and that'll be the way to hear about it if you want to see me play video games badly and scream.

Sue: Awesome. And Andi?

Andi: Yeah. Easiest place to find me is Twitter, FirstTimeTrek.

Sue: And I'm Sue. You can find me on Twitter at spaltor. That's S-P-A-L-T-O-R.

To learn more about our show or to contact us, visit womenatwarp.com, email us at crew@womenatwarp.com, or find us on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram @WomenAtWarp. We will also have some links in the show notes of this episode to additional articles and YouTube videos and resources about asexuality in general, the ace spectrum in general, and asexuality in media and Star Trek.

So thanks so much for listening!