

**“GET OFF MY CHEEKS HUE!” LIBERAL HUMANIST HIERARCHIES,  
POSTHUMANISM, AND THE ARTIFICIAL LIFEFORMS OF *FINAL SPACE***

by

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The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, the dissertation entitled:

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## Abstract

For nearly fifty years, science fiction creators and posthumanist scholars have been imagining what our future environments alongside androids and cyborgs will look like. While some see technology as a threat to humanity (Francis Fukuyama), others envision new forms of subjectivity (N. Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway) that can be derived from the “decentering of the human in relation to either evolutionary, ecological, or technological coordinates” (Cary Wolfe xvi). Whether these narratives depict utopic or dystopic futures, as humans travel into space, it is not just the final frontier they are discovering, but also their posthumanity. The cartoon *Final Space* (2018), a space opera parody with a high appeal to young adult audiences, depicts a posthuman future where humans and artificial lifeforms co-exist within the same environments. However, it is not without distinct liberal humanist hierarchies where biological life is valued over that of artificial life. Using a posthumanist framework, I explore the liberal humanist hierarchies present between the human and robotic characters within *Final Space* and examine how the show’s use of parody interrogates this anthropocentric mindset through a study of three robotic characters. The S.A.M.E.S. defy their sameness when their brief moments of individuality upset liberal humanist hierarchies; yet, they all perish within the show’s first season. Using theories of artificial morality, KVN depicts an autonomous moral agent whose existence confounds various posthuman boundaries, particularly those surrounding life and death. Lastly, HUE’s change from the AI of the Galaxy One spaceship into a small robotic shell aligns with Hayles’ argument about the necessity to consider embodiment for the posthuman subject. Using Anne McCaffrey’s *The Ship Who Sang* as a comparative text, this

thesis examines the hierarchy of AIs and artificial bodies in *Final Space* through the lens of posthuman ethics and critical disability studies.

## Lay Summary

This thesis examines the treatment of robotic characters in the cartoon *Final Space* (2018). While these robots and AIs depict qualities of the posthuman subject, they are still confined within the liberal humanist hierarchies enforced by the human and other biological (alien) characters. First, I examine how the S.A.M.E.S. defy their sameness and have breakout moments of individuality. Second, I explore how KVN confounds boundaries between morality, life, and death, illustrating how the human characters are unable to see robots as ‘life’. Lastly, I investigate the changes in perceptions of HUE as he is downgraded from the shell of a spaceship to a small robotic body made of scrap metal. Here I use Anne McCaffrey’s *The Ship Who Sang* as a comparative text to examine the hierarchies of artificial bodies in *Final Space* through the lens of the posthuman ethic and critical disability studies.

## **Preface**

This Master of Arts thesis is an original, unpublished, independent work of the author, Elizabeth Leung.

This is the academic portion *only* of a hybrid academic/creative thesis. The creative portion is a middle grade novel titled *Donna Hua and the Solar Alliance*, written exclusively by Elizabeth Leung.

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## **Dedication**

To those of us who are posthuman and who interrogate the hierarchies that surround us.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 The Posthuman, Science Fiction, and Parody

Our speculative futures commonly feature posthuman aspects, humans sharing environments with aliens, androids, and artificial intelligences (AIs), or even becoming cyborg-like ourselves. Posthumanism becomes about understanding our position—and how this position is dynamically changing—within our burgeoning technology. Rather than maintaining a liberal humanist mindset (as many scholars such as Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, and Cary Wolfe reject), it is about better understanding the human and our interconnected web of relationships, not just technology, but between animals and our ever-changing environments. As Wolfe defines it: “[W]hen we talk about posthumanism, we are not just talking about a thematics of the decentering of the human in relation to either evolutionary, ecological, or technological coordinates (although that is where the conversation usually begins and, all too often, ends); rather, I will insist that we are also talking about *how* thinking confronts that thematics, what thought has to become in the face of those challenges” (xvi). These futures are best observed in works of science fiction. As Hayles claims, “culture circulates through science no less than science circulates through culture. The heart that keeps this circulatory system flowing is narrative—narratives about culture, narratives within culture, narratives about science, narratives within science” (21-22). As humans travel into space, it is not just the final frontier they are discovering, but also their posthumanity. These speculative futures range from utopic (*Star Trek: The Original Series*) to dystopic (*Alien*) and also from the serious to comedic. Parodies such as *Galaxy Quest* and *Space Balls* play within the genre of science fiction, poking fun at its stereotypes and conventions through a mixture of a comedic and critical lens. According to Hutcheon, “[t]he modern use of parody, though, does not seem to aim at ridicule or destruction.

Parody implies a distance between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new work, a distance usually signaled by irony. But the irony is more playful than ridiculing, more critical than destructive.” (202). *Final Space* (2018) follows this playful ridicule and invites a critical posthumanist reading.

This thesis argues that, while *Final Space* (2018) depicts a posthuman future where humans and artificial lifeforms co-exist within the same environments, it is not without distinct liberal humanist hierarchies where biological life is valued over artificial life. The posthumanist mindset—as Wolfe describes (xvi)—is achieved more by the artificial lifeforms than the biological ones, presenting an irony as these advanced lifeforms remain trapped by liberal humanist hierarchies. Using a posthumanist framework, I will explore these hierarchies present between the human and robotic characters within *Final Space* how the show’s use of parody interrogates the liberal humanist mindset. Particular attention will be given to the robotic characters that Gary, the human protagonist, interacts with most often. The S.A.M.E.S. defy their sameness and their brief moments of individuality, upsetting liberal humanist hierarchies. However, this resistance is fleeting and played for laughs; they remain valued primarily for their expendability. KVN’s existence confounds various posthuman boundaries, particularly those surrounding morality, life, and death. Using theories of artificial morality, I identify that KVN is an autonomous moral agent; one who is ethically praiseworthy (Podschwadek 326) as they can act upon their own set of morals, even if their actions are immoral. Yet, this definable moralistic intelligence does not seem to be enough to count as “life” to the liberal humanist standard, leading to a tragic event. Lastly, HUE’s change from the AI of the Galaxy One spaceship into a small robotic shell made of literal scrap metal aligns with Hayles’ argument about the necessity to consider embodiment for the posthuman subject. Using Anne McCaffrey’s *The Ship Who*

*Sang* as a comparative text, I examine how HUE's embodiment and depicted usefulness to his human companions aligns with disability studies scholarship.

## 1.2 Parody and Artificial Lifeforms in *Final Space*

Equal parts science fiction parody and space adventure, *Final Space* is an adult cartoon television series created by Olan Rogers with high appeal to teenage audiences. While just two seasons are currently completed, it was renewed for a third season and Rogers has stated that he has up to six seasons' worth of material (Mitchell). To briefly summarize: Infinity Guard prisoner Gary Goodspeed discovers a planet-destroying alien which he names Mooncake. They are hunted by the evil Lord Commander who wants to use Mooncake's power to tear into the fabric of reality and enter Final Space. Gary, together with a rag-tag team of friends and allies, are trying to save Earth—nay, the universe—from the horrific fate.

*Final Space* is one of the newer comedies about space travel. It is a goofy space opera which fits within John Gross' definition of parody as a work between the pastiche and the burlesque (xi). A "charm of deliberate artifice" (Gross xi), *Final Space* is a pastiche of popular culture references: the angry dance from *Footloose* ("Chapter Four" 16:23), the Matrix slow-motion fight sequences ("Chapter Six" 08:35-08:50), the Dragon Ball Z fusion dance ("The Toro Regatta" 05:53-05:57). On the side of the burlesque, *Final Space* blows situations wildly out of proportion from dismantling clichés around dystopian resistance narratives ("Arachnitects" 00:20-00:55) to literal pissing contests ("The Happy Place" 00:56-02:28). Working within the realm of parody, *Final Space* opens intriguing avenues of analysis within the genre of science fiction, space narratives, and—within the scope of this paper—the posthuman.

While the show has quickly become a cult favourite, there is minimal scholarship published on it thus far. The sole article I found gave only a passing mention to *Final Space* in

the context of the epistolary love letter subplot (Bishop). The use of parody highlights intriguing hierarchies within biological and artificial characters in the show. The different types of android and AI characters are as plentiful as the number of biological species (both human and alien). Gary's ship, the *Galaxy One*, is helmed by an AI named HUE. On the same ship, Gary has various robotic companions including KVN—his deep space insanity avoidance companion—and a small army of S.A.M.E.S. who are essentially worker robots. Throughout his travels, he also encounters humanoid androids (Rug Yorkvain from “The Toro Regatta”) and another ship's AI named AVA. However, while there are numerous robots, they are not treated equally to the biological characters. There are several hierarchies present within the universe of *Final Space*, although they are not without dispute. As Jaques notes about science fiction:

These stories offer potentially radical destabilizations of hierarchies of being which can be read in the light of posthumanism's interest in ontological mutability, while at the same time often containing that very subversion in ways that reinforce hegemonic codes of human dominion (5).

While there are hierarchies present, they are constantly under interrogation by the characters within the show and by the viewer who laughs at the parody *Final Space* presents about these very hierarchies between the human and nonhuman.

### **1.3 Posthumanism and Liberal Humanism**

Various scholars claim we are in the process of becoming posthuman (Graham, Haraway, Hayles, Jaques, Wolfe). This does not necessarily mean we are abandoning our humanity (or signaling a dystopic future as Francis Fukuyama argues) but moving away from humanist ways of thinking. Humanism (sometimes specified as liberal humanism) claims anthropocentrism and

superiority which dominated philosophy for centuries. Badmington succinctly summarizes the problems in this way of thinking:

[H]umanism is a discourse which claims that the figure of ‘Man’ (sic) naturally stands at the centre of things; is entirely distinct from animals, machines, and other nonhuman entities; is absolutely known and knowable to ‘himself’; is the origin of meaning and history; and shares with all other human beings a universal essence. Its absolutist assumptions, moreover, mean that anthropocentric discourse relies upon a set of binary oppositions, such as human/inhuman, self/other, natural/cultural, inside/outside, subject/object, us/them, here/there, active/passive, and wild/tame. (1345, notation in the original)

The ‘Man’ Badmington refers to is exactly that: a human cis-gendered male, one who is also white and able-bodied. Humanism’s dichotomous system has justified various corruptive systems throughout our history including colonialism, industrialism (and the systematic destruction of our environment), and capitalism. Frameworks have arisen which critique liberal humanism, including feminism, postcolonialism, Marxism, ecocriticism, critical race theory, critical disability studies and, of course, posthumanism, which borrows and grows from all the previously mentioned critical frameworks.

As Badmington defines humanism as a discourse of firm binaries, posthumanism is “an argument for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries” (Haraway 292, emphasis original). In other words, if humanism is the rigid establishment of boundaries between the human/other (at the risk of oversimplify the binaries Badmington notes above), posthumanism is the idea that humans are not in fact central to all meaning, history, or ways of being. Further, posthumanism argues that we should explore these other ways of being through the shifting, blurring, or even

dismantling of these boundaries if we are to grow as humans. Cary Wolfe (who builds on many of Hayle's arguments) notes this rather succinctly:

[W]hen we talk about posthumanism, we are not just talking about a thematics of the decentering of the human in relation to either evolutionary, ecological, or technological coordinates (although that is where the conversation usually begins and, all too often, ends); rather, I will insist that we are also talking about *how* thinking confronts that thematics, what thought has to become in the face of those challenges. (Wolfe xvi, emphasis original)

It is not enough for humans to simply shift boundaries—for us to get cybernetic implants, or a robotic arm as Gary does (“Chapter Two” 19:48)—we must actively consider what these shifting boundaries mean and how this changes humanity's position within our ecosystems.

The scope of posthumanism is vast and while the posthuman does explore the human/animal and human/alien boundaries, this paper will focus on the shifting boundary between humans and technology (human/robotic) in *Final Space*. As our technology has become more sophisticated—our computers developing into robotics, androids, and AI—they become refractions of our own humanity (Graham 28). As Graham states, “to be human is already to be in a web of relationships, where our humanity can only be articulated—iterated—in and throughout our environment, our tools, our artefacts, and the networks of human and non-human life around us” (27). Our tools and our technology are a part of our network and it is the posthuman who can navigate within these complex ecosystems wherein they are surrounded by refractions of their own humanity.

As *Final Space* is set primarily within artificial environments of spaceships, Gary interacts with machines and aliens more than with other humans. As a prisoner aboard the



Galaxy One for five years, Gary's primary interactions are with artificial lifeforms: the S.A.M.E.S., KVN, and HUE. However, *Final Space* does not portray a utopic posthuman ecosystem (as this would make little comedy for a parody). Liberal humanist hierarchies are still present and filter through Gary's (and the viewer's) perceptions of the universe. However, these hierarchies are subtly interrogated through the show's use of comedy, dismantling liberal humanist assumptions with laughter. Using a posthumanist framework, I will explore these hierarchies present between the human and robotic characters within *Final Space* and how the show's use of parody interrogates the liberal humanist mindset.

## **Chapter 2: We Are Not All the S.A.M.E.S.: Exploring Liberal Humanist Hierarchies Onboard the Galaxy One**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The S.A.M.E.S.—an acronym for Synthetic Artificial Masses Erecting Safeness—are abundant throughout the Galaxy One. Comparable to the battle droids from *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*, the S.A.M.E.S. are mass produced worker robots that act as maintenance and security. As Jaques describes the stereotypical robot “[a]s a machine that is normally created for service, its origins aligned with a capitalist agenda in which labor forces can be enhanced and streamlined by a reliance upon technological innovation” (20), the S.A.M.E.S. exist so other humans don’t have to be stuck on the Galaxy One babysitting Gary throughout his sentence. While Gary goes to great lengths to befriend them as he would a biological person (human or alien), they seem unable to interact in a way that satisfies Gary: they malfunction as he talks to them (“Chapter One” 02:38) and try to set him on fire when he tries to play cards with them (02:58). Gary goes to great lengths to bond with the S.A.M.E.S. but with limited success. While the S.A.M.E.S. may not wish to bond with Gary (as reluctant card player, Hank, would suggest), Gary’s treatment of these robots is far from equal to his biological companions. In many ways, Gary perpetuates liberal humanist hierarchies rather than dismantling them. The moments of resistance within these hierarchies often come from the S.A.M.E.S. but are comedic and fleeting.

### **2.2 S.A.M.E.S.-ness and Difference**

As their name suggests, the S.A.M.E.S. are identical: blue heads, hands, and feet; grey arms and legs; red crotch; and a white torso with a yellow circle in the middle. Yet, some have a very prominent difference: a name scribbled on their forehead. Gary names several (but not all)

of the S.A.M.E.S., labeling their foreheads: Hank, Carl, Rob, Orson, Cam—and the more childish—Pennies, Boobs, and Noodles. Tok Thompson notes that this behaviour towards robots is not uncommon; case studies have shown that people can become particularly attached to their Roombas (robotic vacuum cleaners), insisting on a particular Roomba back after a repair rather than a replacement (52). The S.A.M.E.S. become part of Gary’s social realm and are included in his posthuman ecosystem by individualizing them. As Thompson explains following his Roomba example, “[b]y introducing artificial humans into that social realm, we are therefore including them within the group of individuals with whom we might emotionally identify” (52). While giving the S.A.M.E.S. names may seem like an invitation of these robots into the posthuman, Jaques interrogates how projecting this humanness does not necessarily make them equal:

Projections of “humanness” onto them [robots] can thus be read as ways to empower or curtail the inhuman, and seemingly anachronistic acts of gendering and naturalizing the robot offer a commentary on the complexities of boundary pollutions made possible by thinking about the thinking machine. (182)

Gary is certainly guilty of gendering as all the S.A.M.E.S. are given traditionally male name (apart from Boobs and Noodles which are demeaning and comedic). And while the S.A.M.E.S. are given names, they rarely listen to them. The names are as means for Gary to differentiate machines that are ostensibly the same: they are for Gary’s benefit, not to allow the S.A.M.E.S. equal status to Gary within the ecosystem.

What does upset the liberal humanist hierarchies are the S.A.M.E.S.’ breakthrough moments of individuality which they—rather than Gary—instigate. Rather than Gary acting upon them and molding them into his anthropocentric environment, the S.A.M.E.S. act in ways unusual to their programming in several instances. An unnamed S.A.M.E. jumps into battle

yelling, “I’ve never felt so alive” (“Chapter One” 12:32); another fears for his life and wants to “get me the hell out of here” (“Chapter Eight” 07:25); and, memorably, Carl becomes aroused after accidentally walking in on a precarious scene with Gary and Nightfall. Carl even comments on his unusual behaviour, “I feel strangely aroused. Didn’t know that was possible” (“Chapter Seven” 15:07). As season one progresses, the S.A.M.E.S. become more dissimilar and ultimately alter their appearances—retrofitting themselves with “heinous super weapons”—covering Gary’s names (if they had them) with unique helmets (“Chapter Nine” 04:20-4:34). As noted above, many of these moments of individuality are made by unnamed S.A.M.E.S. and I argue that Gary does not graft his “humanness” on the S.A.M.E.S., but rather that the S.A.M.E.S. expand their posthuman identities to include humanness based off Gary’s example. As Graham notes:

[The posthuman condition] alerts us to the element of human agency, rather than technological determinism, entailing in the conception, design and implementation of such technologies: the political choices inherent in the use of all technologies, to the values beneath the choices that get made, and who gets included and who get excluded by ‘the posthuman condition’. (19)

Building on Graham’s theories on the posthuman condition, the S.A.M.E.S. ostensibly gain human agency, breaking through the technological determinism of their own sameness in their programming. This argument breaks even further into the posthuman’s decentralizing of the human within their environment. Here, Gary’s actions are not the cause of this change, but his presence does shape the changes within his environment. Looking at these instances, the S.A.M.E.S. are more posthuman than Gary.

### **2.3 Beth and Other Beth**

Then again, Gary's understanding of his ecosystem is not strong. While he is aware of the S.A.M.E.S., he also names other electronics onboard the Galaxy One: Beth and Other Beth, the refrigerators. As he labelled the S.A.M.E.S., Gary has arranged the names Beth and Other Beth in magnets and taped on drawings of eyes and a mouth. While Avocato recognizes the fridge as simply a kitchen appliance (and not even a Smart Fridge at that), Gary continues to talk like he thinks it is a robot ("Chapter One" 2:44-2:53). It's unclear whether this mis-categorization of the fridge as a robot rather than an appliance is due to Gary's isolation *or* because he classifies the S.A.M.E.S. as just an electronic appliance. Either way, the fridges often receive even more individual attention than the S.A.M.E.S. as Gary sexualizes Beth and Other Beth and admits to having some "seriously dark conversations with that thing" ("Chapter Two" 20:44). The dramatic irony here allows the audience to question this distinction of boundaries between our own electronics, what technologies we value more than others and why we place higher significance on robotics. Gary appears unable to see a difference. Yet, he does make a distinction about his relationships, placing Avocato's friendship higher than that of the S.A.M.E.S., KVN, and Other Beth: "Your [Avocato's] friendship yo. I've been stuck here for so long with just freakin' robots. Look. Robot, robot, robot, robot, robot, robot! Freakin' robot" ("Chapter Two" 20:35-20:49). Gary downgrades the S.A.M.E.S. and other robots to appliances rather than companions.

### **2.4 Expendability**

Despite some projections of humanness, the S.A.M.E.S. are viewed by Gary and the other human characters as relatively disposable. As Thompson notes:

If androids are viewed as simply owned machinery, then there should be little concern about beating, damaging, or destroying completely an android. [...] If viewed as a kind of person, the destruction of an android in a sadistic manner, or even its public humiliation, will likely be looked on within the rubric of human social roles and expectations (55).

Tragically, the S.A.M.E.S. fall on the side of owned machinery and are constantly humiliated and made expendable. When Gary loses his arm, Mooncake rips an arm off Rob and gives it to Gary without any objection from the crew; Rob's cries are ignored ("Chapter Two" 19:49). The S.A.M.E. who announces that they have never felt so alive while jumping into battle dies immediately ("Chapter One" 12:34). Carl's mangled shell floats in space and his death is referred to as a "Classic Carl" ("Chapter Three" 00:50). The S.A.M.E.S. are so expendable that they literally all die in the final battle of season one and all but disappear in season two, except for Carl's head, which becomes a plant pot ("The Toro Regatta" 13:50). While they may fear death ("Chapter Ten" 08:53), their pleas for help are played for laughs.

By Thompson's argument, the S.A.M.E.S. are still viewed by Gary (the human) as something owned rather than an equal. In the same way Gary owns and uses Beth and Other Beth as refrigerators, he uses the S.A.M.E.S. as tools with little regard to their burgeoning personalities. Yet, the S.A.M.E.S. have the potential to break through this anthropocentric thinking and past their own programmed sameness, only to die protecting the human and other biological characters. In another show, this would be a tragedy of unfulfilled potential. Alas, *Final Space* is a comedy and the S.A.M.E.S. are short lived. A classic Carl.

## Chapter 3: “KVN’s a jagoff Gary, you know that”: Artificial Morality, Life, and Death in *Final Space*

### 3.1 Introduction

If Gary could exclude one robot from his posthuman environment, it would be KVN. KVN, Gary’s deep space insanity avoidance companion, is a parody of the helper robot who only seems to drive Gary further into insanity—and even tries to kill him on multiple occasions. As a deep space insanity avoidance companion, KVN is programmed to be a social robot, by which I mean his engineered purpose is to exist alongside humans. While he is a moral (although, counterintuitively so) and an autonomous being, his categorization as a lifeform is questioned throughout *Final Space*. Because he portrays human tendencies—but is not human or alive—KVN treads the border that posthuman theorists examine: “posthumanism must circulate around the same issues of likeness and difference [...]; posthumanism, as a discourse, both exposes and ironically establishes boundaries between the human and the non-human, to facilitate a dialogue as to how those very borders might become more fluid” (Jaques 2-3). While characters may colloquially call KVN living, he does not possess the ‘essence of life’ biologicals appear to have within the universe of *Final Space*. If, as Westling states, “posthumanism helps to define the human place within the ecosystem by interrogating or erasing the boundary that has been assumed to set our species apart from the rest of the living community” (30), KVN becomes a rich site to examine how the erasure of these boundaries affects the biological character onboard the Galaxy One and Crimson Light. In particular, I will examine KVN’s morality and debated categorization as a lifeform.

### 3.2 Artificial Morality

In order to understand the importance of KVN's morality—immoral as it may be—we must discuss how artificial morality intersects with posthumanism. Related to posthumanism, artificial morality is a field of social science philosophy which ponders machine agency and ethics. Posthumanism is greatly concerned with the ethics of the cyborg, android, and animal as the existence of ethics is a pillar upon which the liberal human judges itself and others. While some argue that, “[d]espite the well-meaning efforts of human rights activists, there is nothing natural or self-evident about human rights because there is nothing natural or self-evident about humanity” (Gomel 340), human civilizations still appear to collectively adhere to an established morality by which we live. Frodo Podschwadek (and other artificial morality scholars) uses a loose definition of morality over other established philosophies: “I don't want to argue that we should prefer any of the overarching theoretical frameworks of moral philosophy, such as utilitarianism, deontological ethics, or virtue ethics, but that it suffices to take our practice of social morality as the standard measure” ( 326). Podschwadek continues to explain the fundamentals of this “folk morality” which he and other like scholars use when discussing artificial morality:

Despite this ‘theoretical impurity,’ its main function remains to assign accountability to individuals by addressing them as moral agents with moral responsibilities...a practical approach focuses on what we usually understand to be morally right or wrong actions, and what particular kind of acts we take to be morally praiseworthy in our contemporary moral practice. (329)

When discussing artificial intelligence in relation to artificial morality, it is important to clarify certain terms. Philosophies of artificial morality position themselves in the present-day



examination of ethics surrounding current technologies such as the Roomba or self-driving cars as opposed to posthumanism, which primarily examines works of science fiction. Science fiction commonly portrays artificial intelligence whereas today's self-learning systems are better described as artificial assistants. Podschwadek creates a clear line between technologies that are sentient and those which are merely cognitively complex:

I will assume that this capacity [for autonomous reasoning] rests on two subordinate capacities: the capacity to hold beliefs and the capacity to reflect about and revise these beliefs. AMAs [autonomous moral agents, AI] are not supposed to be mere carriers of information like self-driving cars and other contemporary semi-autonomous machines. Instead, they would have a sufficiently complex cognitive structure which enables them to form a wide range of beliefs about their environment and about their own (physical) state as well. (327)

As stated above, contemporary AIs do not have this capacity for autonomous thought and—while they are commonly referred to as artificial intelligences—may be better referred to as *artificial assistants* or *self-learning systems* to avoid the loaded, all-encompassing term of AI. While artificial assistants may seem like the lack-luster relative of the powerful AI, many scholars identify this lack of autonomy as a strength: “a system that was able to question its moral decisions or even to choose immoral courses of action would put its user severely at risk” (Misselhorn 4). While an artificial assistant's inability to make a moral choice means that it will never obtain a praiseworthy moral standing (Podschwadek 329), it is also incapable of making immoral decisions as it is only coded to follow a moral path.

### 3.3 KVN's Morality

In essence, in order to be autonomous, a robot must have the capability to make decisions whether they are moral or not. As Podschwadek states, this agency makes them ethically praiseworthy: "AMAs that are programmatically determined to *always* act in accordance with given set of moral rules would at the same time exclude any potential for them to be labelled morally praiseworthy in a meaningful sense" (326). In order to make a morally praiseworthy decision, an agent must have the option to make an immoral decision as well. KVN is a great example of this paradigm. KVN constantly makes immoral choices: he disobeys Gary's orders, touching his belongings aboard the Galaxy One ("Chapter Five" 05:13-06:03), and even tries to kill Gary ("Chapter Six" 6:40). In "The First Times They Met," Clarence mentions that the KVN's have a "derangement virus" (09:20) which makes KVN's choices questionable. Like the S.A.M.E.S., KVN is not unique and is a mass-manufactured android. The KVN's appear to have an affinity towards one another claiming they would do "anything for a KVN" ("Chapter Nine" 07:15), and have the ability to integrate with larger mechanical suits called "mechs" ("Chapter Nine" 06:42-07:46), and can merge into a Mega-KVN ("The First Times They Met" 13:52-14:10). It is unclear whether all the KVN units are corrupted by this derangement virus or just the small army Clarence has been keeping as an investment. As Braga and Logan identify:

[V]alues will have to be programmed into a computer, and hence the morality of the AGI [artificial general intelligence] device will be determined by the values that are programmed into it, and hence the morality of the AGI device will be that of its programmers. This gives rise to a conundrum. Whose values will be inputted, and who will make this decision, a critical issue in a democratic society.

(169)

Even if this input value is undesirable, it still comes from an outside force (the programmer) rather than the program itself. A virus would suggest a preset morality upon which the KVN's are acting upon rather than the KVN's making the choice to murder everyone aboard the *Crimson Light*.

The real KVN (Gary's personal deep space insanity avoidance companion), does appear to act outside of this murderous virus. Occasionally, the real KVN makes some morally good, selfless choices: he gives Fox his chip to save his life ("The Set Up" 14:14-15:38); sacrifices himself to protect the *Galaxy One*, celebrating that he is the "most expendable" ("Chapter Ten" 04:26); and retrieves four dimensional keys from Todd H. Watson ("The Descent into Darkness" 16:04-16:23). What may be the most telling moment is when the real KVN turns against a fellow KVN from Clarence's army, ripping out a large portion of his circuitry and declares himself the "real KVN" ("The First Times They Met" 19:05-19:29). While this is a murderous act, KVN also figuratively kills the part of himself affected by the derangement virus.

While he may lack moral ethics by the folk morality human standard (see the psychological torture and repeated attempts to kill Gary), KVN's decision to make these terrible choices makes him—ironically—an ethical and morally praiseworthy being. While KVN's agency aligns him within the posthuman condition, he struggles to fit within the posthuman ecosystem as his ethics clash with Gary's. While KVN's purpose is to keep Gary sane as he lives out his five-year sentence isolated on the *Galaxy One* ("Chapter One" 07:37-7:41), KVN's antics drive Gary crazy. Ethically, it is useful to examine KVN through the lens of refraction, "[f]or every assertion of the definitely 'human' there is a refracted 'other'—the almost-human, the monster, the alien—who shows the workings of the principles by which normative and exemplary humanity is defined" (Graham 20). KVN reflects the unethical back at us.

### 3.4 “KVN isn’t life”

While the real KVN appears to destroy his virus-infected clone, the Mega-KVN floating in space does not actually die: “Nothing can kill KVN. We don’t need oxygen. We were built to survive in space” (“The First Times They Met” 21:30-21:40). Even when KVN appears to die at the end of season one—much to Gary’s delight (“Chapter Ten” 10:10-10:19)—he comes back within the first act of the season two premier. KVN’s are “borderline indestructible” (9:32) and appear unable to die.

By authority of the Titan Bolo, “KVN isn’t life” and he is unable to be sacrificed as the sixth key to unlock Final Space (“The Sixth Key” 12:51). This statement itself is a conundrum. Other robots appear to die—the S.A.M.E.S. do, one even remarks how death is “not bad. It’s just weird” (“Chapter Ten” 08:55-09:00). The S.A.M.E.S. appear able to die—as per their expendable nature. HUE, another robot, views KVN as alive, telling KVN to “go back you waste of life” (“Chapter Four” 16:23) while the all-powerful Bolo does not. In response to Bolo’s statement, KVN replies that he “will never die” (“The Sixth Key” 12:52) and there appears to be some truth in that, as seen by his indestructible nature.

The difference in opinions about what is alive and what has an apparent ‘life’ (as Bolo describes) illustrates a difference between posthuman and liberal humanist views. Bolo appears to uphold humanist assumptions that only biological beings can have ‘life’ whereas the robotic characters are able to claim their own conceptions of life and death. Haraway claims, “cyborgs are ether, quintessence” (294), as an argument in favour of their fluidity between boundaries. Yet, such fluidity can only be appreciated by others with a posthumanist (to use Wolfe’s term) mindset. Without that, KVN is unable to be given as ‘life’ to free Bolo and Nightfall must sacrifice herself. This becomes a tragedy of the posthuman condition. While potential exists, the

ecosystem surrounding the posthuman entity is unable to accept the quintessence—or even the possibility—of robotic life. Unlike the S.A.M.E.S.’ sacrifice, this moment is not played for laughs and various biological characters weep at Nightfall’s death.

KVN cannot die therefore he cannot be alive. The posthuman explores the boundaries between life and death: how human life could become limitless if one’s consciousness is uploaded into a computer or cyborg body. Yet, *Final Space* limits life to the biological, making the robotic lives not as valuable. While the existence of infinite life with the agency of his own morality makes KVN posthuman, this ethically praiseworthy being it is not valued by his companions. Then again, KVN does fail to peacefully interact within his ecosystem: everyone hates him and wants him dead. KVN’s existence is far from harmonious with his environment; as HUE says, “KVN’s a jag off Gary, you know that” (“Chapter Seven” 13:23).

## Chapter 4: HUE: A Space Odyssey: AI Embodiment and the Posthuman

### Subject

#### 4.1 Introduction

As the *Galaxy One* pays homage to the *Discovery One* spacecraft from Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), HUE's voice, tone, and inflection is clearly patterned on HAL 9000, his disembodied voice filling the hallways and rooms, omnipresent. However, while HAL turns against his human passengers, HUE protects Gary and shows a strong loyalty towards him. Even in the midst of crisis, "[W]e wait for Gary" ("Chapter Four" 19:47). Throughout the two seasons of *Final Space*, HUE undergoes the most dynamic transformations of all the robotic characters, changing from a powerful ship AI to a clumsy robot. HUE's change of shell is an argument as to why embodiment is so essential in posthuman discourse. As Hayles argues:

Embodiment has been systematically downplayed or erased in the cybernetic construction of the posthuman in ways that have not occurred in other critiques of the liberal humanist subject, especially in feminist and postcolonial theories.

Indeed, one could argue that the erasure of embodiment is a feature common to *both* the liberal humanist subject and the cybernetic posthuman. (Hayles 4)

Hayles continues, critiquing how the body and self of the liberal humanist's subject are separate entities, erasing bodily markers of difference such as sex, race, ethnicity, and ability (4-5).

Critiquing how previous posthuman scholarship likewise erased the body by reducing the posthuman to simply thought and information, she argues that the posthuman must celebrate how it is embedded in the material world through their embodiment (5). Indeed, HUE illustrates

Hayles' point, his changing embodiment or shell continuously affecting his interactions within the universe of *Final Space*.

## 4.2 The Galaxy One

As the Galaxy One, HUE has warden-like authority over Gary. Gary himself is positioned within an environment (The Galaxy One) which controls him and, as he forms a comradery with the S.A.M.E.S. and a burning hatred for KVN, he creates connections within his new posthuman ecosystem. HUE begins season one as a prison warden; he has the power to add time to Gary's sentence ("Chapter Four" 04:02) and even injects Gary with a (fake) explosive device to insure that he will return when he leaves the ship ("Chapter Two" 5:20-35). While the explosive is a joke, Gary's belief illustrates the power that the AI has over the human in this situation, upsetting the liberal humanist view of human superiority. However, HUE quickly comes to admire Gary's courage ("Chapter One" 20:10) and a mutual respect blossoms between the human and AI. They go so far as to becoming friends ("Chapter Seven" 13:20). Interestingly, this friendship goes against HUE's very purpose. As a prison ship in the Infinity Guard fleet, he pays little heed to the fact that most of Gary's actions are in mutiny against his creators. This is not an unusual nature for the posthuman, "[t]he main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential" (Haraway 293). HUE abandons his original purpose—keeping Gary a prisoner—and sides with him instead. Yes, Gary's sentence does finish, but not until after they have already blown up an Infinity Guard base and attacked the Lord Commander—twice.

However, HUE's agency is often questionable. While he does not stop Gary from mutinying against—in HUE's words—"that dick loaf [the Lord Commander]" ("Chapter Ten"

12:54), it is unclear how much control HUE has to stop him. In the season one finale, Gary sets a course which destroys the Galaxy One. The destruction is very visceral with shots of all the different rooms on the ship blowing up to the slow, operatic soundtrack (“Chapter Ten” 13:25-13:50). While HUE consents to sacrificing his ship for the chance to take out the Lord Commander, it is unclear whether HUE has any override capacity over Gary’s manual input. Generally, HUE seems rather indifferent about aspects of his ship. He is commonly put into firefights and his hull breached by weapon’s fire or invading ships. HUE even suggests ejecting his lightfold engine and does so before Gary orders him to (“Chapter Ten” 02:32-02:52). Here, HUE’s indifference towards the Galaxy One does illustrate a more disembodied philosophy, what Hayles would describe a pitfall for the posthuman subject (4). HUE’s AI software is transferable and, when Gary doesn’t want to lose HUE after the Galaxy One is destroyed, HUE uploads himself into his helmet (“Chapter Ten” 14:28-14:35). As Gomel notes, “contemporary AIs are basically software and, like any software, they can be downloaded, copied, and moved from one receptacle to another” (349), and HUE’s transfer into Gary’s helmet takes less than a second of screen time. While HUE’s posthuman subjectivity is not concerned about his embodied form throughout season one, he becomes hyperaware of his embodiment the following season.

### **4.3 HUE’s Shell**

In the opening to season two, HUE moves out of Gary’s helmet and into a “shell”—a more humanoid robot with a distinguishable head, body and limbs—for the first time (“The Toro Regatta” 02:48). It is unclear if the robotic body was remade or completely built by HUE, although I would argue that it is his creation. Jaques notes that the ability to rebuild oneself with interchangeable parts is a quality of the posthuman in such a landscape (201), and the imagery of



HUE emerging from a glowing chamber is like that of a posthuman womb. What is clear is that that his new shell is a downgrade from the Galaxy One. It is literally created from the garbage salvaged after the battle for Earth—a fact which HUE acknowledges in “The Happy Place” (17:41)—and HUE’s shell not without its faults. His shell is clumsy: his limbs fail around, he falls over regularly, and only has a top speed of a mile in three hours (“The Descent into Darkness” 14:54). His shell is by no means as powerful as the Galaxy One which could fire weapons; his shell only has a “little baton” (“The Set Up” 08:51). While his tactic of wielding a baton is surprisingly successful in the Battle Royal (08:18-09:10), the entire situation is more a comedy sketch on the self-destructive natures of robot battles than HUEs actual skill in battle.

HUE in his new shell is not as valued by his friends as he once was. While HUE happily announces that he has a new body when they reunite (“The Toro Regatta” 18:51), his friends do not acknowledge him. His body equates to his social standing within the hierarchy of his friends—without his spaceship usefulness, he becomes relatively useless in nearly all the missions throughout season two. As Hayles questions “how could anyone think that consciousness in an entirely different medium would remain unchanged, as if it had no connection with embodiment?” (1), HUE illustrates a direct correlation. Hayles continues that, “[t]o the extent that the posthuman constructs embodiment as the instantiation of thought/information, it continues the liberal [humanist] tradition rather than disrupts it” (5). In choosing his shell, HUE demotes himself within the social hierarchy. The lack of functionality of HUE’s body is played for laughs: as he is saved by KVN, HUE admits that “this puts the HUE in humiliation” (“The Happy Place” 18:16). HUE questions “what good is a body if none will respect it?” (“The Lost Spy” 1:38) as none of his friends seem to respect him. If the S.A.M.E.S. were still alive, he would probably be fighting over New Beth with Carl and the others.

HUE's fall from grace is extenuated by the introduction of a new ship AI named AVA, who runs the Crimson Light (the Galaxy One's replacement in season two). Gender-coded female—and rather promiscuous from her conversations with Clarence—she belittles HUE from their initial interactions:

AVA: I'm AVA, the ship's A.I.

HUE: AVA, I like that name. I'm HUE. I am also an A.I.

AVA: Aw! Sure you are. Any more questions?

HUE: I didn't even have that question.

AVA: Right. (“The Toro Regatta” 10:36-10:50)

Their relationship quickly develops into a rivalry where AVA seems to triumph at every turn: “All I had left was the engines and now you took that from me, AVA” (HUE, “The Notorious Mrs. Goodspeed” 01:43-01:49). Despite originally being a ship AI, HUE knows nothing about the Crimson Light. He cannot fix the ship when it goes offline in “The First Times They Met” and ultimately admits defeat to himself—only to take it back and save face when the power is restored (18:10-18:37). While HUE's “misery makes [her] laugh” (“The Remembered” 03:58), AVA falls into the same liberal humanist trap as the other characters, demoting HUE within the social hierarchy because of his embodiment in a supposedly lesser shell.

#### **4.4 Posthumanism and Disability Studies**

HUE's transformation from the powerful AI of the Galaxy One to the belittled robot invites a discussion on disability and how it can manifest in the posthuman subject. As Wolfe claims:

disability becomes an important form of *ableness* in opening up transspecies modes of identification and thus helps us to disclose how we need to rethink the

underlying models of subjectivity that ground the dominant discourses in disability studies, drawn as they are from the liberal democratic framework and its casting of subjectivity in terms of agency, autonomy, and the like (xxix-xxx).

Disability is a mode through which we can dismantle the liberal humanist hierarchies as it “signifies the demise of humanism; precisely because disability demands non-normative and anti-establishment way of living life” (Goodley et al. 348). My argument is that HUE’s robotic shell is comparable to a disability. He no longer acts within the norm of an AI or controls a ship as AVA does and is viewed as lesser because of that. His voice is often unheard by others, much like how disabled voices have been historically silenced.

I wish to compare HUE to another famous example of a disabled ship AI in literature: Helva from *The Ship Who Sang* by Anne McCaffrey (1969). Helva—a disabled girl whose brain is turned into an AI and whose organs are given a spaceship shell—has been a point of discussion since the beginnings of posthumanism as popularized in Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1985). There, Helva is presented as an example of how posthumanist theory could break boundaries for people with disabilities: “in imagination and in other practice, machines can be prosthetic devices, intimate components, friendly selves. We don’t need organic holism to give impermeable wholeness” (314). However, this argument has been critiqued by a number of scholars. Drawing upon the social model of disability, Cheyne argues that, “Helva trades one subhuman status (disabled person, ‘thing’) for another (shell-person), with ‘shell’ referring not only to the metal casing but also indicating her status as the mere ‘shell’ of a person” (144). HUE’s situation is almost flipped from Helva’s. While HUE’s origins are unknown, there is no mention of him previously inhabiting a human form and therefore we can assume he is a

manmade program. HUE regresses—which, while his new shell approximates a humanoid form, is a disabled state for HUE—whereas Helva upgrades (as Haraway would argue).

One element which applies to both HUE and Helva is the way in which they are viewed within their social hierarchy. Stemp notes how, “Helva’s situation posits a social environment where people with disabilities can only be of value if they are also of use” (np). The idea of usefulness is often criticized in critical disability studies as people with disabilities are often considered less useful because they cannot contribute to society as capitalism demands. HUE says that he “sometimes [has] feelings of uselessness” (“The Descent into Darkness” 1:23) which illustrates how this negative view towards disabilities permeates in the social environments of *Final Space*. *Final Space* here performs much in the same way *The Ship Who Sang* does: “‘Ship’ is a tale that shores up the supremacy of “the normal” in all its forms, a narrative that flirts with the radical potentials of posthuman embodiment but ultimately safely contains them” (Cheyne 151). To some extent, I agree that *Final Space* does emphasize “the normal” in that gender, sexuality, and heteronormativity within the robotic characters remain rather conservative. Given that there is no need for biological reproduction within artificial lifeforms, elements of sex and heteronormativity are just skeuomorphs. However, in terms of embodiment, *Final Space* does some heavier flirting with concepts of embodiment, subtly pushing a more pro-disability agenda in comparison to *The Ship Who Sang*—which is not terribly unsurprising given the fifty years which separate the two works of science fiction.

Despite all the harassment and ill treatment from his friends, HUE chooses to stay in his robotic shell rather than seek out a new one. As quoted in Goodley et al., Gregor Wolbring describes how this is an accomplishment in disability advocacy:

Just as we should have the choice to get rid of a disability, we should also have the right to choose not to be “fixed,” and to choose to live with bodies that aren’t “normal.” The right not to be coerced by society to adopt a “normal” body is also a central demand of transhumanism. (351)

Before HUE transfers his AI into an android shell, he muses on how he would like a corporeal body. When Gary asks HUE if he could do anything, HUE says, “I would transfer my AI into a corporeal being and go see Paris” (“Chapter Two” 0:57). HUE is cognizant of the freedoms a body permits, the freedom to explore an environment rather than be the environment that others inhabit. With his robotic body, he gains agency in how he can interact with the world: he claims a room (even if it is just a repurposed janitorial closet) and is able to accompany his friends on their off-ship adventures.

Even AVA turns at the end of season two and starts to understand why HUE enjoys his robotic shell. In the episode “The Descent into Darkness,” AVA becomes jealous of HUE’s shell wishing she “could do all the things you do” (05:26) and goes so far as to ask to share his shell to experience it for herself. This act comes across as rather sexual in nature as HUE’s siren on his head begins to flash and he embarrassingly tells her to “Ignore that. It will stop abruptly, at which point I’ll take a short nap” (05:31). AVA shows both genuine interest and sexual desire. This episode also highlights the transient nature of AIs. As HUE transferred from the Galaxy One to Gary’s helmet and into his robotic shell, AVA can download herself in similar ways. Importantly, this shows that HUE is also capable into finding and inhabiting another shell if he desires. This is not an action he takes at any point throughout the season and can therefore it can be deduced that he does not desire a different shell. He is happy with his corporeal body, no matter its flaws, for it allows him to interact with his environment in a way that satisfies him.

When AVA shares HUE's shell and gives him a system update which gives his body jets, the jets are more akin to prosthesis: they are a means for HUE to act within his environment without having to sacrifice his entire body.

HUE's arc throughout season two sees him coming to terms with the freedoms and limits of his robotic shell. While there may appear to be more drawbacks as the crew of the Crimson Light does not find his body useful, HUE learns to adapt within his environment and use his body to the best of its capabilities without having to sacrifice it. Most importantly, he understands that he is still valuable—unlike KVN “[who] really [is] useless” (“The Descent into Darkness” 01:24).

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

### 5.1 Posthumanism and Humans and Technology of the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century

What Cheyne observes about the posthuman universe of *The Ship Who Sang* seems equally applicable to the universe of *Final Space*, “this ‘exciting new posthuman society’ is intimately bound up with existing ideological prejudice and social inequality: only those who have already been identified as subhuman become posthuman” (149). While the S.A.M.E.S., KVN, and HUE are all posthuman subjects—the S.A.M.E.S.’ breakthroughs of difference, KVN’s status as an ethically praiseworthy machine who blurs of the life and death boundary, and HUE’s transient embodiment—these posthumanist subjects remain trapped within an anthropocentric universe wherein they are unable to be fully accepted by their human and other biological companions: all the S.A.M.E.S. perish, KVN is not considered to have ‘life’, and HUE struggles for acceptance of his chosen shell. While the posthuman subject may be present, they will be unable to thrive until the anthropocentric thinking is interrogated and liberal humanist hierarchies collapsed.

This is especially prevalent for posthumanist subjects with disabilities, both in literature and in our own world. As Goodley et al. states, “disabled people have always been cyborgs; more than that, disability has always demanded to be recognized not as lack but possibility; an enhanced humanity, a posthumanity far beyond the limited figuration of the cyborg” (352). As people with disabilities are so closely intertwined with assistive technologies, conversations surrounding the rights and ethics of posthuman subjects becomes increasing prevalent in the present day. While HUE is more of an AI than a cyborg, he depicts many struggles people with disabilities face living in a world structured by liberal humanist hierarchies and viewers of *Final Space* can empathize with his situation.

As a cult television show, *Final Space* has the potential to influence a large viewership: “[n]ot only does SF [science fiction] vividly dramatize the implications and consequences of new technologies and new discoveries, it is also a powerful influence upon culture, creating a feedback loop of images and ideas” (Gomel 340). Shows like *Final Space*, with the allure of comedy and parody, have the potential to allow viewers to reassess their own conceptions of liberal humanist hierarchies present within our society as we question why we laugh at the S.A.M.E.S.’ personalities or HUE’s dorky shell. As Graham argues: “we need to adopt a *reflexive* understanding of technologies: that they emerge from, and reflect, social, political and economic priorities in terms of design and deployment (and are not neutral) but that in turn, technoscience shapes our very engagement with the world, and potentially our very ontology” (26-7). As we laugh at the S.A.M.E.S.’ demise, KVN’s moral immorality, and HUE’s depressive state, we reassess our own attitudes and uses of our own assistive technologies present and future.



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