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Can we queer nostalgia? Fabulating more just futures through the speculative arts.

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Abstract

In this article, the authors activate the concept of *homo-nostalgia* to indicate the twin pull of nostalgia towards both homogeneity and (homo)normativity. Our present socio-political epoch is marked by cis-hetero and white supremacist nostalgias. These *normative nostalgias* proliferate trans-antagonist and queer-phobic violence, and close down discussions of racial justice and injustice. In this paper, the authors draw on queer theory and their speculative artistic practice to try to imagine and activate nostalgia otherwise. Rather than invoke myths about the past to cement an oppressive future (which is how they suggest normative nostalgia works), the authors analyse a song they wrote about an unconventional *Doctor Who* character,

Alpha Centauri, to explore how it might queer the temporal contour of nostalgia's affect. Adopting José Muñoz's (2009) theoretical exploration of queerness as a "forward-dawning futurity," the authors consider how the process of composing their song and the song itself might lure a queerer, more hopeful future-past for the character of Alpha Centauri, and (hopefully) themselves. Their findings suggest that it might be impossible to queer nostalgia, while still keeping a glimmer of hope that things could have been otherwise.

Key Words: queer; nostalgia; gender; speculative fiction; Doctor Who; qualitative methods; no-hope; music, affect

Introduction

Our present socio-political epoch is marked by cis-hetero and white supremacist *nostalgias*. These normative nostalgias imagine the future as a return to a past that was oppressive for many, reinscribing that oppression through trans-antagonist and queer-phobic violence, while foreclosing conversations about racial justice and injustice. In this article, we draw on Muñoz's (2009) conceptualisation of queerness as a "forward-dawning futurity" (23) to explore how the temporality of nostalgia's *affect* might be queered. In this conceptual article, our thinking was precipitated by a song we wrote about Alpha Centauri, a character we adored as children from the long-running science-fiction TV show Doctor Who. Composed as part of our research-creation practice, wherein making an artwork becomes a method for exploring concepts, our song was inspired by Alpha Centauri's cameo in a 2017 episode of *Doctor Who.* Although set in the

past, this episode aired 43 years after their previous on-screen appearance in a story set in the distant future. As lifelong fans, our relationship with Doctor Who, with Alpha Centauri, and with Alpha's convoluted on-screen timeline is saturated with nostalgia. Consequently, Alpha provides a rich resource through which to contemplate and *complicate* the temporality of nostalgia's affect.

In this paper, we consider how both the process of composing our song, and the song itself, resist the pull of normative nostalgia and instead imagine a queerer future-past for *Doctor Who*, the character of Alpha Centauri, and ourselves. We hoped that our song might *queer the affect of nostalgia*, and re-appropriate it from framing a yearning for a (heteronormative) past that never was, or (homonormative) present that never could be, to instead invoke a fairer, more hopeful, and forward-dawning futurity (that nonetheless must remain firmly out of reach). Ultimately, we are uncertain as to how successful our attempt was.

Methods and methodology.

This article pivots around our creation of a song about the *Doctor Who* character Alpha Centauri as an enactment of *research-creation*. Research-creation is a way of doing and theorising research by making art (Manning and Massumi, 2014; Springgay, 2024; Truman, 2021). In research-creation, rather than investigating an existing cultural artefact, we create the thing we want to investigate. As a methodology, research-creation acknowledges that making art often also develops concepts. Consequently, the theoretical arguments that we come to in this paper could not have been arrived at without the creation of our song: the creative and theoretical processes are entangled. We both have an extreme nostalgic

fondness for Alpha Centauri, stemming from the character's appearance on *Doctor Who* during our childhoods. We found ourselves drawn to examine this nostalgia when the character unexpectedly reappeared in a 2017 episode of *Doctor Who* ("The Empress of Mars"). As scholars, *Doctor Who* aficionados, and artists who research and create cultural productions and speculative fiction, we are curious about how nostalgia circulates in contemporary culture, research, and practice. In this article, we describe our thinking at the intersection of three vectors:

1. our shared reading and discussion of queer of color theorist José Esteban Muñoz's (2009) *Cruising Utopia;*
2. an ever-worsening political milieu for queer, trans, racialised, and disabled people in England, Australia, and North America (the geographies we live and research in) in schools, para-pedagogic spaces (e.g., churches, homes, toilets), and across (social) media;
3. and the concomitant and unexpected reappearance of Alpha Centauri, a *Doctor Who* character from our childhoods.

This article draws these three vectors together to explore and complicate nostalgia and its future-oriented affect.

We begin by briefly introducing our conceptualisation of normative nostalgia, its affect, and how our engagement with Muñoz's concept of "forward-dawning futurity" attempted to queer it. Then, we introduce the TV show *Doctor Who* as well as the character of Alpha Centauri, and explain why we're writing, composing, and thinking about them as a method for queering nostalgia. In the latter part of this article, we analyse a song that we wrote about Alpha Centauri. We draw on music theory, affect theory, queer theory, and speculative thought to think through how our

song queers, and fails to queer, the affect of nostalgia. Although we find the twin pull of homo-nostalgia towards (homo)normativity and sameness impossible to resist, we retain a hope that things could have been otherwise.

Background

In *Cruising Utopia,* José Muñoz (2009) conceptualises queerness not just as a pattern of identity, or description of something strange or unfamiliar. Instead, he imagines queerness as a "temporal arrangement" (16): specifically, one in which "the past is a field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity" (16). To us, this resembles Elizabeth Freeman's (2010) discussion of the queer potential of "mining the present for undetonated energy from past revolutions" (xvi). Importantly, Muñoz isn't envisaging a specific future, but rather a "forward-dawning futurity" (p. 23) that is always-already unimaginable and unobtainable. A truly queer future will never arrive, Muñoz argues, "but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality" (p. 1). In this section, we want to bring Muñoz's understanding of queerness as an unobtainable, forward-dawning futurity - inflected in the present with elements from the past - into conversation with the affect of nostalgia.

Like Muñoz's forward-dawning futurity, the affect of nostalgia is possessed of a specific temporal contour involving pasts and futures activated in the present. Our argument here is that, while this affect is caught up in and reproduces oppressive power relations, queering its temporal contour might also offer possibilities for the dismantling of those same power relations. In making this argument, we draw from

bodies of scholarship sometimes collected as affect theory. In our usage in this paper, we draw on affect theorists who attend to how emotion, feeling, and sensation are material forces that converge on bodyminds, and change their capacities to act and be acted upon (e.g., Ahmed, 2004). We are concerned with how feelings, sensations, and emotions *work* in the reproduction of social norms and power relations. We conceptualise the affect of normative nostalgia as shaped by a specific and oppressive temporal contour that moves in two directions at once: projected both backwards onto the past and forwards into the future. This poly-temporality partially resembles Muñoz's conceptualisation of "forward-dawning futurities," which he argues are drawn from "ephemeral traces" and "flickering illuminations from other times and places" (p. 28), which are then activated in the present. In other words, both the affect of nostalgia and Muñoz's forward-dawning futurity take from the past to propose a future. Yet, as we'll now demonstrate, normative nostalgias differ from forward-dawning futurities in terms of how pre-determined those pasts and futures are.

Etymologically, nostalgia relates to the Greek mythological concepts of *nostos* (or the return of an epic hero to the homeland) and *algos* (pain) (Wildschut et al., 2008). Although initially thought of as a disease (as coined in 1688 by physician Johannes Hofer), societal understandings of nostalgia have softened over the years towards something warmer, fuzzier, or a recollection of the 'good old days.' Normative nostalgia consists of warm memories of a mythological past. In nostalgia studies, this past is generally understood as never having really existed: as Elspeth Probyn (1995) writes "nostalgia [is] not a guarantee of memory, but [...] an errant logic that always goes astray" (p. 448). Whilst we agree, we suggest that this illusion

of a mythological past is then catapulted into the future with the promise it might unfold as a reinscription of that imagined past. In the contexts from which we research (Australia, North America, and England), authority figures such as governments and (prime) ministers, religious groups, curriculum authorities, and populist social and mainstream media pundits mobilise, and even 'mine' (Truman, 2026) normative nostalgia as a rhetorical device. They do so to maintain status quo power relations into the future, propelled by "mourning for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values" (Boym 2001, 8). Examples of these normative nostalgias include rose-tinted "memories" of a golden age, pre-European Union Britain or of Making America Great Again, as well as romanticised notions of the nuclear family, national borders, or an easy sex binary: these imaginaries are then catapulted into the future by the fear of their loss in the present. In this way, normative nostalgias animate contemporary political discourse, marking what Tavia Nyong'o (2019) terms "malignant imperialist nostalgia and white supremacist fantasy" whereby "lies about the past serve the interests of power" (44). Consequently, nostalgia seems worthy of our suspicion and intervention.

Muñoz's notion of queerness *as* a "forward-dawning futurity" is integral to our efforts to queer the effect of nostalgia and nostalgia's *affect*. The problem with normative nostalgias, we contend, is that the pasts that they pine for and attempt to recreate in the future are highly specific and always-already foreclosed. Surprisingly, this is also true of much attention to nostalgia in the field of queer studies, which typically emphasises how queers *experience* nostalgia, not how nostalgia itself might be *queered* (Probyn 1995; Padva 2014; Vicinus 2004). Indeed, Jack Halberstam (2003) critiques the whole notion of nostalgia as antithetical to queerness because of

how it is tethered to universalist understandings of community. Quests for community, Halberstam writes, “are always nostalgic attempts to return to some fantasized moment of union and unity” (para. 4), and so to inclusion in the kinds of normativity from which queers must by definition be excluded. In contrast, taking Muñoz’s invitation to treat queerness as a forward-dawning futurity drawn from “ephemeral traces” of the past (p. 28) opens up the possibility of pasts and futures that unfold in unpredictable ways. This stands in contrast to the fixed and universalist understandings of past and future that Halberstam identifies as integral to nostalgia. Applying this notion to our artistic practice mobilises Freeman’s (2010) suggestion that some queer forms of art might “collect and remobilize archaic futuristic debris as signs that things have been and could be otherwise” (xvi). In this way, and despite the trappings of normative nostalgias, we feel that there is potential in mining past affects to imagine more capacious futures: in other words, to *queer nostalgia itself*. It’s at this point of tension between the potential for “forward-dawning” nostalgias to imagine more expansive, queerer futures, and the frequent mobilisations of *normative* nostalgia as a potent soporific, that we turn to *Doctor Who*.

Nostalgia and Doctor Who.

Popular media often cashes in on nostalgia. This is evident, for instance, in repeated use of old Christmas songs every December, but also the mining of those songs by new artists for their familiar chord changes and instrumental choices (although this is arguably true of many new songs, there is insufficient space to unpack this here: see Adorno, 1941). However, whether due to our increasingly unstable present, dour future, or increased critical examination of our past, nostalgia seems to be

particularly in vogue. There is, for instance, an escalating trend to revive old shows, such as “Frasier” (1993-2004 and 2023-2024), or make sequels to 1980s blockbusters, such as “Top Gun: Maverick” (2022), and “Ghostbusters: Afterlife” (2021).

Cult media and science fiction seem especially vulnerable to being mined for their nostalgia, possibly because such franchises oftem feature mechanisms that justify the return of elements from the past (such as time travel, parallel universes, or magic) as well as that fans of such franchises tend to be deeply passionate, and so more likely to *notice* such returns. Recent examples include the final season of “Star Trek: Picard” (2023), which saw the entire cast of “Star Trek: The Next Generation” (1987-1994) return for one final adventure, or the re-appearances of puppet Yoda in “Star Wars: The Last Jedi” (2017) and Lynda Carter in “Wonder Woman: 1984” (2020). Increasingly such cameos seem to be part of the marketing strategy for new content. For instance, the trailers for “Star Wars; Force Awakens” (2015) and “The Flash” (2023) were marketed explicitly on the returns of Harrison Ford, Carrie Fisher, and Michael Keaton to roles they last played decades earlier. Indeed, even throwaway cameos are often highlighted in marketing material: for instance, Patrick Stewart’s 15-minutes turn as Professor X in “Doctor Strange: Multiverse of Madness” (2022) and Charlie Cox’s single scene appearance as Daredevil in “Echo” (2024) were teased heavily in promotional material. In short, contemporary media, and particularly cult media, increasingly mine past characters and storylines as affective anchors for nostalgic appeal. *Doctor Who* is a cult show with ardent fans, a very long history, and several in-universe explanations for why characters and actors might

return from the past: consequently, it is well-placed as a site for both the analysis and reimagining of nostalgia.

Doctor Who has aired since 1963. Consequently, the programme has formed some part of the media environment of every generation in England since the Baby Boomers, making it a potent site of intergenerational nostalgia. Moreover, the structure and themes of the show offer several in-universe justifications for revelling in nostalgia. *Doctor Who's* main character, The Doctor, is a Time Lord: an alien species with the technology to travel through time and space as well as to survive serious injury by changing their appearance. These plot mechanisms allow the role to be recast every few years, and enable former Doctors (such as Patrick Troughton and David Tennant), alongside past characters and monsters, to re-appear frequently on the show. It is, therefore, not too surprising to see Alpha Centauri reappear on *Doctor Who* decades after their last appearance. However, on another level, the same elements of the show that enable nostalgia for *Doctor Who* itself also make it ripe for mining more *normative nostalgias*: specifically, for romanticised versions of Britain and British history, as well as sexual and gendered norms.

Firstly, *Doctor Who* regularly features visual refrains of London and other British landscapes in various historical moments, such as the Tudor and Georgian eras, and the Sixties, as well as cameos from historical British figures, including several queens of England, William Shakespeare, and Agatha Christie. Perhaps unavoidably, then, *Doctor Who* often touches on the violent and ongoing legacy of British colonialism. However, far from trying to complicate or distance itself from that legacy, *Doctor Who* often leans into it. For instance, the Doctor has travelled to the World Wars on 6 occasions in 15 seasons of the revised show. They've met Winston

Churchill in at least three episodes and have a longstanding relationship with fictional military institution UNIT (Unified intelligence Taskforce). Moreover, the Doctor's Time Machine (TARDIS) is permanently stuck in the shape of a Police Box. While ostensibly a form of camouflage to make the Doctor blend in, their Police Box-shaped TARDIS has come to be a symbol of hope in the mythology of the show, and is often seen materialising to much fanfare when the Doctor swoops in at the last minute to save the day: this elides the police's reproduction of ordinary notions of institutions and the state, their ongoing anti-blackness, and their inaction on trans-antagonist and queerphobic hate crimes. Moreover, the show's lead actor has been played almost exclusively by white men, and most have spoken using Received Pronunciation (the Queen's English). In summary, then, *Doctor Who* revels in nostalgia for simplistic renderings of the police and the state, unproblematized versions of the British empire, and whiteness. These elements of nostalgic representation establish a conservative framework that extends into its portrayal of gender and sexuality.

While *Doctor Who* has a disproportionately large LGBTQIA+ following (Stack 2020), and frequently exudes campness, it has traditionally been more conservative in its exploration of human and non-human sexuality. For much of its 63-year history, the Doctor has presented as asexual: although this is in itself a queering of normative sexuality, it was intended in deference to puritanical television censors of the 1970s and 1980s. The classic *Doctor Who* rarely contested normative notions of sexuality and gender (with the possible exception of hinting at a same-sex attraction between Ace and the Cheetah-person, Karra in "Survival" (1989)). The revival era of *Doctor Who* has included more gender and sexual diversity: for instance, a dashing

pansexual Time Agent from the future (“Empty Child,” 2005); the “thin-fat gay married Anglican marines” (“A Good Man Goes to War,” 2011); Bill Potts’ lesbian relationship with a puddle (“The Pilot,” 2017); and the Doctor’s own onscreen same-sex lip locks with conventionally attractive space-James-Deans (“Parting of the Ways,” 2005; “Rogue,” 2024). We are not interested in arguing against representing queer people in *Doctor Who*, per se, as we both grew up craving such representation (and still do). However, while the revival era of *Doctor Who* features *progressive* representations of trans people and gay people, the series rarely *transgresses* sexuality and gender norms. In this way, while *Doctor Who* is surely quirky and left-leaning, we’re not sure if it ever has been, or even could be, queer.

Moreover, scholars have argued that the increased societal acceptance amongst white liberals of homosexuality, as well compensatory affordance of heteronormative societal structures, has birthed *homo*normativity, by which gay men and lesbians contribute to the maintenance of those same systems of power that continue to oppress them: e.g., marriage, babies, love, and capitalism, as well as white supremacy and the patriarchy (Duggan 2002; Haritaworn 2010). Jasbir Puar (2017) offers the concept of homonationalism to theorise how public acceptance of homosexuality is useful for reinforcing other patterns of oppression: for instance, trans-antagonism (whereby discussion of the complexity of biological sex is narrated as eroding ‘same-sex’ attraction), racism (claiming that ‘those’ racialised communities are more homophobic than ‘our’ white one), and nationalism (claiming that ‘those’ countries are more homophobic than ‘ours’). This is evident, for instance, in a recent spate of gay-themed European movies featuring migrants from Syria, plagued by internalised homophobia, who express how much more free and happy

they are in Europe (e.g., “A Moment in the Reeds” (2017) and “Label Me” (2019)). Likewise, and despite *Doctor Who’s* ongoing experimentations with racial, sexual, and disability justice in its plots, including through its fabulation of life-forms that come up against easy gender binaries, *Doctor Who* still tends to reinscribe a white Euro-western humanism on an inter-galactic scale: what we term the show’s *cosmo-normativity*.

If it’s not already apparent, we have an extreme but complex nostalgic fondness for *Doctor Who*. Indeed, as we’ve already argued, *Doctor Who’s* long history lends itself to this kind of nostalgia: the return of familiar characters (like Alpha Centauri) reminds us of particular eras of our lives. At the same time, and while undoubtedly plagued by cosmo-normative nostalgias, we feel that the glimpses of more elaborate queernesses throughout the show’s 63-year history are often missed. Examples include a female and male version of the same character from different points in their own history dancing with one another (“The Doctor Falls,” 2017); an inter-species lesbian relationship between a lizard from the dawn of time and a Victorian martial artist (“A Good Man Goes to War,” 2011); a species of interstellar, time-travelling, body-swapping cosplayers (“Rogue,” 2024); the fact that the Doctor’s granddaughter was born before their children (“An Unearthly Child,” 1963); and, of course, our dearly beloved Alpha Centauri.

Like much science fiction, and as we’ve illustrated above, *Doctor Who’s* potential to posit truly queer futures, to push norms, is often squandered by its repeated falling back into palatable, progressive(-ish) homonormative representationalism: its cosmo-normativity. In the next section, we introduce the song we wrote about the character of Alpha Centauri. As we explain, we wrote this

song as an intervention into Alpha Centauri's representation on the show, but also as an intervention into *Doctor Who's* multiple (homo)normative nostalgias on an interstellar, cross-temporal scale.

Alpha Centauri.

The unexpected cameo of Alpha Centauri on *Doctor Who* after a forty-three-year absence 'worked' because, as life-long fans, we have a huge, nostalgia-infused admiration for *Doctor Who:* we recognised the character, but also remembered our own responses to them as children. Moreover, like those cult franchises discussed in the previous section, *Doctor Who* lends itself to conjuring nostalgia. In this section, we draw from music theory, affect theory, queer theory, and speculative thought to think through how our song "Alpha Centauri" queers nostalgia.

Alpha Centauri is an alien character. They are a bald, peridot green, cyclopic hexapod. They are shrill and cowardly, with a bulbous, veiny, and poorly attached head, which wobbles about if moved too vigorously and occasionally becomes partially detached (for instance, during a scene in which poor Alpha is struck by the villainous Eckersley).[1] In short, Alpha is an absurd creation.

Alpha Centauri first appeared on *Doctor Who* in the stories "The Curse of Peladon" (1972) and "The Monster of Peladon" (1974), which are set in the far distant future. In these stories, Alpha Centauri is an ambassador from the tertiary star system Alpha Centauri. Their species are known as Alpha Centaurans. In their earliest appearances, Alpha Centauri encourages the planet Peladon to join an intergalactic confederacy. Peladon's membership in the confederacy is highly prized

[1] To see Alpha in action, view this clip: www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Glmef09ZSw

because of its vast stores of the valuable element, trisilicate. However, it is also presented as a theocratic monarchy, caught between tradition and pro-market forces: this makes the speculative future of the show appear as an allegory for England's then burgeoning relationship with the European Economic Community, as well as its colonial past. Alpha Centauri then returned to the show for a nostalgia-infused cameo over forty years later in the 2017 episode, "The Empress of Mars." This later story is set during Earth's Victorian-era, several millennia before Alpha Centauri's first appearances (which aired in the 1970s). This historical, Victorian-era Alpha Centauri appears on a flickering screen, welcoming the matriarchal Ice Warriors to the universe. For convenience, we illustrate this timeline in Figure 1 below.

Story name	"The Curse of Peladon"	"The Empress of Mars"
Airdate	1972	2017
Story date	The distant future	1881

Figure 1. The queer temporal contours of Alpha Centauri.

Seeing this character from our childhood in a surprise cameo at the end of an episode sent us into a flurry of nostalgia-infused, trans-continental text messages.

Alpha never specifies their gender themselves in the context of *Doctor Who*. In earlier stories, the Doctor refers to Alpha Centauri as a "hermaphrodite hexapod." Despite this, the pronouns "he" and "him" are used to refer to Alpha throughout the story. During production, Ysanne Churchman, who performs the voice of Alpha Centauri, was instructed to make Alpha Centauri sound like a "gay civil servant"

(Howe and Walker, 2003, p. 222). The ‘joke’ was that Alpha Centauri’s shrill voice came from a male-gendered body (the Doctor is, of course, oblivious to the joke). By contrast, the production team in 2017 uses the pronoun ‘she’. Meanwhile, across fan-authored material, such as Wiki pages and fan-fiction, Alpha Centauri is not subject to the same binary understandings of gender as other characters on *Doctor Who:* TARDIS Data Core (the Doctor Who wiki) uses the pronoun ‘they,’ while Wikipedia referred to Alpha Centauri as ‘it’ before their page’s deletion in 2023. Likewise, in the expanded Doctor Who universe, notably a series of audio plays featuring characters and villains from the 1963-1989 run of the show, Alpha Centauri is gendered using the pronoun ‘they’. Notably, Alpha Centauri themselves never clarifies their pronouns on *Doctor Who:* instead, different pronouns are thrust upon them over time.

While neither of us were alive when Alpha Centauri first appeared on *Doctor Who*, we grew up watching reruns and VHS releases of the series in the 1980s and 1990s. For instance, Sarah (this article’s second author) remembers watching Doctor Who after “The Polka Dot Door” children’s show, which featured cute anthropomorphized stuffed toys: as the show came to an end, she remembers a rising tension through her body in anticipation of the shrill electronic screech and tunnel of light that accompanied the opening credits of *Doctor Who* (you can experience this for yourself here: https://fb.watch/m397GkbNi3/). As children, we both loved Alpha Centauri’s peculiar form, high-pitched voice, fear of violence, brazen selfishness, moments of bravery, and frequently articulated disdain for the “barbarism” of humanoid species and their “remote and unattractive” home worlds (“Cure of Peladon,” 1972).

Consequently, Alpha Centauri's unexpected reappearance in the 2017 *Doctor Who* episode "Empress of Mars" found us captivated by nostalgia for Alpha Centauri's shrill demeanour and preposterous appearance. However, upon subsequently rewatching the 1972/1974 *future* version of Alpha Centauri (i.e., in a story set 5,000 years *after* their most recently televised episodes), we experienced a significant affective puncture and visceral horror upon re-discovering as adults the bleak future that Alpha Centauri is resigned to, including an intergalactic culture of violent resource extraction, an archaic monarchy, overt misogyny, and strictly-enforced gender binaries. Moreover, we were shocked to recognize the misogyny, white supremacy, xenophobia, and cosmo-phallic and extractional mining logics that inform the Federation's approach to diplomacy with what Alpha Centauri terms "barbarous and uncivilized" and "remote and unattractive" worlds as prescient of our present political milieu. Alpha Centauri is cast into the strictures of a gender binary by their humanoid colleagues and friends and, in turn, adopts those same strictures in their descriptions of other characters. Alpha Centauri's future looks very bleak indeed! As Nyong'o (2019) writes: "Under such oppressive circumstances, what's a queer fabulist to do?" (p. 44). Rather than consign our favourite Doctor Who character to such a future, we wrote a song to salvage the Alpha Centauri of our memories. You should now listen to our song:

https://soundcloud.com/oblique-curiosities/alpha-centauri

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: The song begins with a triumphant prelude, performed by some extra-temporal narrator (and voiced by Professor Kate Pahl), which introduces us to the character of Alpha Centauri as well as their convoluted on-screen chronology. After a brief anacrusis, an interstellar MC asks the question "Gender

Diplomacy?" to which Alpha Centauri responds *"Across the Stars!"* This repeats: "Peridot green? *Hexapod!*" The song continues, with proclamations describing Alpha Centauri (e.g., "Otherworldy, trisolarian know-it-all!") followed by a chorus consisting of the phrase "Alpha Centauri" followed by different pronouns: *"they, she, he, we, you"* and the speculative pronoun *"DEE!"* The final chorus replaces the repetition of "Alpha Centauri" and pronouns with calls to "Join the confederacy!" as well as "Gender? Non-binary!" "Galactic confederacy!" and "Gender equity!" Alpha Centauri responds to each with the refrain *"Alpha Centauri!"* The song concludes with a sentimental denouement, in which Alpha Centauri proclaims: *"Welcome to the Universe!"*

Writing the song!

We began writing our song Alpha Centauri during the autumn of 2018, in tension with two big news cycles: the UK's Conservative government's public consultation on the Gender Recognition Act, which identified substantial public support for the liberalising and de-medicalising of gender identification laws; and the USA administration's (under Donald Trump) intention that gender only be assigned from birth. It's against this background that we began to explore how we might intervene in Alpha Centauri's future. Eight years later, it's terrifying how rapidly things have escalated. Trump's 2024 re-election led to significant and wide-ranging rollbacks of trans rights, including healthcare protections. Meanwhile, in the UK, the Gender Recognition Act consultation was quietly shelved under Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and anti-trans rhetoric grew under consecutive Prime Ministers Liz Truss, Rishi Sunak, and Keir Starmer, culminating in the banning of gender-affirming care

for under-18s, and a Supreme Court ruling that trans women are not legally women under the Equality Act. This is coupled with violent pushback against drag queen story hour in the US, Australia, and UK, and a markedly right-wing populist swing in the European elections in 2024, and Chile in 2025. Nostalgia underpins these policy shifts, with attacks on trans rights in particular framed as a return to a supposed 'common-sense' social order, where gender is fixed and aligned with past norms. In this moment, with queer life increasingly under threat from all quarters — including from basic white gays and murderous, 'gender (un)critical,' non-feminists — we wrote a speculative song and this accompanying article to think through how and if we can activate nostalgia in such a way as to build possibilities for queer life, rather than close it down. As we now illustrate, we remain unconvinced as to how successful this endeavour was.

Analysis

At the start of this paper, we explained how we naively set out to write this song to salvage a queerer future-past for Alpha Centauri, a problematic *Doctor Who* character for whom we have a significant nostalgic fondness. Creating a queerer future-past for this character requires us to resist the twin pulls of nostalgia to both homogenise (induce sameness) and homo-normativise (make it seem like it's right that things be the same): as we argued above, homo-nostalgias sediment futures and pasts and so are inherently always-already un-queer. Below, we explore some of the choices we made in composing the song, their effects, and ultimately why we think we failed to recuperate or queer nostalgia.

Co-opted engagement and melodic manipulation.

The song makes use of numerous musical features that manipulate the listener into enjoying the world of Alpha Centauri: we argue in this section that this kind of manipulation inadvertently mirrors how normative nostalgia functions and so, despite our best efforts, is not queer.

The song's opening monologue narrates the return of Alpha Centauri. Despite the listener possibly not knowing who or what Alpha Centauri is, the delivery of this monologue combines with the accompanying music in hyper-normative ways that *feel* nostalgic: both familiar (from the past) and optimistic (for that past to return in the future). For instance, the narrator invokes Alpha Centauri three times, like a creed: "Alpha Centauri, Alpha Centauri, Alpha Centauri!". This is accompanied with horns and full-sounding pads playing fanfare-like intervals of fifths and fourths. George Russel (2007), in describing his music theory principle of Tonal Gravity, argues that the intervals of the octave, the fifth, and the fourth are the three most "open" sounding intervals because of their relative positions in the overtone series (that is, each interval is achieved by doubling the frequency of the previous tone). Consequently, these intervals are the manipulative mainstays of heroic melodies such as the "Star Wars" theme or various national anthems, creating a rousing and uplifting vibe. Meanwhile, a Theremin plays a soaring counter melody that lifts higher and higher as the monologue progresses. In the song, we further accentuate these frissons using reverbs and echo to create a sense of space and grandeur, and by having this opening prelude return for the song's sentimental denouement, in which Alpha wishes us "Welcome to the Universe!" We agonised endlessly over the exact timings of the words 'welcome' and 'universe', shifting them backwards and forwards

by fractions of a second to maximise their impact. In short, these sections of the song are designed to activate highly tailored frissons in the listener.

Following the opening prelude, the song turns into a disco anthem, making continuous use of a four-on-the-floor drumbeat, hand claps and various disco music effects (such as the reverse cymbal and break): these normative instrumental choices and rhythmic elements invite toe-tipping and head-nodding in the listener. Additionally, the song is crafted to be sung-along with, including all of the instrumental parts (like in “Goldfinger” or “Dancing Queen,” where everyone sings along with the vocals and instrumentals alike): this sing-along, polyvocal quality draws the listener into a sense of collectivity. These manipulations co-opt the audience’s hopeful engagement with the speculative universe to which Alpha Centauri welcomes us through their musical frissons and irresistible groove.

Our intent with these musical features was to make the audience feel how we feel about Alpha for the purposes of injecting that feeling into a hopeful future: the warmth, the humour, and the melancholic remembrance of days gone by. However, we’ve come to realise that there's something un-queerly nefarious about the way in which we mine nostalgia here. For instance, we have yet to listen to our own song even once where we haven’t wanted to raise our arms in the air on the triumphant triple “Alpha Centauri!” creed at 00:29. Just like homo-nostalgia, this frisson is deeply manipulative: its affect is difficult to escape for listeners. This is true despite the fact that it’s probably not clear to the listener what is being hoped towards: as the composers of the song, we know it’s Alpha’s gender-queer confederacy, but do the audience?

Moreover, in analysing our song we recognize how easily artists could use similar musical expressions to co-opt nostalgia's affect for truly nefarious ends; for instance, it reminds us of the use of the song "Tomorrow Belongs to Me" in the musical *Cabaret. Cabaret* tells the story of queer life in Weimar-era Berlin during the rise of Nazism. During a day trip to the countryside, a character begins to sing "Tomorrow Belongs to Me," which features pastoral, bucolic lyrics. As the song progresses, it is revealed that the singer is a supporter of the Nazi party. The audience begins to join in, and the song ends with a Nazi salute. The queer characters are horrified and leave. In the context of the musical, this serves as a haunting warning of the rise of Nazism in Berlin. Ironically, in the real world, the song was met with much confusion by audiences, and eventually was adopted as an anthem for real world neo-Nazis. This illustrates how musical frissons such as rousing chord changes, and repetitious lyrics (of "Alpha Centauri!", "Tomorrow Belongs to Me!" or "single-sex spaces") are easily repurposed for nefarious ends. Thus, while we might have been successful in rousing a triumphant nostalgia for Alpha Centauri, we're not convinced that our efforts to queer that nostalgia are "successful." To clarify, we were successful in manipulating nostalgia out of the audience, but this is done in absence of a clear sense of what's being manipulated towards (reminding us more of the Brexit campaign than some campy sci-fi realm). In the next section, we go on to think through another way in which the song manipulates nostalgia out of its audience: its mobilisation of retrofuturist aesthetics.

Retrofuturism.

Retrofuturism delights in obsolete visions of the future: in other words, how futures were portrayed in bygone eras. This is exemplified on *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds* (2022), which portrays the 23rd century using the same 1960s aesthetics as the original *Star Trek* series (1966-1969). Another example might be the big band music and modernist aesthetics in the *Fallout* video game franchise, which is used to capture a sense of atomic-era paranoia. In keeping with the theme of this paper, we understand retrofuturism as a kind of nostalgia in that it mines the past for speculative versions of the future. In this section, we show that while retrofuturism initially seemed promising, its reliance on a shared understanding of (1) the past and (2) that past's applicability to the future proved too normativising to aid in our attempts to queer nostalgia.

Our song invests in a kind of retrofuturism by taking its cue from the earliest *Doctor Who* musical scores. *Doctor Who's* music is renowned for its avant-garde, hyper-modern electronic aesthetic (most famously enacted in Delia Derbyshire's arrangements of Ron Grainer's theme music). Our song makes use of a similar set of sci-fi sounds and electronica to reproduce a retrofuturist aesthetic, particularly our use of the Theremin. The Theremin is an electronic instrument invented in the 1920s, controlled by the instrumentalist's proximity to a pair of antennae. The Theremin is instantly recognisable due to its use in scores for science-fiction and horror movie productions of the 1950s, such as Bernard Hermann's musical score for *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. It is frequently used to evoke these sensibilities in contemporary retrofuturist media, such as in Danny Elfman's musical score for *Mars Attacks,* Howard Shore's score for *Ed Wood,* or David's (this article's first author)

score for *Filmworker,* to evoke a retrofuturistic aesthetic. It also features in nearly every *Oblique Curiosities* song and features extensively throughout “Alpha Centauri.”

We initially thought we were queering nostalgia through our use of the Theremin: the campness of its permanently delayed futurism could easily be (mis)understood as “queer.” Muñoz (2009) writes that queer futurities evoke ‘ephemeral traces’ and ‘flickering illuminations’ from times past in their portrayal of the future: likewise, we hoped that our use of the Theremin might (literally, eerily) haunt the present with traces of past visions of the future, simultaneously indicating a more capacious futurity. However, as we now demonstrate below, analysing our use of the Theremin alongside that of the reverse cymbal sound effect quickly disabused us of that notion.

Like the Theremin, the reverse cymbal is a widely-known sound effect. It is commonly used in disco songs to generate anticipation, out of which the riff emerges. For instance, it can be heard in the opening measures of Cher’s “Believe.” In our song, it can be heard at several key points, such as at 1:52 in the build up to the chorus. Like the Theremin, the reverse cymbal has its own perverted relationship with time: starting at its ephemeral barely audible ending (its past-future) and growing into its own beginning (its future-past). In the song, we created this sample ourselves by making an audio recording of a cymbal being struck and then flipping it over on top of itself. We then stretched it and added echo, impossibly, so that the end of the cymbal sound echoes back through its own origins. Due to its ubiquity, the reverse cymbal is fairly normative in its experimentation with time. Likewise, then, although we were initially drawn to the Theremin because of its queer relationship with time and the future, we realise that we’ve been trapped in the complex logics of

inclusion. As we discussed earlier, Halberstam (2003) argues that nostalgia is tethered to universalist understandings of community within which queers are out of place. Likewise, tapping into a universalist aesthetic — as we did with our choice of the reverse cymbal and Theremin, but also normative frissons and toe-tapping rhythms — imagines a universalist sense of community that cannot itself be queer. In this vein, following Edelman (2022), we question "[...] the recuperative possibility of progressive politics, including the progressive politics that represents itself as queer" (xvii). Here, Edelman critiques attempts to include excluded groups: once you include an excluded something, it no longer registers by the measure used to exclude it: it "ceases to signify" as queer (Edelman, 2022, xvii). Likewise, Robert McRuer (2018) calls crip (and queer) paradoxical in that their eventual aim is to deconstruct their own boundaries: this aim is ultimately inclusive and so must lead to the erasure of the thing being included. Similarly, our attempt to play at queerness by invoking an unconventional, retrofuturist aesthetic kills its queerness because, by successfully including it, it ceases to be legible as queer.

It was at this point in writing this paper we began to wonder if this whole endeavour was pointless. Our attempts to queer nostalgia by warming the audience to Alpha Centauri through toe-tapping drumbeats and open, heroic frissons, as well as our use of (what we hoped might be) unconventional instruments simply seem to have reinscribed normative nostalgias: the twin pulls of homo-nostalgia to homogenise and normalise seem to have proven impossible to resist. In the final section of analysis, we turn to the lore of the song: we argue that something about this lore is left open in ways that we don't quite understand ourselves. It is this openness, we hope, that might become queerly transgressive (while also risking

becoming fascist, or destructive, or purple, or a donkey). We turn to this line of thinking in our final section of analysis.

Epistemological bewilderment in the lore of Alpha Centauri.

Rampant through all our thoughts here is that we are just as confused about Alpha Centauri in the song we wrote as we are about their life on *Doctor Who*. Alpha Centauri appears on *Doctor Who* out of chronological order. Their temporality seems to weave in and out of our own, in a non-linear fashion (or at least non-linear from our perspective). Consequently, we have no sense of 'when' Alpha Centauri sings their song to us, although given their convoluted, on-screen chronology, we suspect that it occurs at some point in a distant past of some far-flung future. For this reason, the song's opening monologue is voiced by an extra-temporal narrator, who helps us make sense of the complexity of Alpha Centauri's timeline. In this way, the narrator resembles the chorus in Greek tragedies, commenting on the play *en dehors.* This is necessary because Alpha Centauri's queer timeline can't be followed by those in straight time (i.e., neither by ourselves nor you, dear reader). For Muñoz (2009), queer refusal is marked by its virtuoso failure at straight time's measure. Here, Alpha Centauri's chronological impossibility is a refusal of straight time: it fails so hard it can't be measured from straight time. Consequently, while we wrote the song to figure out where Alpha has been, we have more questions now than we had at the beginning. This enacts what Muñoz (2009) terms an 'epistemological and ontological humility' in that we:

> "[do] not claim the epistemological certitude of a queerness that we simply "know" but, instead, strain to activate the no-longer-conscious and to extend a

> glance toward that which is forward-dawning, anticipatory illuminations of the not-yet-conscious." (p. 28)

In other words, the fact that Alpha's universe is bewildering and unfinished leaves it open just a crack to some otherwise possibilities: anticipation of the unknown is itself queer because it might always have been something else. After the failings of the previous two sections, it's this openness to queer illegibility — "What is this universe?" but also "Which one is the woman?" "What were you born as?" "Who does what in the bedroom?" — that might, just about, give us room to queer: the fact that we have been left with a more confused understanding of Alpha's timeline is an absolute failure (because we set out to clarify it). This humility and failure extend to the lyrics, which as we'll now demonstrate inadvertently continue to confound the listener as to who Alpha is and what their world is like.

The song's first lyric is a seemingly binary, yes or no question asked by the extra-temporal narrator: "Gender diplomacy?" to which Alpha answers, *"Across the stars!"* This is followed by the question "Peridot green?" the answer to which is *"Hexapod!"* These seeming non sequiturs associate gender and colour with appendages, the cosmos, and speculative spatio-temporalities (across the stars meaning both a distance between points, and something beyond perception): this implies a significant complication of easy questions of identity and the boundaries of sensory experience. Similarly, during the chorus of the song, Sarah (author 2) sings a series of different pronouns in the voice of Alpha Centauri: 'she, he, we, they, you' as well as the speculative pronoun 'dee.' In part, this is in response to other characters' mixed pronoun use to refer to the character: rather than understand this as a misgendering, we instead suggest that Alpha's gender is so rich as to be

incomprehensible to humanoids. These lists of pronouns are also propositional, calling after Eve Sedgwick's (2003) nonce taxonomies of queer identifications. In this way, like Sedgwick, Alpha's listing of pronouns, both 'real' and speculative, invokes the idea of "identifications across definitional lines" (Sedgwick, 2008, p. 59): a prolific yet incomprehensible queering of queer identification.

The song also contests notions of independence and universality. In the show, *Doctor Who,* Alpha Centauri is from the Alpha Centauri star system. This is a tertiary star system and the closest to Earth. We stretched this tertiary contesting of the unitary or singular to consider what such a species might be like. First, we reimagine the galactic consortium of interplanetary mining colonies from the 1970s iteration of the character as a genderqueer confederacy. Building from this, we drew on the confusion surrounding Alpha Centauri's name to speculate on what their home planet must be like. In *Doctor Who*, Alpha is referred to as 'the delegate from Alpha Centauri', 'Delegate Centauri,' and also simply 'Alpha Centauri.' Simultaneously, Alpha Centauri is also the name of the tertiary planetary system from which they hail, as well as the name of their entire species (see "Robot," 1974). Consequently, as children, we understood that Alpha Centaurians are also all *named* Alpha Centauri: (and nothing has occurred since to disabuse us of this understanding). Naming Alpha Centauri's star system, planet, population, and each individual this way blurs notions of individuality but also leads us to wonder if Alpha Centaurans ever know which one is which. There is, we've started to speculate, a queer intimacy of not knowing what one's relation is with any other individual: what would this do to monogamy, polyamory, and friendship/enemy-ship? In our reading, this resonates with Ashon Crawley's (2020) writing on friendship. For Crawley, friendship is

anti-institutional because, unlike the easy boundaries and behavioural norms of marriage or lovers, friendship is anti-institutional: what Crawley draws from Glissant to call an “ongoing negotiation of consent” (Glissant interviewed in Diawara 2011). In this way, there is no need to distinguish between Alpha Centaurians because the regard held towards one Alpha Centauri is the regard held towards all other Alpha Centauris. This reconfigures Alpha’s seemingly misogynist disdain for human females in the “Monster of Peladon” (1974) as confusion at the idea of having a fixed gender with which one might associate (“You mean you have a fixed gender that everybody knows all the time? Barbarous!”) but also a fixed *personhood* (“You mean you know who everybody is all the time? Uncivilised!”). Moreover, the “we” pronoun in Alpha’s taxonomy of pronouns hints at some kind of hive or collective consciousness (“You mean you’re only ever one person at a time? Remote and unattractive!”), to which we as the listener already belong, as signified by the following pronoun “you.” Meanwhile, the later reverberant ‘Dee’ pronoun, which accompanies a ‘break’ in the music, implies some kind of shrill ‘throwing to the winds’ of any notion of pronouns or fixity: as a pronoun it is behind gender, beyond individuality, across time or space. “Dee!” In this way, it resembles what Kodwo Eshun (1998) writes on ‘looping’ in the break: looping, he writes, “tricks the ear into hearing a continuous beat…: the big brain anticipates the cycle, gets into the groove, lives inside the tense present of the loop. The Breakbeat becomes a mnemonic” (p. 024). The mirroring of the mnemonic logics of the break in the speculative pronoun “dee” perhaps locks in something of that anticipatory groove. We are careful to note here that we do not understand this as ‘post-gender’ framing, but rather a

preposterous, unwieldy, and ultimately bewildering invocation to openness that might be useful for troubling gender foreclosures.

Conclusion: Speculative 'dee' and affective surpluses.

We set out on this project to do two things: we wanted to (1) lure a queerer, more hopeful future-past for *Doctor Who*, the character of Alpha Centauri, and (hopefully) ourselves; and we wanted to (2) resist the pull of nostalgia towards homogeneity and homonormativity in its portrayal of futures and pasts.

To address our first aim, we are uncertain as to whether we have lured a queerer future-past for our beloved Alpha. At the very least, we hope we've *complicated* their future-past. Thinking through the logics of Alpha Centauri on issues of gender and identity has helped us to further extrapolate on their multiple and overlapping queernesses. Similarly, we're uncertain as to how fully we've lured a queerer future-past for ourselves. However, we do seem to have queered our understanding of what nostalgia is, which has implications for our second aim: to resist the normalising pulls of nostalgia in our own artistic practice.

In regards to our second aim, we frequently and inadvertently found ourselves recreating normative nostalgias while creating our song. We discussed this in the analysis section in relation to how the song co-opts the listeners' enthusiasm and redirects it towards Alpha through the song's manipulative curation of affects and frissons. Likewise, our references to the shared community understandings required for retrofuturism to work recreate normative nostalgia. Yet, in so doing, we also learnt

about how normative nostalgia works: in part, this is due to the unique methodological affordances of research-creation.

Our research-creation process demonstrated dynamics that a textual or discourse-analytic approach might have struggled to articulate. Our attempts to coax nostalgia into the song as we wrote, performed, and produced forced us to inhabit nostalgia's temporal contour: its seductions and the gravitational pull of its normativities. Our various failures to outwit nostalgia were methodologically productive: they illuminated how easily queer intentions can pave the road to normative hells, how sound and style are saturated with political weight, and how unintended meanings emerge through the practice of making.

Ultimately, what we think we've ended up doing is illustrating our difficulty in queering nostalgia but also, arguably, our difficulty in doing almost anything explicitly and intentionally queer. The moment you sediment queerness into something it becomes subject to the same gravitational forces of normativity. The twin pull of nostalgia towards homogeneity and (homo)normativity across thought, sense, patterns of relation, and *art* is much more difficult to escape from than we'd ever imagined: this is what we're terming here *homo-nostalgia*. Our finding, then, is that nostalgia is always normative and always normalises, despite our best efforts to prove otherwise. As we discussed earlier, attention to nostalgia in queer studies tends to investigate how queer people experience nostalgia, rather than trying to queer the affect of nostalgia itself. We have added to this argument by suggesting that nostalgia can be nice, and regulatory, and happy, and inclusive, and offer a warm fuzziness to queer people, but it can't ever be queer: you can have nostalgic queers, not queer nostalgias!

All of this said, we are still left with a few glimmers of possibility for imagining nostalgia otherwise: in the analysis section, we explored these glimmers in relation to the epistemological bewilderment evident in the lore of Alpha Centauri. In some ways, the point of our song could not ever have been to curate a nostalgia for a queerer universe for Alpha precisely because queerness is permanently unattainable. Fully specifying what Alpha's queernesses are, or mean would eventually lead to them sedimenting and getting caught up in heteronormative, homonormative, or cosmo-normative nostalgias: even queernesses as bizarre as those we've traced for Alpha here. These queernesses and our limits in defining them build on lore established in *Doctor Who,* but also emerged in our writing of the song and our decades-long history with the character. It is perhaps this bewilderment that is as queer as we can hope for.

And yet, the song ends with a denouement that brings back the fanfare from the prelude and its accompanying, more earnest aesthetic. The song's final lyrics are "Welcome to the Universe!": a universe that we still like the sound of. The final F major 9 chord on which the song concludes seems open, somehow: it's not a fade out, which might imply that the song continues, but it's also not truly an ending. Unlike a typical F major chord (which consists of the notes F, A, C), the extended F major 9 (F, A, C, E, G) with which we finish the song doesn't sound quite like a resolution: the chord is definitive but unresolved. There is perhaps a nostalgia for nostalgia here, which might be as queer as nostalgia can get: there's more to be said about this universe.

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