

Audrey Muscato
Professor Saiber
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“Aye, and Gomorrah...” & the Sin of the Binary

In “Aye, and Gomorrah...” Samuel R. Delany imagines a band of spacers chosen to perform work in outer space and neutered to avoid the harmful effects of radiation on future generations. Spacers— like their work— are otherworldly to the heterosexual cisgender reader. They defy gender and have no sexual urges. Frelks solicit sex from spacers and are depicted as perverted. Plagued with questions regarding sexuality and gender, “Aye, and Gomorrah...” provides a poignant social commentary. Samuel R. Delany uses depictions of sexuality and gender to critique society’s views and the binaries constructed around them. Delany preaches acceptance of homosexuality and goes a step further, revealing the reader’s own sin— our entrenchment in the gender and sexuality binaries.

Throughout fiction, and especially in New Wave science fiction which is loaded with social commentary, knowing background information on the author can inform the interpretation of the story. Delany is a gay man and “Aye, and Gomorrah...” was published in 1967, just two years before the Stonewall Riots and on the eve of the gay rights movement in the United States. With this in mind, any references to sexuality in “Aye, and Gomorrah...” should garner extra attention. The two major types of characters (frelks and spacers) are viewed as either sexually perverted or asexual, yet highly sexualized by others. One of the most overt references to homosexuality that Delany uses to argue for the acceptance of gay people is when the frelk tells the spacer, “you don’t choose your perversions” (Delany, “Aye,” p. 412).

This is a direct parallel to one of the main arguments for acceptance of the LGBTQ community; as Lady Gaga might say, “baby, I was born this way” (Germanotta & Laursen). The meaning of this quote is clear and direct, especially to a twenty-first century reader. However, the message becomes even clearer with the lines that immediately follow it: “*you* have no perversions at all. *You’re* free of the whole business” (Delany, “Aye,” p. 412). Delany’s addition of the italics on the subjects of these two sentences stresses that the frelk is speaking directly about the spacer. In retrospect, the omission of italics for the subject of the first sentence is even more telling. With this omission, we are to understand that the frelk is using the subject “you” broadly. She is arguing that nobody (herself included) chooses their sexuality. We are the way we are and since we have no control over it, there is no reason to discriminate. Delany further normalizes homosexuality in his only depictions of non-frelks and non-spacers. The two “normal” people who converse with the spacer are a gay man and a gay woman (Delany, “Aye,” p. 406-407). In comparison to the spacer and the frelk, these people and their sexualities are normalized. These depictions, along with the blatant use of gay rights movement rhetoric, convey Delany’s call for the acceptance of homosexuality.

After establishing Delany’s commentary on homosexuality, which is fitting for the time and culture in which he was writing, we can move on to analyze the second and even more progressive message: a scathing critique of the gender and sexuality binaries and the people who perpetuate them. Delany’s message for gay acceptance is timely, but it is not as revolutionary as his critique of the binary because the gay characters still fall within both binaries. They are cis men who love other cis men and cis women who love other cis women. However, a closer analysis of the frelk and the spacer shows Delany’s praise of fluidity. The

spacer does not exist in the traditional gender binary and the frelk does not exist in the traditional sexuality binary of the 1960s. In these characters, Delany reflects the problems with these binaries and society's reliance on them. Every non-spacer that the spacer meets attempts to gender them and figure out *what they were*. The frelk asks the spacer "did you start out as male or female?" while the gay man and woman both lament that the spacer is no longer the gender to which they are attracted (Delany, "Aye," p. 406-07, 410). This projection of the gender binary onto the spacer is Delany's way of critiquing its pervasiveness. Furthermore, it is significant how the two queer cis characters attempt to force the spacer into the gender binary. In the gay rights movement which exploded just years after "Aye, and Gomorrah...", cisgender gay men and women forced transgender and genderqueer people to the margins, just as these characters cast aside the spacer. By accurately reflecting the treatment of genderqueer people in the time he was writing, Delany was also predictive of the future gay rights movement.

The projection of the binary extends even further to the frelks as well. The spacer learns that the word "frelk" is gendered differently in French and Spanish, with French using the feminine *une* and Spanish using the masculine *frelko* (Delany, "Aye," p. 406-07). In this way, Delany uses gendered foreign languages to showcase the ubiquity of the binary. A frelk is feminine in one culture and masculine in the next, but the projection of gender identity onto the frelk is actually a commentary on heteronormativity. The French man who believes the spacer was previously a man uses the feminine form of frelk, while the Mexican woman who believes the spacer was previously a woman uses the masculine form of frelk (Delany, "Aye," p. 406-07). In both cases, the non-spacer characters associate frelks with the gender different from what they believe the spacer's former gender to be. While forcing a binary gender identity

onto the spacers, this also forces heterosexuality onto the frelks, showcasing society's attempt to place them into sexuality binary. This theme is continued when the frelk whom the spacer interacts with is female and we find out that the spacer's original sex was male (Delany, "Aye," p. 410). The conscious decisions made by Delany on the genders and sexualities of various characters in the story and the characters' attempts to force each other into the binaries provides a social commentary on the era that Delany was writing in that carries on through the present. Humans are obsessed with placing people into binaries: gay or straight, man or woman. Even with people that are as non-binary in gender and sexuality as spacers and frelks, the characters still attempt to place each other into binaries. Delany uses his fluid characters to point out the flaws in that system.

"Aye, and Gomorrah..." serves not only to critique the larger societal norms of gender and sexuality binaries, but also to reveal the reader's own entrenchment in these binaries through its form. Samuel R. Delany's essay "About 5,750 words" seems like it was written with "Aye, and Gomorrah..." in mind. In this piece, Delany explains that one of the beautiful aspects of reading science fiction is how every word forces the reader to reshape their understanding (Delany, "About"). Delany's "Aye, and Gomorrah..." is the perfect example of this. In the same way that the spacers bounce between cities on their jetpacks with fragments serving as the transitions, the reader is immediately thrown into a story with unknown words like "spacers" and "frelks" with no explanation (Delany, "Aye," p. 406). For the first half of the story, the reader is confused about what spacers and frelks could be. It is not until about halfway through that the reader gets an explanation of what a spacer does ("building water-conservation units on Mars..."), what was done to them ("neutering"), and why ("up beyond the ionosphere, baby,

there's too much radiation for those precious gonads...") (Delany, "Aye," p. 410-11). This delay in the reveal, paired with the choppiness of the form leaves readers wondering what spacers could be. *Are they aliens? Mutants?* When the reality of the spacers is finally revealed and their humanity is also emphasized (through the main character just wanting to feel a connection), the reader is forced to grapple with the fact that they were too entrenched in the gender binary to imagine a human without gender. The shock and, likely for some readers, discomfort of the spacers' reality is telling not only of society, but also of our own personal biases.

As a gay man, Delany's calls for acceptance of homosexuality and argument that sexuality is not a choice in "Aye, and Gomorrah..." are not shocking. However, his larger commentary on the binaries that permeate throughout our society is bolder. Not only does he critique these binaries with fluid characters, but also he forces the reader to check their own entrenchment in a system that is too rigid to encapsulate the broad spectrum of sexual and gender diversity. The way Delany uses this story to critique the readers for their own sins is revealed in the title. Sodom and Gomorrah are biblical cities that were subjected to divine retribution and are widely associated with sin. In the context of the story, we can read the sexual "perversions" of the frelks as "crimes" of sodomy, but the title takes it a step further. "Aye, and Gomorrah..." is a continuation, arguing that while sodomy may be its own sin, we—the readers— are sinful, too. Our own inability to see outside of the binaries is Gomorrah. The ellipsis at the end takes it another step further: sin extends beyond the binary of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Works Cited

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