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From Black Kiss to Black Captain: Race, Gender, and a Half Century of *Star Trek*

David Hamilton Golland
Governors State University

“He [Martin Luther King] said to me, ‘Think for a moment why Uhura was chosen to go on this mission where no man or woman has gone before – because she was the most qualified and was chosen on that basis alone.’ And he said ‘I am very proud of the dignity with which...you have created your character. You must stay.’ And so I had to stay.” – Nichelle Nichols¹

“Today or a hundred years from now don't make a bit of difference – as far as they're concerned, we'll always be niggers.” – Cirroc Lofton as Jimmy/Jake Sisko²

In 1966 America witnessed an unusual milestone in civil rights history: a "negro" woman as a recurring cast member on a mainstream television program. Lieutenant Uhura was a smart, talented member of the crew of the USS Enterprise – and during the next three seasons she gave the first televised interracial kiss and demonstrated professional competence, again and again. Yet in 1993, when the *Star Trek* producers developed a series with an African-American commanding officer, the decision was greeted with a collective shrug. Three decades in, white America had become accustomed to the notion of talented African-Americans and black women operating on an equal basis with whites. Along the way, the franchise produced some of the most integrated mainstream television shows, continuing to cast African-American actors in non-stereotypical roles, from Levar Burton as chief engineer to Tim Russ as a Vulcan security chief, and topping it off with the casting of a woman captain – who was neither a stereotypical “boss bitch” nor sexpot ingénue. Nichols had helped pave the way for a new understanding of race and gender – at least in the public medium of broadcast television.

¹ Nichelle Nichols interview, “Bonus Features,” *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*, Directed by William Shatner (1989; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2003).

² “Far Beyond the Stars,” *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, first broadcast February 11, 1998 in syndication, Directed by Avery Brooks and written by Ira Steven Behr and Hans Beimler.

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And yet *Star Trek* was also capable of reflecting a parallel story. That is the story about the frustrated African-Americans who had never escaped the grinding poverty and racism which had resulted in a seemingly permanent underclass, and the women who continued to feel forced into real-life stereotypical roles. Although the *Deep Space Nine* episode quoted above, which featured the only use of the “N word” in the history of *Star Trek*, was set in the 1950s, it spoke to the continuing frustrations of the 1990s, when it was first broadcast. Over the years, African-American actors played far more Klingons than humans. Whoopi Goldberg’s character reprised a Jim Crow stereotype, the wise mammy playing the master’s trusted confidante.¹ And the tendency to attribute over-the-top behaviors to various alien species – from the money-grubbing Ferengi to the bloodthirsty Cardassians – tended to speak to our society’s historical penchant to similarly stereotype human peoples. Kate Mulgrew’s Captain Janeway notwithstanding, woman actors in *Star Trek* were often chosen for their sex appeal (Jeri Ryan in particular), and only rarely were they seen to juggle the modern responsibilities of the working woman. In these ways, *Star Trek* demonstrated that as much as it had the potential to change society, so too was it reflective of continuing inequality.

From Black Kiss to Black Captain will tell the story of how *Star Trek* made civil rights history and reflected its successes and failures over time. This essay will both celebrate the advances made by the franchise and discuss the ways in which it has demonstrated how American society had fallen short of its goals.

The role of television in our society – how it reflects and effects human behavior – has been the subject of significant academic debate and concern. According to Erika Engstrom and Joseph Valenzano, “television programs are really messages...that communicate *something* about a culture.” Paddy Scannell, meanwhile, notes that “[television] is part of the taken for granted fabric of the world as a whole and speaks to the everyday life concerns of peoples situated in their own life world everywhere,” while Paul Monaco, in his Understanding Society, Culture, and Television, posits that “[m]uch of what goes on in society that becomes newsworthy can be presented as involving tensions between individuals, political parties, races, special interests, social classes, or nations.” When Pierre Bourdieu warned in 1998 that “real information, analysis, in-depth interviews, expert discussions, and serious documentaries lose out to pure entertainment and, in particular, to mindless talk show chatter between ‘approved’ and interchangeable speakers,” Jonathan Gray responded that

¹ On the “mammy” trope, see for instance bell hooks, Ain’t I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism (Brooklyn, NY: South End Press, 1981).

“[t]elevision entertainment is not as all-encompassing as some critics and alarmists make it out to be – it has not colonized the world, much less our souls and brains – but it is pervasive, and a major entity both to be reckoned with and to be embraced and enjoyed.”² Ultimately the best justification for an analysis of the importance of race and gender in *Star Trek* comes from Tim Dant, who writes that

“[T]elevision is today the medium that mimetically reproduces the life that humans directly experience as actuality and as fiction. The...telling of history, the reporting of news and spectacles such as sports events are all mimetic forms that appear on television and give pleasure. Mimesis is not the same as a ‘copying’ or a ‘mirroring’ actual behavior; it is always a representation.”³

This topic is most assuredly *not* where “no one has gone before.” A number of scholarly books and articles have dealt with race and gender in *Star Trek*, but not both at the same time, and not in any detail since 2003. The most comprehensive of these either consider only the original series or the original series together with *The Next Generation*.

Most recent discussions of race in *Star Trek* cite Daniel Bernardi’s book *Star Trek and History: Racing Toward a White Future*. This book applied scholarship on whiteness studies to a critical analysis of the original series, *The Next Generation*, and the films featuring the original cast. Bernardi demonstrated how notions of racial egalitarianism in these incarnations of the series invariably came up short, over-sexualizing Nichelle Nichols’ Uhura and depicting aliens as savage and uncivilized when they failed to assimilate into the hegemonic, white, dominant Federation. An especially blatant case he cited was an early episode of *The Next Generation* in which Picard’s Enterprise visited a planet peopled by an imperialist’s fantasy of a sub-Saharan African tribe. Despite publication in 1998, the book did not consider *Deep Space Nine*, with its African-American Captain Sisco, played by Avery Brooks.⁴

² Erika Engstrom and Joseph M. Valenzano III, *Television, Religion, and Supernatural* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2014), p. 3; Paddy Scannell, *television and the Meaning of Live* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2014), p. xiii; Paul Monaco, *Understanding Society, Culture, and Television* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2000), p. 6; Pierre Bourdieu, Tr. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, *On Television* (NY: The New Press, 1998), p. 3; Jonathan Gray, *Television Entertainment* (NY: Routledge, 2008), p. 2.

³ Tim Dant, *Television and the Moral Imaginary: Society through the Small Screen* (NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), p. 1.

⁴ Daniel Leonard Bernardi, *Star Trek and History: Race-ing Toward a White Future*

Micheal Pounds' 1999 book, *Race in Space*, likewise covered only the first two series, also with in-depth analysis of selected episodes. Like Bernardi, Pounds found *The Next Generation* lacking in a true vision of an egalitarian future, but was kinder to the original series, noting in particular that "*Star Trek* focused approximately one in every three programs...on ethnicity (Terran and extraterrestrial) or race relations issues (many of which felt as if they were torn from journalism's coverage of the civil rights struggle domestically and internationally)." This despite his finding that "[t]he series' only character who is visibly a person of color, Uhura, develops no off-duty relationships with any of the ship's crew."⁵

The first scholarly discussion of gender in *Star Trek* occurred nearly two decades earlier than those publications, in a 1981 article by Edward Whetmore which analyzed the Season Three original series episode "Turnabout Intruder." This episode depicted Captain Kirk (William Shatner) being forced to switch brains with old friend Dr. Janice Lester. The ship was now under control of a woman pretending to be Kirk, and the episode, as Whetmore detailed, was about the unsuitability of the female "temperament" for command situations.⁶ Whetmore's article was published thirteen years before the premiere of *Star Trek: Voyager*, which featured Kate Mulgrew as Captain Kathryn Janeway (and five years before the franchise's first depiction of a human female captain: *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* opened with Madge Sinclair, an African-American woman, playing the captain of the USS *Saratoga*).⁷

Also pertinent is Susan Lentz' 2003 article, "'Where No Woman Has Gone Before:' Feminist Perspectives on *Star Trek*." While Lentz correctly depicted the women of the original series as mainly filling the "Gal Friday" roles so prevalent in the 1960s, with Uhura as "reminiscent perhaps of the early 20th Century switchboard operator" and Nurse Chapel (Majel Barrett) filling a stereotypical woman's role in medicine, she perceived an evolution in the depiction of women through *The Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine*, and *Voyager*. In *The Next Generation*, the women medical officers, Gates

(New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998). The episode cited is "Code of Honor," *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, first broadcast October 12, 1987 in syndication, Directed by Russ Mayberry and Les Landau and written by Katharyn Powers and Michael Baron.

⁵ Micheal C. Pounds, *Race in Space* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1999), pp. 54, 137.

⁶ Edward Whetmore, "A Female Captain's Enterprise: The Implications of *Star Trek*'s 'Turnabout Intruder,'" in Marleen S. Barr, *Future Females: A Critical Anthology* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1981).

⁷ *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home*, Directed by Leonard Nimoy (1986; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2003); Rick Berman, Jeri Taylor, et al, Producers, *Star Trek: Voyager*, originally aired 1995-2001 in syndication.

McFadden's Beverley Crusher and Diana Muldaur's Katherine Pulaski, were doctors, not nurses; the other major recurring female character, Marina Sirtis' Counselor Troi, was the equivalent of a trained psychologist (a position in our world usually requiring a terminal degree). These, however, are "nurturing" professions; the truly nontraditional female character, Denise Crosby's security chief Tasha Yar, was gone before the end of the first season. But the role of women evolved with the two later series covered by Lentz: in *Deep Space Nine*, both Nana Visitor's Major Kira Nerys and Terry Farrell's Jadzia Dax were strong, independent women, while Lentz found "Quark's mother Ishka as one of the most interesting" recurring female characters, for she refused to be bound by the harsh rules of the misogynist Ferengi society. Lentz turned last to *Voyager*, noting that "the major female characters of the series are scientists and engineers," likewise nontraditional pursuits. Although unmentioned by Lentz, the fact that Nurse Chapel of the original series returned as a doctor in *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* – the character's only appearance in any of the films – still fits neatly into this "evolutionary" analysis.⁸

It is Lentz' analysis which most closely adheres to the current author's historical "ground rule" for this essay. As this is a work of history, we must treat the past on its own terms, and not expect those who lived in the past to have conformed to the societal norms and mores of the present. The historian should not hold historical television to a higher standard than that to which we would hold its contemporary society. In other words, since shows were often reflective of the racism of the culture in which they were produced, we should not focus on how their producers and writers failed to live up to later standards. Our task is to show how historical media *reflected* the society in which it was created; also, to identify the programming which did not, i.e. programs which pushed societal boundaries. As this relates to the history of the *Star Trek* franchise, the questions therefore should not be "was Gene Rodenberry a sexist" or "were African-Americans cast in roles commensurate with egalitarian expectations," but rather "did the show demonstrate a more (or less) egalitarian ethos than society at the time it was produced, and how (if at all) did that change?"

The original *Star Trek* was indeed ground-breaking in its casting. The decision to cast an African-American woman (Nichelle Nichols) and a Japanese-American man (George Takei) as recurring characters, indeed as officers on the

⁸ Susan A. Lentz, "'Where No Woman Has Gone Before': Feminist Perspectives on *Star Trek*" in Robert H. Chaires and Bradley Chilton, Eds., *Star Trek Visions of Law and Justice* (Dallas, TX: Adios Press, 2003), pp. 136-159 (quotations from pp. 144-149); *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, Directed by Robert Wise (1979; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2001); Rick Berman, Michael Piller, and Ira Steven Behr, Producers, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, originally aired 1993-1999 in syndication.

starship in positions of at least theoretical authority over characters played by white men, was unheard of at that time. In 1966, when the show first aired, positive depictions of African-Americans were few and far between. The blatantly racist *Amos 'n' Andy* was still in syndication despite nearly two decades of NAACP attempts to get it off the air, and a generation of television and film viewers had become accustomed to seeing African-American women in two stereotypical roles: that of the mammy – the nurturing African-American woman whose purpose was to raise white children and give sage advice to white adults – and the whore, who failed to control her sexual desires because of a supposed lack of civilization among African peoples. The 1950s and 1960s also marked the heyday of two screen entertainment genres: the Western and the World War II film. In both of these genres, Asians were presented as obstacles to inevitable white American supremacy. The Chinese immigrants whose virtual slavery built the railroads were almost universally depicted in Westerns as inscrutable, scheming, and dangerous. And the World War II film genre identified the Japanese as treacherous, single-minded, and terroristic. Fear of the Japanese translated into discrimination against Japanese Americans: George Takei, who played Sulu in the original series, was raised in an internment camp during World War II. And so it is remarkable that he and Nichols were cast in such important roles during this era. Nichols' character, Lieutenant Uhura, neither "mammy" nor whore, was sexy without the nudity and blatant sexuality so prevalent in the later "Blaxploitation" genre (this was, after all, network television). Hers was an empowering sexuality, and (perhaps in a conscious attempt to avoid stereotype) she was more in control of her sexual desires than the cast-member with whom she shared the first American televised interracial kiss: the swashbuckling Kirk, who seemed to have a love affair in nearly every episode.⁹

The original series was groundbreaking in its choice of characters as much as with its casting: the Enterprise crew included a Russian (Walter Koenig's Chekov) and a space alien (Leonard Nimoy's Mister Spock). The audience for *Star Trek*, baby-boomers raised during the height of the Cold War, had been trained to see Russians as the apotheosis of evil. At worst they represented communism, a threat to the "American Way of Life." At best they were dupes, sheep following Marxist shepherds. They were not to be trusted.

⁹ On race and gender in television roles during the 1950s and 1960s see, for instance, Laura J. Sweeney, *The Origins of the Star Trek Phenomenon: Gene Rodenberry, The Original Series, and Science Fiction Fandom in the 1960s* (San Marcos, California: Department of History, California State University San Marcos, 2012), pp. 49-51 and 65-71. On Takei's youth in an internment camp, see "George Takei," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=George_Takei&diff=574111461&oldid=574111048, accessed September 26, 2013.

And yet here – albeit as the lowest-ranking member of the bridge crew – was a Russian who evinced a lack of evil intent and demonstrated competence at his job. Space aliens were at least as scary to 1960s audiences as Russians, who as fellow humans at least shared their motivations and emotions; space aliens were variously depicted as invisible, as horrible monsters, or even as deceptively human in appearance, waiting to show their true nature and harm or enslave us. The fear of the space alien in human form is also connected to the fear of the Russian: Russians could learn English and blend in with white American society, with dangerous potential. And so the Chekov and Spock characters, despite being presented as overwhelmingly positive, were made somewhat more safe for the audience by clearly identifying their “otherness:” Chekov was given a thick Russian accent and Spock light green skin and pointed ears.

Rather than analyze one or two episodes for their racial overtones, it is fruitful to look at the depiction of a single character over the course of the series. As Nichols’ Uhura was the one character in the original series to break both race and gender boundaries, it is to her role in the series we now turn, beginning with the premiere episode, “The Man Trap,” in which she spoke Swahili. This was a positive depiction, and we can take it at face value that Swahili was being positively presented as the language of a civilized people. However, in “Charlie X,” there is a negative characterization. In a group recreation scene, Uhura sang while Spock played a stringed instrument. The space alien other and the African other provided entertainment for the white crew, most of whom were junior in rank to both Uhura and Spock. Likewise in “The Conscience of the King” Uhura again sang for the entertainment of others, this time playing the stringed instrument herself. While there is considerable value to – and pleasure in – sharing one’s talents with others, it is nonetheless noteworthy that Uhura and Spock were so characterized in these episodes. There is a long history in American entertainment of African-Americans being deemed “acceptable” through musical performance, and the producers of *Star Trek* clearly used these scenes to make Uhura more palatable to a white audience.¹⁰

In three episodes during the first season, “The Naked Time,” “Balance of Terror,” and “Court Martial,” Uhura temporarily took over navigation. This is a positive depiction, considering her gender as well as her race. The navigation station was typically held by Lieutenant Sulu, a male Japanese-American. Taking

¹⁰ “The Man Trap,” *Star Trek*, first broadcast September 8, 1966 by NBC, Directed by Marc Daniels and written by George Clayton Johnson; “Charlie X,” *Star Trek*, first broadcast September 15, 1966 by NBC, Directed by Lawrence Dobkin and written by D.C. Fontana; “The Conscience of the King,” *Star Trek*, first broadcast December 8, 1966 by NBC, Directed by Gerd Oswald and written by Barry Trivers.

over the controls of the ship, even under supervision, was nontraditional. While the Japanese were not stereotyped as poor navigators (they had, after all, carried out the 1941 air attack at Pearl Harbor, hundreds of miles from their own ships), African-Americans were not expected to fill such posts on naval vessels. Later in “The Naked Time,” when a delusional Sulu held the bridge crew at bay with a sword, it was cool-headed Uhura who bravely challenged him, ultimately distracting him long enough for Kirk to take him down. Overall, these moments demonstrated the versatility of the character: she was not your typical telephone switchboard operator. And if Uhura could handle navigation, and keep a cool head in a tense standoff, perhaps she could handle tactical, or even command? (That said, Uhura was never shown in command of a starship, not even temporarily, in any *Star Trek* episode or film.)¹¹

Similarly to her attempted tackle of the delusional Sulu in “The Naked Time,” Uhura again demonstrated command capability in “Space Seed.” In this episode, an intruder named Khan temporarily took control of the ship. While in control, Khan ordered Uhura to turn on a viewing screen so that the crew could watch Kirk, in another room, writhing in agony. Uhura stoutly refused. Arguably, of course, she did this out of loyalty to Kirk, and so was only doing her job. But the task of turning on a viewing screen is minor and fell squarely within the scope of her usual duties; to have complied would have been unlikely to result in a reprimand once the ship had been restored to its normal chain of command. She was therefore exercising critical rather than merely functional faculties: she was thinking for herself, acting correctly under duress; a positive depiction.¹²

Perhaps the apogee of demonstrations of Uhura’s versatility during the first season occurred in “The Galileo Seven.” In this episode, Spock was away with a landing party and Uhura appeared to have taken over the science position – clearly the most important position after the command chair, given that it was usually held by the first officer and required far more than technical expertise. Indeed, it was she who identified the earthlike planet in the center of the anomaly into which Spock’s team had disappeared.¹³

¹¹ “The Naked Time,” *Star Trek*, first broadcast September 29, 1966 by NBC, Directed by Marc Daniels and written by John D.F. Black; “Balance of Terror,” *Star Trek*, first broadcast December 15, 1966 by NBC, Directed by Vincent McEveety and written by Paul Schneider; and “Court Martial,” *Star Trek*, first broadcast February 2, 1967 by NBC, Directed by Marc Daniels and written by Don M. Mankiewicz.

¹² “Space Seed,” *Star Trek*, first broadcast February 16, 1967 by NBC, Directed by Marc Daniels and written by Gene L. Coon and Carey Wilber.

¹³ “The Galileo Seven,” *Star Trek*, first broadcast January 5, 1967 by NBC, Directed by Robert Gist and written by Oliver Crawford and S. Bar-David.

While Uhura's versatility was repeatedly apparent during the first season, what was far less apparent, at least in the actions and words of other characters, was her facility for communications, her stated specialty. Time and again, when Uhura couldn't do something in communications, usually because of technical problems, Spock would immediately go to her station and attempt to solve the problem himself. Sometimes he was successful and sometimes not. While this presented Spock as having advanced technical proficiency, it reflected poorly on the opinion Spock held for Uhura's abilities. But if she wasn't highly proficient at communications, why had she been assigned to the bridge? Had these episodes been filmed in the 1990s, one might have assumed that the writers were taking a dig at affirmative action, repeatedly attempting to show that the African-American character was out of her league and had only gotten her "unearned" job because of her race or gender. But affirmative action did not exist as a coherent policy during the filming of the original series. One possible answer to this conundrum is that while everyone on board was depicted as technically proficient, Kirk, Spock, and DeForest Kelley's Doctor McCoy were the true experts.

The advent of the second season of the original series appears to have been the opportunity for a significant re-thinking of the Uhura character, possibly because Nichelle Nichols had considered leaving the show. Another reason for the re-thinking might have had to do with the elimination of another recurring character. The departure of Grace Lee Whitney's Yeoman Rand, who had often appeared on the bridge and in landing parties and had been depicted as a potential object of the captain's affections, dropped the number of recurring female cast members from three to two. Uhura more than Nurse Chapel filled the space formerly occupied by Rand. One example of this is in the use of Uhura in landing parties: whereas she had done this only once in the first season, during Season Two Uhura participated in three landing parties ("Mirror, Mirror," "I, Mudd," and "The Gamesters of Triskelion"). Rand's departure also cleared the way for the development of a romantic interest between Uhura and Kirk, as shall be discussed below.¹⁴

Uhura also had clearly gained the confidence of the captain and his first officer, in a reversal of the pattern from Season One. In "Who Mourns for Adonais?," as Uhura again demonstrated facility with the "nuts and bolts" of her

¹⁴ "Mirror, Mirror," *Star Trek*, first broadcast October 6, 1967 by NBC, Directed by Marc Daniels and written by Jerome Bixby; "I, Mudd," *Star Trek*, first broadcast November 3, 1967 by NBC, Directed by Marc Daniels and written by Stephen Kandel and David Gerrold; and "The Gamesters of Triskelion," *Star Trek*, first broadcast January 5, 1968 by NBC, Directed by Gene Nelson and written by Margaret Armen.

job, crawling behind a panel to re-engineer the communications station, she doubted her ability to successfully complete her task. But Spock expressed confidence in her: “I can think of no one better equipped to handle it, Miss Uhura. Please proceed.” She did, and succeeded; her re-establishment of communications between the ship and the surface saved the landing party.¹⁵ In “Mirror, Mirror,” in an alternate universe wherein the crew of the Enterprise was devious and bloodthirsty, Kirk asked Uhura to go to the bridge to ascertain the ship’s mission. When she expressed anxiety, Kirk said “Uhura, you’re the only one who can do it.” And along with the confidence of her supervisors, she had gained the self-confidence necessary to handle physical confrontations: in the penultimate scene of the same episode, Uhura disarmed the mirror-Kirk’s lover, a successful reprise of her unsuccessful Season One attempt to disarm the deranged, rapier-wielding Sulu.

Again and again in this second season viewers were presented with a tougher, more independent, more central Uhura. In “Friday’s Child,” Uhura participated in a senior-level briefing. In “The Gamesters of Triskelion,” when crew members were forced to be gladiators, Uhura fought admirably, and the “master thrall” commented that she was equal in spirit to the captain. At the end of “Bread and Circuses,” after the crew had liberated a planet from a dictatorial former Starfleet captain, it was Uhura – not Kirk, Spock, or McCoy – who added a critical piece to the puzzle by identifying the planet’s religion. Finally, in “A Private Little War,” Uhura, Chekhov, and Engineer Scott (James Doohan) supplied historical and anthropological ideas to Kirk in the absence of Spock.¹⁶

There were also two episodes in this season, “The Trouble with Tribbles” and “The Changeling,” in which Uhura gave orders over the intercom. These were in the nature of the “now hear this” style of orders, where the speaker is not so much giving orders as relaying them from a superior officer, but it is nonetheless telling that the writers were feeling more freedom to put an African-American woman even in this position (usually Shatner did these voice-overs, beginning with “This is the captain speaking”). In “The Changeling,” she gave specific orders through the ship’s intercom to an individual crewman: “Mr. Scott’s engineers are working on [the warp power indicators] now. Report to him when your indicators are registering properly.” The crewman at first appeared to

¹⁵ “Who Mourns for Adonais?,” *Star Trek*, first broadcast September 22, 1967 by NBC, Directed by Marc Daniels and written by Gilbert Ralston and Gene L. Coon.

¹⁶ “Friday’s Child,” *Star Trek*, first broadcast December 1, 1967 by NBC, Directed by Joseph Pevney and written by D.C. Fontana; “Bread and Circuses,” *Star Trek*, first broadcast March 15, 1968 by NBC, Directed by Ralph Senensky and written by Gene Rodenberry and Gene L. Coon; “A Private Little War,” *Star Trek*, first broadcast February 2, 1968 by NBC, Directed by Marc Daniels and written by Gene Rodenberry.

be white, but was later referred to as “Mr. Singh,” and therefore of south-central Asian origin; he was played by Hawaiian actor Blaisdel Makee. At no point in the original series did Uhura give or deliver an order to a white person.¹⁷

Another moment of some import in the portrayal of Uhura came later in the same episode. After suffering brain trauma, Uhura was placed in an infantile position, being taught to read again by Nurse Chapel. But the writers turned this into a positive depiction of Uhura’s capabilities. Chapel, when pointing out to Doctor McCoy that Uhura was now at a first grade reading level, stated that “She seems to have an aptitude for mathematics,” a nontraditional pursuit for women. Uhura did not give up or appear frustrated with learning, defying the stereotype attributed to African-American children by opponents of school integration; by the end of the episode McCoy reported to the captain “I thought you might like to know that Lieutenant Uhura is back to college level; she can be back on the job within a week.” These scenes go further than any other in the series to demonstrate that Uhura held her job “because she was the most qualified and had been chosen on that basis alone,” a quotation Nichols would later attribute to Martin Luther King.¹⁸

In the third season of the original series, the depiction of Uhura was not dramatically different from that of the second season, but certain moments are worth deconstruction. In “Spock’s Brain,” informing Kirk of a transmission from a planet, Uhura demonstrated that her communications expertise was theoretical as well as technical, offering various theories of the cause for an unexplained transmission. “Wink of an Eye” featured a recorded distress signal received as if it were current, making communications a plot point. Kirk, Spock, and Uhura discussed the matter but it was Uhura who put it all together.¹⁹

But perhaps the most ground-breaking depiction of Uhura during Season Three came in “Day of the Dove,” when Uhura was allowed to express anger for the first time, actually throwing a device to the floor in frustration with her inability to complete a necessary communication. A greater propensity to violence is a false stereotype associated with African-Americans, and the producers had heretofore not allowed Uhura such frustration in an apparent attempt to show that she was not stereotypical, a “credit to her race,” safe. That

¹⁷ “The Trouble with Tribbles,” *Star Trek*, first broadcast December 29, 1967 by NBC, Directed by Joseph Pevney and written by David Gerrold; “The Changeling,” *Star Trek*, first broadcast September 29, 1967 by NBC, Directed by Marc Daniels and written by John Meredyth Lucas.

¹⁸ Nichelle Nichols interview.

¹⁹ “Spock’s Brain,” *Star Trek*, first broadcast September 20, 1968 by NBC, Directed by Marc Daniels and written by Lee Cronin; “Wink of an Eye,” *Star Trek*, first broadcast November 29, 1968 by NBC, Directed by Jud Taylor and written by Arthur Heinemann.

they did finally allow her a moment of anger in this late episode is testimony to the confidence they and producer Gene Rodenberry felt by this point in the relationship between Uhura and the audience. In other words, she had demonstrated that she was competent, so she was now allowed to be human.²⁰

The episode “That Which Survives” contained two very interesting moments from the standpoint of race. After the bridge was shaken, Spock replied to Uhura’s “what happened?” query with his typical literalism: “The occipital area of my head seems to have impacted with the arm of the chair.” It was clear that she was asking what happened to the ship rather than what happened to Spock personally. She smiled knowingly, as she was by now quite used to Spock. While her response was not haughty, there was nevertheless a bit of condescension, as with a mother to a child: “No, Mister Spock, I meant ‘what happened to us.’” Moments later, when discussing the “chances of the captain and the others being alive,” Uhura’s facial expression as Spock explained that “we are not engaged in gambling” clearly demonstrated impatience with his emotionless clinicality. She almost smirked as she replied “Yes, Mister Spock.” Part of this was subordination to a superior officer, but there was a bit of the classic sublimation to whites: after centuries of slavery and Jim Crow, African-Americans had learned that talking back could lead to dangerous repercussions. Uhura knew just how far she could take her impatience and condescension.²¹

While these moments were neither inherently negative nor positive depictions of Uhura as an African-American woman on American television in the late 1960s, what they indicated was a willingness to acknowledge the sensibilities of the African-American audience, something largely unheard of in mainstream popular entertainment at that time. As with the expression of anger depicted in “Day of the Dove,” most whites would not pick up on these subtle cues, but most African-American viewers could easily discern them. We cannot be certain to what degree these cues were specifically written into the script and to what degree they were the expression of the actress and missed or ignored by the editors and censors, but perhaps it is this, in the end, which was most remarkable about *Star Trek* by its third and final season: that it was appealing to a multicultural and diverse audience as much as it was employing a multicultural and diverse cast.

No discussion of Uhura’s path-breaking role would be complete without an analysis of the celebrated kiss scene in “Plato’s Stepchildren.” In this third-

²⁰ “Day of the Dove,” *Star Trek*, first broadcast November 1, 1968 by NBC, Directed by Marvin Chomsky and written by Jerome Bixby.

²¹ “That Which Survives,” *Star Trek*, first broadcast January 24, 1969 by NBC, Directed by Herb Wallerstein and written by John Meredyth Lucas.

season episode, Kirk kissed Uhura, albeit under the influence of telekinesis. Although footage of actual lip contact was edited out and the camera shot cut to the back of Uhura's head, the kiss was a plot point, the viewer was made to believe that it had occurred, and the actors actually did kiss. This interracial kiss resulted in the refusal of several NBC affiliates in the South to air the episode, and it has gone down in history as the first televised interracial kiss.²²

A deeper analysis of the scene and its antecedents reveals that this kiss may have been more than simply the result of telekinesis. The kiss was clearly in the works as early as the second season, when, following the departure of Yeoman Rand, Kirk and Uhura began to demonstrate a deepening affection for one another. In "Mirror, Mirror," Kirk comforted Uhura in a very touching, physically intimate manner. He softly took her shoulders in his hands, facing her, looked deeply into her eyes, and said "Uhura, you're the only one who can do it. I'll be right there." This was written as the actual Kirk and the actual Uhura, and they were not in the grip of any outside influence. There was clearly affection between the two but it was not clearly platonic: the writers, director, and actors appeared to be making a serious attempt to push the boundaries of what was acceptable on broadcast television, a necessary prelude to the kiss scene. Later, in the final scene of "The Tholian Web," as Kirk recounted being trapped in an empty dimension, he nodded at Uhura as he said to Spock and McCoy "I must say I prefer a crowded universe much better," indicating an affection (or at least sexual appreciation) for her. She smiled back. At some level this was merely sexism; Kirk liked his women compliant, and Uhura, like African-American women throughout history, was in a position requiring compliance. But there was more to this. In the context of the "Mirror, Mirror" scene before and the "Plato's Stepchildren" scene later, this moment in "The Tholian Web" appeared to be the expression of a shared secret rather than simply the leer of a rake. Uhura's smile evinced confidence, not compliance.²³

With this background it is clear that the intimacy between Kirk and Uhura in the kiss scene was not fully dependent on mind control. The reality was somewhere between a race relations milestone and a television contrivance. Kirk had a demonstrated affection for Uhura, and found her attractive; he had not acted on this, presumably because he felt that an affair with a crew member

²² "Making History: The First Interracial Kiss on TV Happens...on Star Trek." Makers Blog, http://www.makers.com/blog/making-history-first-interracial-kiss-tv-happens-star-trek?icid=maing-grid7|main5|dl2|sec1_lnk2%26pLid%3D283870, accessed September 20, 2013. "Plato's Stepchildren," *Star Trek*, first broadcast November 22, 1968 by NBC, Directed by David Alexander and written by Meyer Dolinsky.

²³ "The Tholian Web," *Star Trek*, originally broadcast November 15, 1968 by NBC, Directed by Herb Wallerstein and written by Judy Burns and Chet Richards.

would interfere with his ability to command the Enterprise. But now we find that his feelings were reciprocated. Uhura and Kirk were not in control of their actions but they controlled their speech. Uhura said “I’m thinking of all the times on the Enterprise when I was scared to death and I would see you so busy at your command, and I would hear your voice from all parts of the ship and my fears would fade.” Kirk may not have been her lover but he was her romantic savior and love interest. Indeed, Kirk seemed almost to welcome the kiss. His anger was over the loss of self control, not being made to kiss this beautiful woman for whom he clearly cared, and not platonically.

Nichelle Nichols reprised her role as Uhura in six feature films. In *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, it is noteworthy that Uhura’s hairdo was presented as an Afro rather than straightened, reflecting the tastes and standards of the era. The film was produced during the 1970s, the height of the Black Pride movement. But Uhura’s was not a role of importance in this film, and as usual, despite the increased diversity of the Enterprise crew (evident in a briefing scene), command roles were still reserved for white men (Shatner’s Kirk, of course, and the younger Captain Will Decker, played by Stephen Collins).²⁴

During the 1980s, the decade which saw production of four of the six original-cast *Star Trek* films, the United States was in the throes of a conservative backlash against the achievements of the Civil Rights Era, and the depiction of Uhura in the films was representative of those social and political changes. The early gains of the Civil Rights Era had taken place in an era of governmental largesse, and were in any event focused on creating a “level playing field” for African-Americans: declaring overt employment discrimination illegal, establishing measures to ensure voting rights, and withholding government funds from segregated school districts. Later in the 1960s and into the 1970s, as the federal government became focused on actual jobs programs, affirmative action, and cross-district busing to integrate schools, the Vietnam War cut short the promise of substantial funding for the War on Poverty and a declining economy subsequently increased competition for jobs, leading to a white, primarily working-class, backlash against the gains of the Civil Rights Era. These changes resulted in the victory within the Republican Party of conservatives over moderates and the rise of Ronald Reagan to the presidency (after launching his campaign in Philadelphia, Mississippi, the site of racist killings in 1964). A desire to appeal to working-class whites also resulted in the rise of moderates in the Democratic Party including Bill Clinton, whose presidency saw a rollback of social programs seen to benefit African-Americans after conservative Republicans retook Congress in 1994.²⁵

²⁴ *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*.

In *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock*, Uhura was present for only a few scenes at the start of the film and one at its conclusion. The 1984 film was however noteworthy for our study in that it contained the only depiction of Uhura giving a direct order to a white male officer. Taking a job as transporter chief on Earth so that Kirk, McCoy, Engineer Scott (James Doohan), and Chekhov could illegally board the Enterprise, she ordered a young white ensign into a closet. But the age of the ensign was critical: this scene followed a familiar trope in the depiction of African-American women, that of the mammy. Uhura may have been employed by the conspiracy, but she was not one of the white male conspirators. African-American women have traditionally been employed by white families in child-rearing, and the ensign was a stand-in for a child in Uhura's care.²⁶

The most negative stereotypical depiction of Uhura occurred in *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*. In the second act she performed a sexy, tribal dance to entice an enemy group into a trap, relegating a professional bridge officer to the position of primitive sex object. Later she and Sulu – not coincidentally the bridge crew's nonwhites – were the first crew members to succumb to the persuasive powers of alien intruder Sybok, because nonwhites are traditionally depicted as being weak-willed. Under Sybok's influence Uhura was again sexualized: she made an advance on Mister Scott, claiming that Sybok “has simply put us in touch with feelings that we've always been afraid to express” (despite the fact that there had never been any indication in the television shows or prior films that she had romantic feelings for anyone other than Kirk). Meanwhile McCoy, likewise “touched” by Sybok, remained loyal to the captain. Whites, especially elite whites, were depicted as having full command of their own faculties.²⁷

If the third *Star Trek* film was unconsciously racist and the fifth demonstrably so, *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* moved in exactly the opposite direction, returning Uhura to her former position of professionalism and

²⁵ For more on the post-Civil Rights Era backlash and the rightward drift in American national politics, see for instance Mary Frances Berry, *And Justice for All: The United States Commission on Civil Rights and the Continuing Struggle for Freedom in America* (NY: Knopf, 2009); Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (NY: The New Press, 2010); David Hamilton Golland, *Constructing Affirmative Action: The Struggle for Equal Employment Opportunity* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011); and Dennis Deslippe, *Protesting Affirmative Action: The Struggle for Equality after the Civil Rights Revolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

²⁶ *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock*, Directed by Leonard Nimoy (1984; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2002).

²⁷ *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*.

respect. In her first scene in the film, she expressed surprise at being called into a meeting by stating “I’m supposed to be chairing a seminar at the Academy.” Later in the film, after Vulcan Lt. Valeris (Kim Cattrall) fired a phaser in the galley as a demonstration, senior officers and a security team arrived to investigate. Uhura was first on the scene. “Did somebody fire a phaser?” she asked, clearly exercising her authority. At the end of the same scene, Uhura said to Spock, “You understand, we have lost all contact with the Captain and Dr. McCoy.” She, Spock, and Chekhov were the only remaining bridge officers in the galley (and Chekhov had no lines after he dismissed the security team). Uhura behaved as one who had Spock’s confidence as a trusted advisor, and he confirmed this status by discussing strategy with her: “Yes, at the moment they’re surrounded by a magnetic shield. However, if I know the Captain, by this time he is deep into planning his escape.” This indicated that Uhura, unlike Valeris, knew that Spock had placed a tracking device on Kirk; presumably it was Uhura who had been monitoring Kirk’s whereabouts. But what made this scene particularly remarkable is that prior to this last exchange, Spock had sent Valeris to the bridge to “inform Starfleet Command our warp drive is inoperative.” This task should have been Uhura’s, as the communications officer; further, as the message was a fiction, the human Uhura would presumably have been more comfortable lying to Starfleet Command than the Vulcan Valeris, who needed to be convinced by Spock that it was not a lie, but “an error.” While it would later be revealed that Valeris was one of the conspirators, Spock did not know that yet. He was clearly choosing to reserve the high-level discussion in this scene for Uhura, or at least counting her as part of a command/tactical triumvirate including himself and Chekhov (echoing the typical triumvirate of Kirk, Spock, and McCoy.) While the plan was Spock’s, Uhura and Chekhov were depicted as trusted associates.²⁸

In a still later scene in the same film Uhura gave an order to the entire ship over the intercom system (as she had on two occasions during the television series): “This is the bridge. We are still in Klingon space. Deck Nine, remain at battle stations.” She was the communications officer, and this could be taken as more of an announcement than an order. But such announcements typically began with “This is the Captain speaking.” With two captains present on board at the time, (Kirk and Spock), and with Chekhov the head of security, others could have just as easily made this announcement. Clearly Uhura was giving an order here, albeit on behalf of one of the Captains. Since Kirk had so recently returned from a Klingon prison camp, perhaps he and Spock were debriefing in sick bay

²⁸ *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, Directed by Nicholas Meyer (1991; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2004).

or his quarters – leaving Uhura in charge of the bridge! She did, after all, outrank Chekhov; Sulu was on another ship, and Scott was examining schematics over coffee in the Captain’s mess when Uhura made the announcement. This – along with Sulu’s promotion to Captain – may have been indicative of the end of the Rodenberry era. Producer Gene Rodenberry was prone to stereotype ethnic characters and women. With his health failing (he died with *Star Trek VI* in production), Roddenberry was much less in control of this film than he had been in the past.²⁹

The evident desire among the creators of *Star Trek* to break racial and social stereotypes in their casting and characterizations continued with the successor series *The Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine*, *Voyager*, and *Enterprise*. *The Next Generation* cast included African-American actor Levar Burton, who portrayed a handicapped character: Lieutenant Commander Geordi La Forge was blind, but because of the latest technology in the conceit of the show, could “see” through a specially-designed visor which covered his eyes and fed optical signals directly into his brain. Brent Spiner, a white actor, portrayed Lieutenant Commander Data, an android. In *Deep Space Nine*, the Sudanese-British actor Alexander Siddig played Dr. Julian Bashir, an Arab. In *Voyager*, African-American actor Tim Russ played Vulcan Lieutenant Commander Tuvok, while Latina Roxanne Dawson was cast as the half-human, half Klingon B’Ellana Torres. Like Uhura, Torres was complicated and sexy but not usually sexualized; indeed her eventual marriage to the latest swashbuckler in the Kirk mold, Lt. Tom Paris (Robert Duncan McNeill), was depicted as a partnership of equals. The recurring characters of *Enterprise* included an African-American man, an Asian-American woman, and a female space alien, but returned to the standard format of a white male commander.³⁰

Like the nontraditional casting and characterization choices of the original series, these later characters were portrayed as competent but not perfect, safe but not docile. But a new theme had taken hold with the advent of *The Next Generation*, one which continued through the later series: absolute professionalism. Whereas Uhura, Sulu, Scott, and Chekhov had been presented as “normal” – albeit in a manner wherein their racial, ethnic, or special differences were occasionally celebrated – the “nontraditional” characters of these later series functioned as part of hyper-professional, expert teams. Each was capable

²⁹ On Rodenberry’s background in race, gender, and casting, see Sweeney, *Origins of the Star Trek Phenomenon*, pp.17-29 and 65-71.

³⁰ Gene Rodenberry, Rick Berman, *et al*, Producers, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, originally aired 1987-1994 in syndication; Rick Berman, *et al*, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*; Rick Berman, *Star Trek: Voyager*; and Rick Berman, *et al*, Producers, *Star Trek: Enterprise*, originally aired 2001-2005 by UPN.

of a unique contribution and possessed superior general skills. Uhura and Chekov were proficient; La Forge, Bashir, and Torres were geniuses.³¹ The lesson was that in the pure meritocracy of the future, when race and ethnicity become irrelevant, the capabilities and achievements of the best among us will set an ever-increasing standard.

The most groundbreaking aspect of *Deep Space Nine*, in an era when African-American actors and characters were now considered the norm (to the point that their absence in the recurring cast of popular television shows like *Seinfeld* and *Friends* raised eyebrows³²), was the selection of an African-American man to play the captain. The most important role in any Star Trek series, this third incarnation saw Avery Brooks filling shoes previously been worn by William Shatner and Patrick Stewart. It helped that Brooks, like Stewart, was an erudite veteran of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Further, the producers decided to play it safe, starting his character, Benjamin Sisko, at the rank of commander rather than captain (although he was the ranking officer), and in a sense emasculating him by not giving him a starship.³³ These slights nevertheless pale in comparison to the fact that the Sisko family – Benjamin, his son Jake, his father Joseph, his late wife Jennifer (portrayed using the “flashback” device as well as the “alternate universe” device), and his love interest and eventual second wife Kasidy Yates – were indeed all-American (while remaining true to their African-American heritage). As with the Huxtable family in the contemporary *The Cosby Show*, this was an attempt to push the boundaries of popular television, presenting a cast dominated by African-Americans to a mainstream audience. Like *The Cosby Show*, *Deep Space Nine* presented an upper-middle-class family with professional parents in stark contrast to the silliness of *The Jeffersons* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, the standard depiction of disadvantaged African-Americans found in *Good Times*

³¹ Pounds, *Race in Space*, p. 83.

³² See, for instance, Jillian Sandel, “I’ll Be There for You: Friends and the Fantasy of Alternative Families,” *American Studies* Vol. 39, No. 2, TV and American Culture (Summer, 1998), pp. 141-55.

³³ Another poke at racial sensitivity, despite being first broadcast in the era of “political correctness,” was that this job, commander of Starfleet personnel on an alien space station, was presumably considered undesirable by the white officers eligible for the position, so it fell to a Black man. When the space station was finally assigned a ship much later in the series, Sisko placed it under the command of Klingon Lieutenant Commander Worf, played by African-American actor Michael Dorn. Worf was hyper-masculine, and as an African-American man could have been seen as very threatening to racial norms, but the actor’s race was sublimated into his character’s identity as a space alien. Worf’s interracial love affair on the series – with white Terry Farrell’s character Jadzia Dax – was likewise rendered racially unthreatening by the fact that neither of the characters were human, making it “interspecies” rather than interracial.

and *What's Happening!!*, and the more typical working-class experience depicted in *Family Matters*. The Siskos were thus rendered fully palatable to the white segment of the audience. Also like the Huxtables, the Siskos were mainstream yet intensely proud of their heritage. Whereas the grandfathers of the Huxtable family unashamedly recounted their experiences – good and bad – as members of the segregated army during World War II, grandfather Joseph Sisko (Brock Peters) maintained a thriving creole restaurant in New Orleans with an interracial clientele. Whereas *The Cosby Show* featured regular references to the lessons and successes of the Civil Rights Era, including a depiction of the Huxtables watching a clip of Martin Luther King's speech at the 1963 March on Washington and at least one timely reference to the importance of defeating *apartheid* in South Africa, the Siskos (through a Benjamin dream sequence) revisited African-American urban life in the 1950s. The lesson from both shows was that in the post-Civil Rights era, the American Dream of integration was no longer represented by a melting pot, wherein ethnic differences add to a mixture but lose their integrity, but rather to a salad bowl, wherein ethnic *and racial* differences each add something to the mix but maintain their distinctive characteristics. A tomato next to lettuce will always remain a tomato, no matter how you toss it; shredded cheese does not melt in a salad. Again like the Huxtables, The Siskos of *Deep Space Nine* were not simply African-American versions of white people, but African-American people who combined success in the white-dominated culture with integrity for their own sub-culture.³⁴

Arguably, the white segment of the *Star Trek* franchise audience was already open to the notion of an African-American captain. Unlike their forebears of the postwar era, for whom Lieutenant Uhura was novel, the audience for *Deep Space Nine* had grown up during the post-Civil Rights era. But racial stereotypes had been easier to defeat, it would seem, than gender stereotypes, as many “trekkers” found the casting of a *woman* captain difficult to stomach.³⁵

³⁴ *The Cosby Show* was Nielsen's top-rated American television program from 1985 to 1990. “The Cosby Show,” Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title= The_Cosby_Show& diff=571857235&oldid=571856801](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The_Cosby_Show&diff=571857235&oldid=571856801), accessed September 13, 2013. Marcy Carsey, *et al*, Producers, *The Cosby Show*, originally aired 1984-1992 by NBC; Bernie West, *et al*, Producers, *The Jeffersons*, originally aired 1975-1985 by CBS; Quincy Jones, *et al*, Producers, *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, originally aired 1990-1996 by NBC; Norman Lear, *et al*, Producers, *Good Times*, originally aired 1974-1979 by CBS; Bernie Orenstein, *et al*, Producers, *What's Happening!!*, originally aired 1976-1979 by ABC; and Thomas L. Miller and Robert L. Boyett, Producers, *Family Matters*, originally aired 1989-1997 by ABC.

³⁵ See for instance “Fan Mutiny: With Janeway, or Against?” *Star Trek: Voyager* Forums, May-July, 2006, <http://www.tv.com/shows/star-trek-voyager/forums/fan-mutiny-with-janeway-or-against-378-248740/>, accessed September 15, 2013; K. Tempest Bradford, “Standing

In 1994, with *The Next Generation* drawing to a close and *Deep Space Nine* in its second season, Rick Berman (who had succeeded creator Gene Roddenberry as executive producer of the franchise) cast actress Kate Mulgrew as Captain Kathryn Janeway, a no-nonsense female scientist in command of a starship which, in the first episode of the series, was flung to a distant quadrant of the galaxy without communication with earth or any hope of returning to “Federation Space” in the crew’s lifetime. In some sense, therefore, Janeway was more than a captain; she was a head of state, engaging with completely unknown species, appointing an ambassador, and guiding her “nation” through the unknown.³⁶

Traditional casting in mainstream public television has divided women into two tropes: the sexpot ingénue, which Roddenberry had toyed with but ultimately rejected for Uhura; and the “boss bitch.” Thirty-nine years old in 1994, Mulgrew no longer qualified as an ingénue; indeed, for the character she portrayed, such a trope would have been ridiculous. And so the trope to be avoided for the sake of equality was that of the “boss bitch.” This sexist and derogatory characterization encompasses the notion that wherever a woman is employed, her “proper” role in relation to men is that of subservience. The *Star Trek* successor series had been built on the principle that humankind would eventually institute full equality of the sexes, just as it would institute full equality of the races – indeed that these had been accomplished by the 23rd century. With this background, therefore, the casting of a woman captain would be as natural as the casting of an African-American captain. Following the format of absolute professionalism in the successor series she would be, like the members of her crew, capable of a unique contribution to team excellence while possessing superior general skills; further, as the captain, she would be, like Sisko and Picard, qualified and experienced in the command of such advanced people. And so while some fans of the series would denigrate Janeway as a typical “boss bitch,” in fact she was no different than her male predecessors – at least when it came to her professional life.

Janeway’s personal life was another matter entirely. Here the writers and the actress worked to distinguish Janeway as a woman, inherently different from

Up for Sisko and Janeway,” August 21, 2009, <http://tempest.fluidartist.com/standing-up-for-sisko-and-janeway/>, accessed September 15, 2013; Sara Eileen Hames, “Janeway Doesn’t Deserve This Shit,” Tor.Com Blogs, August 2012, <http://www.tor.com/blogs/2012/08/janeway-doesnt-deserve-this-shit>, accessed September 15, 2013; and “TrekkieFeminist,” August 6, 2013, <http://trekkiefeminist.tumblr.com/post/57490055633/900-done-with-people-hating-on-captain-janeway>, accessed September 15, 2013.

³⁶ Robert Greenberger, *Star Trek: The Complete Unauthorized History* (NY: Voyageur Press, 2012).

Sisko and Picard, and even more so from Kirk. A confirmed bachelor, Kirk was hypersexual and promiscuous, both on and off duty, behavior that was expected from a white leading man in the postwar era. Picard, by contrast, was controlled, with continual hints that he might be interested in a love affair with Doctor Crusher (possibly to avoid the implication of homosexuality). Ben Sisko was a widower who was eventually allowed to fall in love and marry (albeit in a circumscribed fashion to avoid evincing the hyper-promiscuity with which the African-American community has been unfairly labeled). With all three prior male captains, love interests – whether or not included in the plotline – were not seen as hindrances to their ability to fulfill their duties. With Janeway, however, the writers had the opportunity to explore the issues facing the modern working woman of the 1990s, trying to balance work life with home life, exploring female sexual desire in a post-feminist environment but still dealing with the double-standard which inveighed against female promiscuity. Like Sisko, Janeway began the series with an absent longtime lover: whereas Sisko’s wife had died, Janeway’s fiancée was in another quadrant of the galaxy; he thought she had died and she was unable to tell him otherwise. As with Sisko, Janeway was eventually allowed to love again; various plot devices resulted in the discovery that her fiancée had moved on, leaving her free to pursue romance (but as with Sisko in a circumscribed manner to avoid suggestions of promiscuity). In one particularly interesting plotline, she entertained the possibility of a love affair with Commander Chakotay, her Native American first officer, played by Robert Beltran. While this development was never fully realized, it was considered with two plot devices. One had the two stranded permanently on an uninhabited planet, while the other imagined a future wherein Janeway had retired and Chakotay had assumed control of the starship. Notably, in neither of these circumstances was Janeway in direct command of her lover, as such a construction would suggest that wives could overthrow their husbands as head of the nuclear family.

We should not take this glorification of *Star Trek*’s ability to cast above sexism too far. Janeway may not have been a “boss bitch,” but the *Voyager* cast did include a sexpot ingénue, costumed in what passed for nudity in 1990s primetime television. Former Miss America runner-up Jeri Ryan portrayed Seven-of-Nine, a human who had been assimilated by the collectivist Borg species. Freed by the crew of *Voyager*, Seven was given a distinctive skintight outfit leaving little to the imagination. She was cast, therefore, more for her voluptuous body than any other characteristic.³⁷

³⁷ “Jeri Ryan,” Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jeri_Ryan&diff=569477318&oldid=569477047, accessed September 27, 2013.

For a series usually so forward-thinking and equality-conscious, the overt sexualization of Seven-of-Nine was not the only area in which the producers and writers failed. The successor series also played on ethnic stereotypes in the characterization of certain species. The money-grubbing Ferengi bore all too many of the traits anti-Semites associated with Jews, notably a lack of ethics, a worship of profit, the legal subordination of women, and an uncontrollable sexual attraction to gentiles (or non-Ferengi, in the conceit of the show). By contrast, the Cardassian species were characterized much as Americans were taught to see Germans during the World Wars: militaristic, despotic, genocidal. The continued presence of these species alleviated somewhat the totality of these stereotypes through increased interaction and “profile” episodes; this was especially true as more mixed-species characters were introduced. But their continued presence was a double-edged sword as their stereotypical behavior remained the dominant feature. Further, the very fact that the mixed-species Klingons, Ferengi, Cardassians, and Vulcans tempered their stereotypical “nature” belied the implication that mixed-race people in our own time are less stereotypically “African-American,” “Jewish,” “German,” etc., precisely because of the presence of white, gentile, or “American” heritage.³⁸

In race, too, casting in the successor series proved problematic. After the Soviet-seeming Klingons were transformed for the films and successor series into animalistic, ritualistic thugs, with angry-looking ridges on their skulls and a primitive attachment to violence, extras of the species were most often cast with African-American actors, thereby “othering” African-Americans with one hand even as the other hand was breaking new ground with the recurring casts. While this might have been done to meet new affirmative action guidelines, the positive presence of African-Americans in the featured and recurring casts obviated that need, going far beyond mere tokenism.³⁹ And having avoided the whore trope with the complicated sexuality of Lieutenant Uhura (except in the fifth film, as noted above), during the reactionary 1980s the producers perpetuated the mammy trope with Whoopi Goldberg’s recurring character on *The Next Generation*, the bartender Guinan, who reprised a familiar role in American popular culture: the intuitive servant, female (and therefore non-threatening),

³⁸ Pounds, *Race in Space*, p. 186.

³⁹ This is presumably why the producers of the *Lord of the Rings* films cast African-Americans as the animalistic Orcs; those films had no African-American featured cast members. See for instance Shyam Bhatia, “The Lord of the Rings Rooted in Racism: Academic,” *Rediff India Abroad*, January 8, 2003, <http://www.rediff.com/news/2003/jan/08lord.htm>, accessed September 15, 2013; and David Ibata, “‘Lord’ of Racism: Critics View Trilogy as Discriminatory,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 12, 2003, http://www.chicagotribune.com/features/chi-030112_epringsrace.0,4574891.story, accessed September 15, 2013.

preferring the company of the white master/commander (and those at or near his station) to those with whom she shares skin tone. In *Star Trek: First Contact*, the second Star Trek film to feature the cast of *The Next Generation*, Goldberg's Guinan was replaced by Alfre Woodard's Lily, an African-American scientist from the 2060s (and assistant to the white male Dr. Zephram Cochrane). As merely the assistant in a future set 100 years after the broadcast of the original series and filmed in the 1990s, Lily showed that African-Americans and women were still relegated to second-class status. Lily acted as Picard's alter ego, and it was she who successfully advised him to give up his vendetta against the Borg much as African-American women have historically served as sounding boards for white men in television (e.g. *Gimme a Break!*) and film (e.g. *Gone With the Wind*).⁴⁰

The later *Star Trek* films featuring the cast of *The Next Generation* continued this unfortunate pattern of backsliding in their depiction of race. A particularly egregious example of this was found in *Star Trek: Insurrection*, which depicted an idyllic, peaceful, seemingly pre-industrial civilization consisting of only white people. Their villainous cousins, however, were multiracial, implying that the species achieved perfection by removing non-whites. Less than a decade after the genocide in the former Yugoslavia, the supposedly enlightened Star Trek found itself celebrating ethnic cleansing!⁴¹

Star Trek: Nemesis, meanwhile, was a story about race, despite the ostensible theme of "brotherhood" (major guest characters included Data's prototype and Picard's clone). The film depicted the crew of *The Next Generation* intervening in a race war in the Romulan Empire: the primitive, enslaved Remans represented African-Americans, while the sophisticated, governing Romulans represented hegemonic whites. Guided by a white outsider, the Picard clone Shinzon (African-Americans are often stereotyped as incapable of leadership on their own behalf⁴²), the Remans had risen up against the Romulans and wrested control of the empire, enacting what is for many whites a recurrent

⁴⁰ *Star Trek: First Contact*, Directed by Jonathan Frakes (1996; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2005); Hal Cooper, et al, Producers, *Gimme a Break!*, originally aired 1981-1987 by NBC; *Gone With the Wind*, Directed by Victor Fleming (Beverly Hills, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures, 1939).

⁴¹ *Star Trek: Insurrection*, Directed by Jonathan Frakes (1998; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2005).

⁴² One example of this is the popular (and largely incorrect) depiction of Abraham Lincoln as "the Great Emancipator." His Proclamation carried no legal force but encouraged African-Americans themselves to flee the plantations of the South, some of whom later enlisted in the Union Army. See for instance James Oakes, Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865 (NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013).

fear: that African-Americans, held in subservience for so long, will overthrow white dominance. Further, Shinzon's ship, described by Picard as a "predator" and by Data as a "weapon," was called the Scimitar. A scimitar is the curved sword of the medieval Moslem, evoking the racial fear Europeans once held for the Arabian invasion, fears then being reinforced by modern acts of terrorism. The defeat of Shinzon would be the result of his betrayal by the Romulan "whites." True to form, previously loyal whites betrayed the Reman "Blacks." During the American Civil War the slave-owners had sought help from the British in their war to keep their slaves. Here the Federation, with a captain portrayed by an English actor, represented the British, and unlike the actual British during the American Civil War, the Federation did come to the aid of the Romulan masters, causing the revolt to fail and white hegemony, in the form of Romulan control of their empire and slaves, to resume. In that sense, this film was a remake of D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, replete with racial stereotypes, only this time the South won. To top it all off, the film began with what amounted to a segregated wedding: Guinan and La Forge were seated at one table together with Worf alone at the next, relegating the three African-Americans of the recurring cast, Whoopi Goldberg, Levar Burton, and Michael Dorn, to the "colored section."⁴³

This slide into negative stereotypical depictions on the part of *Star Trek* has sadly not been reversed by the two latest films, which recast the crew of the original series with actors from the millennial generation. Zoe Saldana's Uhura is very different from Nichelle Nichols' demure portrayal of the character, and more in line with an era expecting female characters to resemble martial arts experts like Angelina Jolie's Lara Croft. She too is sexualized, wearing a skintight outfit and being depicted as involved sexually with Zachary Quinto's Spock, but without nudity, making her compare more favorably to Dawson's Torres than Ryan's Seven-of-Nine. But the latest of these films is even more exploitative of women, especially nonwhite women: while Uhura continues to be depicted as tough, modern, and professional, the viewer is confronted in an early scene with Chris Pine's Captain Kirk waking with two lovers, Asian in appearance, soon revealed as space alien. This is degrading but sadly typical of recent media, as the scene is a remake of the opening scene of the final episode of Season 14 of the television series *ER*. Their tails, however, make it especially degrading, as they imply a lack of civilization in Kirk's lovers. And while the scene is evidently included to buttress young Kirk's reputation as a "bad boy," the fact that he is consistently rewarded for his bad behavior indicates that the

⁴³ *Star Trek: Nemesis*, Directed by Stuart Baird (2002; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2005).

writers see such sexist, racist degradation as deserving of a wink and a nod rather than a real reprimand.⁴⁴

As with any collaborative enterprise, *Star Trek* has both benefited and suffered from a diversity of opinions and backgrounds among its writers, producers, and directors. On race and gender, the result has been schizophrenic. As often as the franchise took two steps forward in its depiction of women, African-Americans, other nonwhites, and even space aliens, it took two steps back. The depiction of Nichelle Nichols' Uhura in particular saw several revisions over time, as society changed. At first she was a bit player, the token African-American, relegated largely to "hailing frequencies open, sir," the product of a sense during the 1960s that mainstream television programs should include more African-Americans in non-traditional roles. In the second season she was re-made into a key member of the bridge crew. In *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* she was a mammy, and in *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier* she was a weak-minded, uncivilized sex object. But in *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* she was again a key member of the crew, in a position of trust and responsibility. Still, the mammy trope was even then being revisited by the successor series *The Next Generation*, first with Whoopi Goldberg and later Alfre Woodard. The racial stereotypes depicted in the franchise have grown more, not less explicit, despite the positive depiction of the Siscos in *Deep Space Nine*. Likewise the sexualization of women has worsened in *Star Trek*, as seen in the fetishized sex aliens of *Star Trek Into Darkness*, despite the depiction of *Voyager's* Captain Janeway as a strong, intelligent, professional woman. Like American society, *Star Trek* was full of promise on the role of African-Americans and women during the 1960s and demonstrated the gains made by the 1990s, but also reflected the racist backlash of the 1980s and has illustrated the continued sexual subservience of women in the 21st century. As much as we may enjoy *Star Trek*, therefore, we must conclude that the franchise overall has not been groundbreaking in its depiction of race and gender (and indeed has never considered alternate categories of sexuality despite countless opportunities). While *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, *Deep Space Nine*, and *Voyager* were groundbreaking within *Star Trek*, and broke certain molds in the depiction of people capable of command, they barely exceeded societal expectations for the 1990s, were certainly not revolutionary for the era, and therefore did not

⁴⁴ *Star Trek*, Directed by J.J. Abrams (Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2009); *Star Trek Into Darkness*, Directed by J.J. Abrams (Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2013); *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, Directed by Simon West (Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2001); and "The Chicago Way," *ER*, first broadcast May 15, 2008 by NBC, Directed by Christopher Chulack and written by David Zabel and Lisa Zwerling.

make up for the repeated and continuing demeaning depictions of nonwhites and women in the franchise.

In 1998 and 1999, Daniel Bernardi and Micheal Pounds published books dealing with these topics but covering only the original series and *The Next Generation*. They were forced to conclude that *Star Trek* had not lived up to its promise of a racially and sexually egalitarian society. They did not consider *Deep Space Nine*, *Voyager*, or the later films, and they did not look comprehensively at a single African-American female character. Having now done so we must unfortunately conclude that they were right.