

Science Fiction, Gender, and Race:  
How Star Trek Has Failed to Live Up to its Progressive Ideals

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GNDR 360I-02

2 May 2012

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## **Table of Contents**

**Section One:** Introduction to Paper

**Section Two:** A Brief History of *Star Trek*

**Section Three:** Gender, Race, and Intersection.

**Section Four:** Why Media Matters

**Section Five:** The 23<sup>rd</sup> Century: A Progressive Beginning

**Section Six:** Problems in the Bright Future

**Section Seven:** The 24<sup>th</sup> Century: The Future is Less Bright

**Section Eight:** The 22<sup>nd</sup> Century: Progress is Lost

**Section Nine:** Rebook: A New Take on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Century

**Section Ten:** Conclusion

**Section Eleven:** Works Cited

## INTRODUCTION

*Star Trek*, created by Gene Roddenberry, has been viewed as a progressive franchise when the first television series, now recognized as *Star Trek: The Original Series*, and the first spin-off series, *Star Trek: The Animated Series*, were compared to the social and political stances of gender and race in the society of the era. When keeping the views of American society of the 1960s in mind, *The Original Series* and *The Animated Series* had main characters, secondary characters, and supporting roles that alternated between defying traditional views of gender and race in society of that era. The *Star Trek* television shows made commentary about social and political mores of that time period. Because of television censor rules of what could and could not be shown on the air, *Star Trek* producers and writers had to find ways to appease the network executives so that the *Star Trek* series' could be aired on American television.

Though *The Original Series* and *The Animated Series* lasted only five seasons combined, the following *Star Trek* feature films continued with the theme of taking on issues of the human condition, featuring ideas about human growth, eugenics, religion, and politics. However, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* attempted to make similar commentary for the 1980s and 1990s as *The Original Series* and *The Animated Series* did for the 1960s and 1970s. *The Next Generation* had a harder time with making said gendered and racial commentary due to attempting to identify itself as being farther in the future than *The Original Series* was. There was also the

changed role of Roddenberry's position in the production of the series and his eventual death, and the differing views of gender and race from the new production staff members who had taken over from Roddenberry. Though a couple of episodes of *The Next Generation* were taken from scripts that were to have been used for the aborted *Star Trek: Phase II*, the aforementioned differences between *The Original Series* and *The Next Generation* are apparent in the roles given to the main characters.

As the *Star Trek* franchise grew over time, into the creation of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993-1999) and *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995-2001), the commentary about gender and race in society tended to come in at a more gradual pace, despite the fact that the commanding officer on *Deep Space Nine* was African-American with a female first officer, and the commanding officer of *Voyager* was female with a Native American Indian first officer. Generally, the actors had to make suggestions and changes to keep the writers and producers from stereotyping gender and racial roles in the *Star Trek* franchise. However, the last *Star Trek* television series, *Enterprise* (2001-2005), and the latest film, *Star Trek XI* (also known as *Star Trek*), took a step backwards in the roles of gender and race for main characters in the series. The progressive stance of the *Star Trek* franchise began to evaporate throughout *Enterprise*, and became even more apparent when comparing *Star Trek XI* (which is a reboot of the *Star Trek* franchise) to *Star Trek: The Original Series*.

## HISTORY

Eugene “Gene” Roddenberry created *Star Trek* in 1964, when he presented his idea of a “wagon train to the stars” to television studios. Desilu Studios picked up the series and presented it to NBC, and the first pilot episode, “The Cage,” was produced, followed by the second pilot, “Where No Man Has Gone Before,” produced in 1965. On April 21<sup>st</sup>, 1966, *Star Trek* entered production and lasted for three seasons, when it had been canceled for the perception of having low viewership; though the series had a Neilson rating of between 20 and 24, which would be a hit today, having a 30 share was iffy (Gross, 65). The fan base for *Star Trek* was powerful enough to bring back *Star Trek* in an animated form for two seasons, starting September 8<sup>th</sup>, 1973 (Gross, 79-80; Reeves-Stevens, 16).

The television franchise in the 1970s paused at the end of *The Animated Series*. In 1977, Paramount Pictures attempted to create a new television network, with *Star Trek: Phase II* as the flagship program, collapsed (Reeves-Stevens, 34). After the network deal collapsed, what was to be the feature-length pilot became the first *Star Trek* film: *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*. *Star Trek* continued to make films throughout the early and mid 1980s, but did not return to television until *Star Trek: The Next Generation* premiered in September of 1987. *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* premiered in January 1993, running concurrently through the final two seasons of *The Next Generation* and the first five seasons of *Star Trek: Voyager*, which premiered in January of 1995.

*Star Trek: Enterprise*, the only television prequel, aired September 26, 2001, after *Voyager* had completed its final season. The final episode of *Enterprise* aired on May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2005, making 2006 to be the first year in 19 years to not have a *Star Trek* television series in production. Years later, the *Star Trek* film franchise was re-launched with *Star Trek XI* premiering on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009, and an expected release date for *Star Trek XII* being May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2013. The *Star Trek* movie and film franchise comes to being over 530 hours (or 22 days) of *Star Trek*.

### **GENDER, RACE, AND INTERSECTION**

Gender is the set of social standards and expectations that are associated with and represent each sex (Dines, 4; Kesselman, 9; Peach, 2); it is not to be confused with sex, which is the physical or biological characteristics that make up a physical body. Race is the social or cultural concept that describes people based on visual clues from physical appearances and behaviors (Anthropological; Dines, 4), part of which is determined by ethnicity and common heritage, but not restricted to those commonalities. In this paper, gender is looked at over sex because social interaction is based off of the perceived gender of a person, or how the person represents their gender publically, and race is used over ethnicity because the social interactions used in this society because of the visual cues used to assign stereotypes to groupings of individuals.

Race is gendered and gender is raced: the barriers in place in society that affect those not of the dominant gender also effect those not of the dominant race. Though there are differences in the privileges provided or denied between gender and race, the provisions and denials of the two are interlinked; however, gender and race are often not considered together when recognizing barriers. Audre Lorde provides an example, pointing out the “absence of the experience of women of color as a resource for women’s studies courses. The literature of women of color is seldom included in women’s literature courses and almost never in other literature courses, nor in women’s studies as a whole” (Peach, 72), citing the presence of William Shakespeare and Fyodor Dostoyevsky in literature, but showing that the works of authors, such as Zora Neale Hurston and Gwendolyn Brooks, are not included in literature selections. When considering concepts of gender and race in society, and the reflections that are shown in media, the intersection between gender and race needs to be considered, for oppression is an additive quality, placing members of disadvantaged groups at a further disadvantage.

### **WHY MEDIA MATTERS**

To understand the impact that the *Star Trek* franchise has had on society, one must first recognize that the media’s representation of the world helps shape the views of a society. Because “media images help shape our view of the world and our deepest values: what we consider good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil”

(Dines, 9), a society will learn to accept or begin to demonize due to the images that are presented to them by those who control what is seen and recognized. The ideas represented in various forms of media affects members of society across gender, racial, and class lines.

An idea of what creates gender and race, and what it means to be of a gender or race, is perpetrated through media sources. Myths and mysticisms about what normal gender roles and the placement of gender in society is dictated by what is observed and repeated in the media, through the use of commercialization and political and religious convenience. Portrayals of race and the cultural appropriations of history that create what it means to be of a certain ethnicity or background are repeated in televised and printed stories and are often repeated for the viewing audience to take in and mimic. These ideas and portrayals are then copied and reproduced as the viewership and readers come to expect to see what they see, as the mindset of those following the media become used to what is being seen and start to expect it. Hegemonic overtures are a result of the media source's portrayals of the placement of gender and race in society; "hegemony is best understood as a process, an activity, that moves a group or groups toward the state of total dominance, a highly uncommon historical moment in which a ruling group achieves complete and total power over subordinate groups" (Bernardi, 17).

However, counter-hegemonic examples also appear in the media, as "they are formulated in processes of communication – in the interpretations, social circulation, and uses of media content" (Dines, 65); a dominant belief system in a



society falls prey to its dissidents as tendencies counter to the norm begin to appear. Counter-hegemony to the dominant society and beliefs is seen in culture jamming, where “community activist groups and others brought together by a shared vision of a more just society enact cultural resistance” (Sandlin, 324); the progressive nature of the *Star Trek* franchise embodied the shared vision of a better future for all genders and races.

### **THE 23<sup>RD</sup> CENTURY: A PROGRESSIVE BEGINNING**

The original concept of *Star Trek* called for the Executive Officer, named “Number One,” to be female. She was described as being “almost mysteriously female, in fact – slim and dark in a Nile Valley sort of way [...] an extraordinarily efficient officer [...] probably Robert April’s superior in detailed knowledge of multiple equipment systems, departments, and crew members” (Roddenberry, 6), making her the officer in command second only to Captain Robert April. However, NBC wanted changes made to the format of *Star Trek*, including the removal of the female first officer, and so the character was dropped. At that point in time, “there were no female leads then – women in those days were just set dressing” (Gross, 13); however, another character, Lieutenant Uhura, became a groundbreaking main character, being a Black woman who was a commissioned officer, an astronaut, and was not someone’s servant. This character stayed on the series, participating in the first interracial kiss, navigating the *Enterprise* in combat situations, and even taking

command of the *Enterprise* in an episode of *The Animated Series*. She is described as being “a highly efficient officer. Her understanding of the ship’s computer systems is second only to the Vulcan Science Officer, and expert in all ship’s systems relating to communications” (Reeves-Stevens, 92), and she was the first female and the first Black person shown on screen to take command of a vessel, though it was implied that another Black character, Commodore Stone, had been in command of a vessel earlier in his career.

This series continued to have minority and female characters in guest star and central roles, including: Commodore Stone, a Black male and the first flag officer seen in the franchise; Captain Chandra, an Indian male and Starfleet captain; Doctor M’Benga, a Black male and medical officer; Lieutenant Rahda, an Indian female and helm officer; Lieutenant Masters, a Black female and science officer in charge of the dilithium in engineering; and Lieutenant Shaw, a White female and a JAG officer in the fleet. The series also made comment about race and the hope that to see societal changes in Earth’s future, as paraphrased in a conversation between Lieutenant Uhura, Commander Spock, Captain Kirk, and an entity posing as Abraham Lincoln:

“A charming negress. Oh. Forgive me, my dear. I know that in my time, some use that term as a description of property.” –Abraham Lincoln

“But why should I object to that term, sir? See, in our century, we’ve learned not to fear words.” –Lieutenant Uhura

“The foolishness of my century had me apologizing where no offence was given.” –Lincoln

“We’ve each learned to be delighted with what we are. The Vulcans learned that centuries before we did.” –Captain Kirk

“It is basic to the Vulcan philosophy, sir: the combination of a number of things to make existence worthwhile.” –Commander Spock  
 (“The Savage Curtain”)

The earlier *Star Trek* movies that are in the same era continued to show women in command positions and continuing to be important and functioning members of Starfleet. The first female and Black commanding officer seen on screen was the captain of the *USS Saratoga*, played by Madge Sinclair, as well as having Lieutenant Saavik, a Vulcan female, training to be a starship commander, and Captain Terrell, the first Black starship captain seen in the franchise. The TV shows and movies depicting life in the 23<sup>rd</sup> century portrayed gender and race as not having an affect on the abilities or placement of persons in the United Federation of Planets (the governing body that Earth and other planets are members of) society by placing women and minorities in positions of authority and power without bringing special attention to it unless making a direct correlation to the era that filming took place in.

## **PROBLEMS IN THE BRIGHT FUTURE**

Though *Star Trek: The Original Series* had many progressive ideals, the franchise had its problems with race and gender. In “Star Trek and History”, Daniel Leonard Bernardi points out: “one of the characters was Japanese-American, one was African, two were European ethics, one was half-alien and half-human, and three were European-Americans. Though predominantly white, for 1960s network television this was an integrated cast” (36). He then further describes how the future is depicted as being a hegemonic white society, using Lieutenant Sulu as an example: “Sulu’s intended integration into the space of the starship comes at the expense of a recognizable identity with Japanese culture; that is, the character was conceived as having ‘successfully’ assimilated into the European-American melting pot of humanity’s future” (40), based off of how Sulu was described in “The Star Trek Guide” as being mystified by Asians and preferred French traditions (which we see in the episode “The Naked Time”). Main characters were not alone in the hegemonic examples of the future, either.

The episode “The Paradise Syndrome” features Captain Kirk losing his memory and being accepted into a Native American community on an alien world. This episode contradicts the progressive ideals that the *Star Trek* franchise tries to promote, because it “stereotypes Native-Americans as novel savages and whites as ‘normal’ and even divine” (Bernardi, 44) is the format of the episode. Indeed, this episode “has less to do with the lifestyle and customs of Native-Americans than with the evolution of whiteness” (Bernardi, 45), showing that the isolated Native Americans are stagnated when not around White persons with no advances in

technology. This is further seen when “Miramanee cannot figure out how to pull Kirk’s shirt off, as she cannot find any lacing. She is portrayed as simple minded, not that bright. This is not the case with Kirk. [...] Despite his amnesia, he is shown as naturally superior” (Bernardi, 49), combining the stereotypes of being Native American with the stereotypes of being female.

Women in *Star Trek* episodes produced in the 1960s varied from being highly professional and forward to highly emotional and weak. Though there were episodes where women were calm and collected in combat situations, like Lieutenant Uhura in “The Balance of Terror” as she is navigating the *Enterprise* while they were fighting the Romulan Bird of Prey, follow-up episodes would have women scream when something unexpected happening, like Lieutenant Uhura in “Arena” after the Metrons abduct Captain Kirk from the bridge of the *Enterprise*. Special guest stars are not immune from this either, from Lieutenant McGivers falling for Khan and betraying her crew for the attention of the manly, exotic, robust villain in the episode “Space Seed”, to the Elaan of Troyius, featured in the episode of the same name, where “the story’s ultimate purpose is for Kirk to tame the shrew in order to stop a war and keep the Klingons from expanding their empire” (Bernardi, 64); in the episode, the Asian-American actress represents the perceptions of Asian women of the era, where “her dragon lady tactics were only used so that she could assume a position she truly desired: the submissive mistress of a white knight” (Bernardi, 65), depicting her as a sexualized woman who uses her appeal for power until she meets someone ‘civilized’ and already having power.

## THE 24<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY: THE FUTURE IS LESS BRIGHT

Despite the problems that *Star Trek* had with racism and sexism, the parts of the *Star Trek* franchise originally taking place in the 23<sup>rd</sup> century was still a progressive show, advocating for a future society based on equality and equitable opportunity. As the spinoff series were made, taking place in the 24<sup>th</sup> century, women took on more roles that were typically reserved for men, with Lieutenant Tasha Yar as a chief of security, Dr. Beverly Crusher as a chief medical officer (who also occasionally took command of the *Starship Enterprise*), Lieutenant B'Elanna Torres as a chief engineer, Colonel Kira Nerys, a former resistance fighter who became the first officer and eventual commanding officer of the space station Deep Space Nine, and Captain Kathryn Janeway in command of the *Starship Voyager* and the first female commanding officer to star in a series. Minorities were given equal positions of power, from Lieutenant Commander Geordi LaForge being given command of the *Enterprise* on occasion and becoming Chief Engineer of the same starship, to Commander Chakotay being First Officer of the starship *Voyager*, to Captain Benjamin Sisko commanding Deep Space Nine as well as being one of the fleet commanders in the war against the Dominion. At first glance, the 24<sup>th</sup> century representations of *Star Trek* seemed to indicate that the future would continue to show improvement, as a reflection of the way society was improving in the era that filming took place in.

However, when comparing *Star Trek* shows to the eras that they were filmed in, the advances became less pronounced. Females and minorities continued to advance in society in the 1980s and 1990s, and had more equal footing in society when compared to 1960s and 1970s society, but *Star Trek* was slow to recognize that. Early in *The Next Generation*, the character of Counselor Troi was almost dropped, and the character of Doctor Crusher was temporarily written out of the series; the writers didn't know how to write for the characters, and so character development was limited for the characters at first. Improvements to character development increased after the second season of *The Next Generation* concluded, eventually progressing into having women in command roles in combat situations, taking command of shore parties, and showing more minorities and women in positions of leadership.

Though showing more minorities and women in positions of leadership, the *Star Trek* franchise remained very androcentric and Euro-Amerocentric. An example comes from the episode "Code of Honor," where "this episode of *The Next Generation* perpetuates a common racial stereotype: a primitive, homogeneous, dark people ruled by a self-serving, pompous chief who desires white women and is indifferent to missions of galactic mercy" (Bernardi, 109); this episode has the primarily White senior officers of the *Enterprise* confront an entirely Black planet named Ligon II, who's leader kidnaps Lieutenant Yar, prompting the following conversation:

"Opinion, Counselor. Will they injure Tasha?" –Picard

“I believe not, sir. In fact, they seem mainly curious. But in the case of Lutan I did feel other needs.” –Troi

“What kind of needs?” –Riker

“Some sexual attraction from all the males. Lieutenant Yar is physically very attractive. But I felt something else in the case of Lutan... something more like... avarice or ambition.” –Troi (“Code of Honor”)

This conversation is later continued in the next scene, after the officers have time to study the records about the inhabitants of this world. Data informs the crew that the Ligonian society “is a highly structured society in which people live by strict codes of honor. For example, what Lutan has done is similar to what certain American Indians called ‘counting coup’” (“Code of Honor”), linking the aspect of the other, being minorities, lusting and chasing after White women, who must be protected.

The theme of White males being the norm and minorities and females being the other is continued in the later series; though *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* has a Black male for a commanding officer and a White female for an executive officer, and *Star Trek: Voyager* has a White female for a commanding officer and a Native American Indian male for an executive officer, their significance becomes lost. Males continue to have the majority of important roles in the series, and women continue to be objectified, including Colonel Kira’s uniform becoming sleeker and having high heels added, which is not practical for a military uniform, and Seven of Nine’s body suit that accentuates her hips and breasts. The steps forward that the *Star Trek*



franchise attempted to make throughout the series, however, become less apparent when the franchise goes back in time and attempts to reboot the series.

### **THE 22<sup>ND</sup> CENTURY: PROGRESS IS LOST**

Enterprise, later known as *Star Trek: Enterprise*, premiered in 2005, 40 years after the first pilots of *Star Trek: The Original Series* were created. This series was supposed to explain the period of *Star Trek* history between World War III and the events of *Star Trek: First Contact* and *Star Trek: The Original Series*. Though this series takes place in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century (103 years before the events of “The Cage,” or 114 years before the events of “Where No Man Has Gone Before”), a number of steps forward that the franchise had made had been erased. The leading three humans, Captain Archer, Commander Tucker, and Lieutenant Reed, are all European or European-American males, while the two lowest ranked officers on the ship, Ensigns Sato and Mayweather, are an Asian female and a Black male, respectively. As the series progressed, though Mayweather was the most experienced spacer (having been a “Boomer,” or born and raised on starships), and Sato was a linguistic genius, but the two were shown to be the most inexperienced members of the crew and never got promoted throughout the run of the series. The crew and the commanding officers of Starfleet were predominantly of European descent, not reflecting the changing views of the society that was viewing the television series.

The ship's executive officer, Commander T'Pol, is used as a sex symbol throughout the series. Her costume, much like the costume of Seven of Nine in *Star Trek: Voyager*, was form fitting and accentuated her hips and breasts. Sexual attraction was based around her character as well; more focus was given to her character than to any other character when it came to sexual scenes, including a scene from the episode "Harbinger," where T'Pol "explores her sexuality" ("Harbringer"), and in the pilot episode "Broken Bow," where the camera focuses on intimate physical contact between T'Pol and Tucker in the decontamination chamber in a scene that was unrelated to what was being discussed ("Broken Bow"). After T'Pol leaves the Vulcan High Command and joins the Earth Starfleet, instead of donning a Starfleet uniform, she continues to wear her form-fitting catsuits with a few Starfleet decorations added.

Issues of gender and race are rarely brought up in *Star Trek: Enterprise*, though some concepts of sexuality are mentioned, and even then obliquely or used as a way to entice the target demographic to watch the show. One of the few times that race is mentioned is in the episode "Storm Front," when the crew of *Enterprise* go back in time to World War II to repair damage done to the timeline. The reference to gender and race is mentioned because it is a part of 1944 culture and society; Captain Archer is stranded on Earth of the past and is in the care of a resistance fighter, Alicia Travers, working to free the United States from the Nazi invaders:

"What year is this?" –Archer.

"It's 1944." –Travers.

"World War II." –Archer.

"I've never heard it called that before, but that's as good a description as any. It used to be a pretty nice neighborhood. Even for Coloreds. As you can see, it's gone downhill." –Travers ("Storm Front").

And later:

"Why you walk with her?" –Nazi Guard.

"Why not?" –Archer.

"Do you like Negros?" –Nazi Guard.

"We don't want any trouble." –Travers

"Shut up, Bitch." –Nazi Guard.

"When we send her back to Africa, you can go along. You can run through the jungles together!" –Nazi Guard ("Storm Front").

The other episode dealing with race was the episode "Detained," being an allegory for the internment camps of World War II and the Japanese-Americans who were forced into them; other than this, race is not mentioned.

### **REBOOT: A NEW TAKE ON THE 23<sup>RD</sup> CENTURY**

May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009, the *Star Trek* franchise was revived with the premier of the latest installment of the *Star Trek* films: *Star Trek XI*. The latest film had new actors to play Captain Kirk and crew, and was a more action-packed view on *Star Trek*. This

*Star Trek* film did not follow in the steps of its namesake when dealing with gender and race, beginning with the advertisements showing the lead characters of Captain Kirk and company, where all of the male characters are looking forward, directly at the viewer, while Lieutenant Uhura is looking to the side, watching Captain Kirk instead of viewing the viewer. She is reduced to being the one person who is not looking ahead as a hero, but looking to the central figure to indicate that he is the hero.

The female uniforms in the movie are short and reflective of a previous era; “Uhura (Zoe Saldana) seems to have traveled through time to the pre-feminist 1960s, where she found her miniskirt and go-go boots” (Ebert), donning a uniform style that was worn by females to show off the arms and legs of the wearer.

Uhura’s role is also greatly reduced, if keeping in mind the differences between 1960s American society and 2000s American society: she is the object of both Kirk and Spock’s attraction, where her contribution to the plot is that she is the center of the situation that brings Kirk to Pike’s attention, and then later discovers that a Klingon armada was destroyed. After that, every time the other senior officers

leave the bridge, a White, younger, less experienced, lower-ranked officer is left in command over her. Though this has happened in *The Original Series* back in the 1960s, as the society of the era did not have women, and especially women of color, in such command positions in the military or in the space program, the 2000s is an era that has women and persons of color in such positions of command. Despite the changes in society over the span of almost 50 years, the *Star Trek* franchise ended up ignoring the change in society.

## CONCLUSION

The 48-year history of *Star Trek* saw changes in society through the Civil Rights movement, increases in technology, and the appearance of new socio-cultural norms. However, though *Star Trek: The Original Series* and *Star Trek: The Animated Series* worked to televise and promote progress in society, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, and *Star Trek: Voyager* hit stumbling blocks when trying to replicate what *The Original Series* and *The Animated Series* accomplished by failing to keep up with reflecting the changes in society. *Star Trek: Enterprise* failed to live up to the gender and race progressiveness that was placed in *The Original Series*, and the latest *Star Trek* film, *Star Trek XI*, stepped back from *Star Trek's* roots with gender and race by not dealing with issues of the current era concerning gender, race, or the intersection of the two social groups.

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