In recent years, scholars studying the 1960s have increasingly relied on artefacts of popular culture in order to study the larger themes of the decade. The reason for studying popular music, movies, magazines, and television is they that bear the hallmarks of the decade that produced them. Whether commercially produced or independently made, they all reflect the attitudes, values and politics of their creators’ society. Despite its out-of-this-world nature, science fiction television was as rooted in sixties culture as any other genre, because it was created by and for the people. This meant that content was often heavily controlled by conservative network executives who did not want to risk offending audiences. Science fiction television managed to slip through the censors more often than other genres (a convenience for politically-minded producers) as it used aliens and space ships rather than a more familiar setting in order to talk about contemporary events.

Yet surprisingly few shows of the decade took this opportunity. One of those that did was Star Trek, which aired in the late 1960s and provided the viewing public with images right out of the liberal left’s textbook. Headed by creator Gene Roddenberry, Star Trek was used by its writers, as a vehicle for promoting the political ideas of the liberal American left, as well as for confronting such varied issues as civil rights, the Vietnam War and the Cold War. Yet it was ultimately a product of its time and often reflected the same flaws as the political faction it
supported. However, for all its flaws, it was an important first step towards a more progressive kind of television.

Though television was an invention of the 1940s, it did not come into its own as a major cultural force until the 1960s. Networks could reach more and more people, as the number of American households with televisions skyrocketed. The limited choice of channels available meant that a show had a chance of reaching one in four (or five or six) of the millions of households watching television. Mass media really grew during this decade, as information, entertainment and advertising could be spread quickly and easily via television. The National Broadcasting Company (NBC) was one of the first television networks to begin broadcasting, along with the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) and the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) – together, the Big Three of early television.¹

Though each major network produced a wide variety of genres, science fiction became immensely popular following the creation of NASA and the beginning of the space race. ABC was the first to pick up on the genre, achieving great success with *The Outer Limits* and *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* and CBS followed with *Lost in Space*.² In 1966, NBC purchased *Star Trek* in an attempt to remain competitive. Network executives were wary of unknown creator Gene Roddenberry, but trusted the judgement of Desilu Productions, the television studio responsible for *I Love Lucy*. Though NBC executives thought Roddenberry’s series pilot was “too cerebral”³, they allowed the show to move into filming provided the pilot cast be re-worked to make it more acceptable to mainstream audiences – a highly revealing decision that will be discussed later. *Star Trek* premiered in September 1966, running for three seasons and 79

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³ Sherry Ginn, *Our Space, Our Place* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005), 108.
episodes before NBC cancelled it in 1969 due to low ratings\(^4\), a common fate for sci-fi shows. It remained a cult hit, however, and the mass appeal of the show led to it becoming the defining show of the genre. In the forty-two years since its cancellation, *Star Trek* has spawned four spin-off television series, one animated series and eleven movies, including the 2009 reboot. Other productions include a travelling museum exhibit, several documentaries, a large and vocal fan community and a surprising amount of scholarship.

Even though Roddenberry’s brand of white liberal anti-racist politics was falling out of favour in the late sixties, *Star Trek* was one of the first television shows of any genre to portray ethnic minority characters in non-stereotypical ways. The simple presence of non-white characters was considered unusual and ground-breaking, but in many cases the writers were not sure what exactly they were supposed to do with these characters. Roddenberry, ever the enthusiastic liberal, strongly encouraged his writing staff to use the entire cast when writing episodes – though he very rarely used all of them himself\(^5\) – and promoted the idea of his show as his gift to a multi-racial America. Nichelle Nichols, the actress playing Uhura, found this lack of use especially frustrating. She had been promised a regular role on the show, and expected to receive one. Needless to say, she did not. During the first season, she would routinely receive the first draft of a script that featured her in a minor yet important part. Time after time, when the final script was released, her role was diminished to a line or two and maybe a sashay across the bridge\(^6\). Thoroughly sick of being treated like a glorified switchboard operator, Nichols threatened to quit. Roddenberry and others begged her not to, as they felt her presence on the

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show was crucial to the vision they were trying to create. Several weeks later, she met Martin Luther King Jr. and told him that she was debating leaving the show. He replied:

Don’t you know that you have the first non-stereotypical role [for black Americans] in television? For the first time the world will see us as we should be seen – people of quality in the future. You created a role with dignity and beauty and grace and intelligence. You’re not just a role model for our children, but for people who don’t look like us to see us for the first time as equals.

Nichols was rather affected by King’s words and did not quit the show, though she issued a warning to the show’s writers. Whereas Nichols had complained about her character’s representation as a woman, King had responded to objections over being misrepresented as a black American. He clearly did not see what was wrong with a woman in the twenty-third century doing “women’s work”, a view that was symptomatic of the left and the civil rights movement in general. As other women have observed, they could be protesting and receiving police beatings just like the men, but back at headquarters they were still making coffee and serving lunch.

Though it sounds nice, it is unclear whether King was accurate when he said that Star Trek inspired black children. While the numbers of black actors and actresses working in television increased over the course of the seventies and eighties, it is impossible to determine whether this number increased due to increased demand for black actors or increased availability of black actors brought about due to positive (or at least neutral) representation in shows they saw as children or teenagers. A story frequently trotted out to illustrate this is an anecdote told by Whoopi Goldberg. She claims that watching Nichelle Nichols as a child was the primary reason she realized it was possible for a black woman to be a competent actress and play roles that were

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7 Adamo, African Americans, 13.
8 Adamo, African Americans, 13.
9 Adamo, African Americans, 13.
10 Adamo, African Americans, 13.
more than racial caricatures. (Perhaps ironically, the role she went on to play in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* in the 1980s is often seen as one of the later racist stock characters – the “black cosmic mentor”.) Though this is likely true for her, no one has ever studied the racial demographics of the original show’s audience during the 1960s; at any rate, the vast majority of intensely-invested members of the fan community are white, though this by no means rules out a significant black “casual viewer” audience.

In accordance with the writers’ belief that “race was enough”, Uhura was often used as background colour, with her character nowhere near as developed as the white members of the cast. Writers of the show did not even think to provide her with a first name until later movies. What development there was for the character was mainly established by descriptions in the casting calls and the guide produced for writers working on the series. These early character descriptions reveal that Uhura was not a black American but a Bantu citizen of the “United States of Africa”. It is interesting that this was the backstory chosen for her by Roddenberry and the writing staff, given that they were more than aware of the black civil rights movement. While this choice may have reflected their desire for an obviously international cast, it is curious considering that Sulu, equally under-developed as a character, was described in that same writer’s guide as a Japanese-American who was completely assimilated into American culture and in fact found “real” Asians mystifying and even somewhat repulsive. What does this say about the culture of television production in the late sixties? Was it “safer” for the show to portray an African rather than a black American, or were they deliberately alluding to the popularity of Africa among the American revolutionary left?

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It seems unlikely that the show’s writers had gone for the “safe” option. Though they had been told to re-work the pilot cast in order to be more acceptable to American audiences, Uhura was not part of this cast. Her character had been approved “as-is” in the re-worked cast. Yet the alternative explanation for her nationality – that they were attempting to include Africa in the series – seems unlikely. While it is possible that Roddenberry wanted her to fit with the intended international flavour of the cast, and deliberately created a “United States of Africa” in order to recognize pan-Africanism as a political movement, there is little evidence to suggest that this was a concern for anyone on the creative team, despite their significant political awareness and involvement. Unfortunately, the most likely explanation is a combination of laziness and racism, where Uhura was given vaguely-defined African origins as no further thought was put into her character beyond her being black (the assumption being that the fact of her race was enough to define her). “Infinite diversity in infinite combinations,” the philosophy attributed in the show to the Vulcans and in real life to Roddenberry, was never taken to its logical conclusion of a post-racial society, even though that is precisely what Roddenberry had set out to represent.

This same laziness may also be responsible for Sulu’s background as a Japanese-American. While it is tempting to read this as an acknowledgement of America’s growing Asian population, it is simply more likely that no writer could be bothered to portray an actual Japanese character. His name alone reveals the lack of effort put into cultural accuracy by the writers – Sulu is not a Japanese name, and would likely be unpronounceable as the language has no “l” sound and “u” is silent. The writers simply invented a name that they thought sounded Japanese, and expected it to be accepted as legitimate. Even though all scripts for the series were

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16 Paul Christopher Manuel, “‘In Every Revolution, There is One Man with a Vision’: The Governments of the Future in Comparative Perspective,” in Political Science Fiction, ed. Donald M. Hassler et al. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 183.

read over by the Kellam DeForest Company, a contractor hired by Desilu to do research and fact-verification for the show, there were never any comments on the legitimacy of Sulu’s name (nor of Uhura, or even of Chekov’s accent – now somewhat notorious for being a vague amalgamation of eastern European accents that was supposed to sound Russian).\(^\text{18}\)

“White-washing” the character was a way for writers to avoid having to confront his ethnicity and cultural background; probably the only reason he was defined as Japanese-American, rather than being left ambiguously Asian-American, is because it was actor George Takei’s nationality.\(^\text{19}\) Sulu’s character also reflects the idea of assimilation as progress. This was the official US government policy towards immigration and multiculturalism during the sixties – the proverbial “melting pot” where all cultures were eventually subsumed into one giant, homogenized but “superior” American culture\(^\text{20}\). The ideal United States of the twenty-third century apparently had no room for multiculturalism or even maintaining some idea of one’s cultural heritage. Yet for all this talk of Americanization, the only significant role Sulu plays in the entire series is as a crazed swordsman in an episode called “The Naked Time”\(^\text{21}\); apparently, for all his complete assimilation into American culture, Sulu still maintained some aspect of the kamikaze about him, as if it was bred into his bones.

However as much as Roddenberry and the other Star Trek writers liked to pretend they were producing television that was separate from the commercial interests of their network, they were not. NBC executives had ultimate creative control over the series, even above Roddenberry himself. Much of the editing scripts received was not just creative or conceptual, but sanitizing. While the show could get away with surprisingly heavy-handed political allegory at times, they

had to slip these scripts past the censoring eyes of executives and hope that they were ignorant enough to not notice the political message, or at least interpret it in a way that seemed less controversial than the creators intended.²² In terms of content, the sixties in television was only a few decades removed from the Motion Picture Association of America’s Production Code of 1930, which enforced strict censorship standards of Hollywood films until its repeal in 1968. It included articles that banned the depiction of such unsavoury characters as prostitutes, homosexuals, unwed mothers, married couples that shared the same bed as well as gunshot wounds, gruesome death scenes, toilets and swearing.²³ While this code never applied to television, it was consulted by networks as a general guideline of what was and was not appropriate for television, and is important to keep in mind.

The show’s final cast, as mentioned before, was not the cast debuted in the pilot. The pilot cast was almost entirely different – Captain Christopher Pike was commander of the USS Enterprise rather than Captain Kirk, with his female first officer (named simply Number One)²⁴, Latino Lt. José “Joe” Tyler²⁵ and science officer Spock. Roddenberry took a major risk by casting a woman as the second-in-command of the Enterprise and unsurprisingly it did not escape notice by the NBC network executives. They were of the opinion that the American public was “unprepared“²⁶ for a woman in such a position of authority, and recommended that her character be eliminated. The pilot went on to test audiences who, for the most part, agreed with the network; reactions towards the character of Number One ranged from resentment to disbelief that a woman could be capable or successful as a commander.²⁷ Resentment was an interesting reaction; it was never said specifically who resented Number One, but the case could

²² Sarantakes, “Cold War Pop Culture,” 77.
²³ Kisseloff, The Box, 42-48.
²⁴ Ginn, Our Space, 108.
²⁶ Johnson-Smith, American Science Fiction TV, 80.
²⁷ Johnson-Smith, American Science Fiction TV, 80.
be made for both sexes, with women resenting her for living in a future where women could hold such jobs, and men resenting her for “stealing” a position of authority away from a supposedly more qualified man. At any rate, the actress playing Number One, Majel Barrett, was well-liked by much of the audience (as well as Roddenberry, who later married her) and she was re-cast as ship nurse Christine Chapel\(^28\), a role that was much more acceptable to both audience and network.

As mentioned before, Roddenberry and the rest of the writing team were very politically-aware. The science fiction community, like America at large, was divided over the actions of the United States government in Vietnam in the late sixties\(^29\). The *Star Trek* writers were by no means exempt from controversy over Vietnam and it is possible to track their changing opinion of the war through the episodes they wrote, beginning with the first season episode “The City on the Edge of Forever”. Though the episode’s storyline involved time-travel to 1930s New York, its references to a “misguided peace movement” point sharply to the anti-war protests that were seriously gaining steam in 1966\(^30\). Yet not two years later, the same writers were producing episodes such as “A Private Little War”, which depicted the exact same sequence of events as Vietnam but on another planet and concluded with Kirk insisting, to the disappointment of the episode’s ideological foil, Dr. McCoy, that the balance of power must be preserved through Federation intervention\(^31\) – the official explanation provided by the US government regarding their intervention, military or not, in Vietnam\(^32\). But do not mistake these episodes for belief: Gene Roddenberry and several other major *Star Trek* writers, producers and actors signed an advertisement that was taken out in 1968 in a popular science fiction trade journal. The single-

\(^{28}\) Johnson-Smith, *American Science Fiction TV*, 80.


page advertisement provided a long list of names and proclaimed their lack of support for the US military involvement in Vietnam. Though there was an opposing advertisement endorsing American action in Vietnam, taken out in the same issue (and deliberately arranged by the editor so that they were facing each other), not a single member of the show’s staff signed it.\textsuperscript{33}

Though the show’s staff did not support the war, this was not always evident in the episodes they produced. It was one thing to express contempt of the American government’s actions in Vietnam in a small-circulation science fiction writer’s journal, and another to film and air a popular network television show doing the same. Even though the writers of “A Private Little War” – Don Ingalls, Gene Coon and Gene Roddenberry\textsuperscript{34} – intended for the audience to conclude that Kirk was being misguided by the Federation and thus sympathize with the anti-interventionist McCoy, many viewers missed this. In fact, it only passed through network censorship because they believed it endorsed the war; and even the actors, such as Walter Koenig (who played Chekov) had some trouble figuring out what political point of view the episode was actually endorsing.\textsuperscript{35} It is thus not hard to imagine that many viewers felt the same way, completely misinterpreting the episode’s intended message.

Roddenberry and his compatriots were not merely critical of the Vietnam War; they were quite critical of the Cold War generally. Nuclear weapons were rarely portrayed positively in the series\textsuperscript{36}, and mutually assured destruction (or MAD) was often denounced as a fundamentally unstable and dangerous political strategy\textsuperscript{37}. However, the \textit{Star Trek} writers generally advocated for peace, or a warming of relations between East and West, which is where the character of Chekov comes in. Introduced in the show’s second season, supposedly at the request of a very

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{33} Franklin, “Vietnam Era”, 32.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Sarantakes, “Cold War Pop Culture,” 92-94.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Sarantakes, “Cold War Pop Culture,” 95-96.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Sarantakes, “Cold War Pop Culture,” 88-89.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Sarantakes, “Cold War Pop Culture,” 89.
\end{itemize}
unenthused critic writing for *Pravda* (the official magazine of the USSR) who had expressed some anger that the Americans would dare create a show set in space and not include a representative from the first country to put a man in space. Pavel Chekov was a Starfleet officer from an ambiguous Russia. It is never mentioned what kind of political system Russia uses; certainly Chekov is not considered a threat by any means, with his misguided and somewhat ignorant belief that all important inventions were created in Russia, implying that either Communism has been defeated or it has reached a long-lasting peace with the United States. As for the character’s origins, there is little to prove the popular legend. Roddenberry insisted until his death that he was looking to add a younger character to broaden the show’s appeal and NBC suggested adding a Russian character; he sent a letter to Mikhail Zimyanin, the editor of *Pravda*, in order to show that Americans were accepting people capable of acknowledging the achievements of enemy nations. Actor Walter Koenig, who played the character, denied all political motivations entirely and insisted that his character was suggested by NBC and was modelled off Davy Jones from the Monkees. In this version, Chekov was Russian partly because of Roddenberry but mostly because it was thought that Koenig looked too eastern European to play any other nationality successfully, and they did not have the time to cast another actor. There is evidence to suggest both versions of the story are true and it is further complicated when one considers Roddenberry’s tendencies to appropriate the ideas of others in

39 Mark P. Lagon, “‘We Owe It to Them to Interfere’: Star Trek and U.S. Statecraft in the 1960s and 1990s,” in *Political Science Fiction*, ed. Donald M. Hassler et al. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 244.
40 Lagon, “U.S. Statecraft”, 244.
his autobiographies, or to retroactively attribute to himself greater foresight and political ambition than he actually had at the time.\footnote{Sarantakes, “Cold War Pop Culture,” 80.}

For all the positives and problems within the original series -- reflecting as they do the wider positives and problems of the liberal American left -- *Star Trek’s* conflicting representations of race, gender and politics nonetheless stuck in cultural memory. Characters such as Uhura, Sulu and Chekov are remembered not as somewhat problematic representations of an idealized future but as real, ground-breaking figures of early television. Roddenberry’s future, though imperfect, became the vision that others wanted to see come true. Much of today’s television criticism relies on issues of representation, and any show that dares present an image of the future that does not reflect the realities and diversities of today is not destined for long-term success. This does not necessarily mean that the *Star Trek* of the sixties no longer reflects the future we want to see: of all the many series in the franchise, it was the original 1960s one that has been revived recently. In 2009, J. J. Abrams (known better as the creator of *Lost*) decided to pitch a movie reboot. This version, known to fans either as *Star Trek XI* or “new Trek”, demonstrates the enduring appeal of Roddenberry’s vision: even though the show has been re-imagined to suit the needs of the post-9/11 world, fighting not a faceless, evil empire but a group of renegade extremists, the cast of the *Enterprise* is not out of place. Captain Kirk and the trusty bridge crew have once again been tasked with showing America the future they could have if only they embrace harmony, tolerance and democracy. The “final frontier” may have changed, but *Star Trek* will always find a way, to paraphrase Roddenberry, to boldly go where no one has gone before.
Bibliography


