

Heidelberg University English Department
Lecture Series: Another Place, Another Time

Discussing the Present in the Future: Relocating Social Issues into *Star Trek*

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Annika Elstermann: Welcome to this episode of the Heidelberg University English Department's lecture series *Another Place, Another Time*. Today I'll be speaking with Carolyn Burlingame-Goff, who's been working on teaching courses related to *Star Trek* for a number of years and who's also published a number of articles on *Star Trek* as multi-race, multi-species and multi-cultural. Today, we'll be talking about discussing the present in the future, relocating social issues into *Star Trek*. So, for a bit of general context, I know most people are familiar with, but I think it could be good to have a more in-depth contextualisation of... What is *Star Trek* and when and in what kind of historical context was it started?

Carolyn Burlingame Goff: So, Gene Roddenberry was a producer and he had been working on a television show called *The Lieutenant*, and *The Lieutenant* took place on a military base and the military had provided all sorts of support for the production. And in one of the episodes, Roddenberry took on the issue of racism in the military and he had an episode in which a Black officer or a Black military member saw a white man, who had been part of a white supremacist organization, who had been beaten him up, beaten him badly, before he joined the military, and when he saw this man he attacked him. So the show is actually the Black man being court-martialed for having attacked the white man.

So this episode, which tried to expose racism in the military and tried to deal with it in a constructive way was not a big hit with either the military or the network. And the military refused to allow to have Roddenberry have access to the base. After that point, the network cancelled the show. So Roddenberry was in a situation where he wanted to talk about race in America, he wanted to be able to talk about Vietnam, he very much wanted to be able to talk about the sexual revolution— And he couldn't, because the network simply wouldn't show a program that dealt with these issues in contemporary America. So, he said he was inspired by Jonathan Swift to place these issues on a distant planet and have them happen to [quote unquote] "little green men", so that the network censors couldn't claim that he was actually talking about the American political system or the American social situations. And so that's how *Star Trek* began, with the idea that he would set his program in an imaginary world, in an imaginary universe, but he would quite clearly be discussing Vietnam, the sexual revolution, racial issues... Political topics of the day.

AE: So this was in the 1960s?

CBG: Yeah. *Star Trek* had started in the early 1960's, it actually goes on the air in 1966 interestingly enough, the production company was Desilu, of which Lucille Ball was the head, and she was no stranger to network politics and to the difficulties of having your personal convictions invade your artistic endeavours. So, she was— it's a very interesting sort of coming together of two of the most popular entertainment phenomena of all times, but at any rate it was more or less a coincidence,

nonetheless she did back the show, she was more or less receptive to Roddenberry's visions. So it goes on the air in 1966.

AE: And was it popular from the start, would you say?

CBG: Well, that's very debated: There were a lot of science fiction fans who had felt marginalised for many, many years – They were considered— I mean, you know the stereotypes: The boys who were living in the basement and instead of surfing the internet, they have their comic books and their science fiction pulp novels they like to read. And they had been pretty much ignored by network television. There was a program called *Lost in Space* – which has recently been remade, so some people may be familiar with it – But that was a very childish science fiction that was actually the original one. So with *Star Trek* they felt an extreme sense of validation and so those fans immediately became devoted to the program.

If you look at the actual numbers they had, they did well. They weren't winning their timeslot, but they did well. They had very respectable numbers, but they always had trouble with the network and part of that was because Roddenberry was not good with authority and there was a lot of friction and so they were always threatening to cancel it and then Roddenberry would get these devoted fans to write to the studio and to argue with the studio. And some very highly respected authors, science fiction authors, like Harlan Ellison, also helped to argue that the show should remain on the air. But to be honest with you, it coincidentally made just enough episodes to be able to get into syndication and it was the reruns that really gained the huge popularity that it now has and the huge fan base that it has now.

When I was growing up in Cleveland, Ohio, we had a total of five stations. Three of those were the major networks, two of them were syndications. There were shows on channel 45 and 61, I still remember, they showed reruns of old shows and I watched *Star Trek* every single night of the week, because that was the best show that was on channel 45 every night. So, a lot of people like me came to the show in the reruns rather than in the original airing of the show.

AE: So it was a very political show and a show with a very political aim from the very beginning, right?

CBG: Absolutely.

AE: Was this in any way— Would you say, it's veiled that it's political, or was it openly critical and can you draw a really very direct link and say 'this is about that and that is supposed to be this'?

CBG: It's pretty direct. Roddenberry claims that it went over the censors' heads, but then every 14 year-old in the audience knew exactly what he was talking about. There is a very famous episode that Roddenberry himself wrote called *The Omega Glory* and it is about a post-apocalyptic planet, where the Yongs and the Kohms fought a war and we figure out, before the end of the episode, that the Yongs are the Yanks [Yankees] and the Kohms are the Communists, so... I'll let you tell me how veiled that reference is. An American flag makes an entry at the end of the episode and they read from the constitution. So that is not terribly veiled. And I think that most of the people living at that time would have realized at that time that okay most of the episode is about the Cold War and the possible horrifying consequences if there was either a nuclear holocaust or biochemical weapons were

developed that could destroy humanity. There were a lot of episodes about Vietnam, about neutrality, about client states, about wars, proxy-wars between two great powers. Everybody knew the Klingons were the Soviets and that the Federation was the American's. . . It wasn't very veiled, no, it wasn't.

AE: Did it have, because the main target audience is 14 year-olds – Did it have an educational effect as well? Because I'm just not familiar with how much of the news 14 year-olds would have followed at the time.

CBG: Well, Vietnam was the first war they have actually televised, so they would have some, or would have quite a bit of information about it and *Star Trek* is on the air as the attitudes towards the war in Vietnam start to shift in America to become tolerating it as a necessary evil to really being against it. The Tet Offensive happens in the middle of the series and there are researchers who looked it up before that and after that to see the show does get more negative about the idea of the Cold War and proxy-wars and you can argue that it does. At least from the broadcast dates. This is always tricky, because when they are written is not necessarily when they are broadcasted, so you have to be very careful about that logic. I think the main audience wasn't really 14 year-olds in Roddenberry's mind, it was hip people. So whether they were hip 14 year-olds or hip 60 year-olds, he was looking for hip people. And hip people certainly would have gotten it.

AE: Now, just to kind of wrap up with this brief introduction: How does this change over time? Because this is a very, very long series with a lot of different iterations, so does this political stance or the way that social issues are dealt with change significantly over time?

CBG: Well, this is a good question, I mean the original *Star Trek* is seen as being very socially progressive, but by the time you get to *The Next Generation*, the idea, the mantle of social progressiveness is there, but the people who are making this show really haven't – if you can excuse the word – evolved all that much. So in the first season of *The Next Generation*, there are some horribly sexist and horribly racist episodes that people are still fairly embarrassed about and try to pretend don't exist. The treatment especially of women continues to be hypersexualised and that doesn't really normalise 'till towards the end of *The Next Generation*. I don't think that the boys realised that there were a lot of girls watching science fiction, too, and that they had been really thrilled to see in the 60's that there were female psychologists and that there were female rulers and there was a female Romulan captain of a spaceship. Yeah, when we look back at it now, we think "Oh my goodness that's pathetic and hypersexualised and so embarrassing in terms of sexual harassment both on and off the set!" but at the time there weren't— You know, if you didn't wanna watch a housewife baking cookies, you know, *Star Trek* was one of the few places you could see something different, so. . .

There were a lot of women who actually came on board – myself included – and had to put up with sharing their hobby with 14 year-old boys who had maybe slightly different interests in the portrayal of women then I did. And *The Next Generation*, if you look at DeAnna Troi's costuming for example, they were struggling with this. They were really struggling with it. I think by the time you get to *Deep Space Nine* with a Black captain and really strong female characters, who nonetheless are all very young and physically attractive and wore very, very tight revealing outfits, but nonetheless, they at least are in real positions of authority.

AE: And arguably, the men are also wearing very tight outfits, for what it's worth.

CBG: [laughs] That is true. But if you look at those Dabo girls and you look at the fact that Nana Visitor and Terry Farrell are wearing, I don't know, double D padded bras, you know, you get some indication that there was a lot more stress on the women. And they have discussed that. The actresses have discussed that but they still feel – and they're not wrong – they still feel that those were some of the best roles on television for women at that time. So yes, you had to be eye candy, but at least you could be eye candy that kicked ass. And so that was better than just being, I don't know, a secretary or a barmaid or whatever else was open to actresses at that time.

And then, *Voyager* of course had a female captain, but you once again see how of two minds they are by the costuming of the captain and the introduction of Seven of Nine, 'the Borg Babe' as she was called by the producers. Even up through *Enterprise* you have a lot of these issues and *Discovery* has tried very hard to do everything they can to sort of be as evolved as possible on social issues and we could talk a little bit about why that is problematic again, once we've maybe talked about some of the Science Fiction theory.

AE: Yes, so Roddenberry – as you said in the beginning – chose not to set this in the... His social criticism of the contemporary US in the contemporary US, because the network likely wouldn't have aired it. He could also have chosen a historical setting and he could have chosen a fantasy setting, anything like that. But he chose Science Fiction and he chose to set this in the future and kind of like not an non-real future, but in a future that results from our present. So, why does Roddenberry do it like that?

CBG: There were a lot of people transferring these issues in the 60's into Westerns, so going backwards. So, he probably felt that that was covered. And he did mark it his show as a 'waggon trained to the stars', so he was very aware that he was taking a lot of the Western motifs [AE: The final frontier.] Yeah, exactly! The final frontier, absolutely. There's even one episode which is literally the O.K. Corral, so I think he felt that that was probably covered. Fantasy was absolutely not a genre at that point. I think if you would have said "Elves and Orcs" at that point, they would have said "Yeah, good luck with that!" I think he would have been laughed out of it.

You know he could have picked something, like a pirate maybe or on a ship, there were movies that did that. I think he was interested in Science Fiction very much because of what you just said: He wanted to show that with the right attitude and with the right decisions, society could actually progress to a point where war was only a very last option, where there was an emphasis on exploration, where greed and capitalistic insensitivity had more or less been sidelined, where class and race and religion were unimportant and only the individual's own worth and talent and abilities counted for anything anymore. And so he wanted to show that future. He wanted to show that man could evolve there if we made the right choices and if we followed the right principles that we could get there.

AE: And this has in the 60... In the 60 years since, this has been theorised by a lot of people, because a lot of people. Because also Science Fiction as a TV genre, or as a movie genre has exploded so much since the early days of *Star Trek*. Could you give just a bit of an overview over what generally some theorists are saying about Science Fiction as a means of – as the title of your talk says – as a means of communicating with the present.

CBG: So, Science Fiction has always seen its role as addressing present issues in a future or in a

present that has a slightly altered reality. And initially it's absolutely true, Science Fiction has an extremely optimistic and utopian notion of what could be achieved with technology. Of course there's a lot of dystopian novels as well that show what technology could do that's very harmful, but most of Science Fiction does have this very optimistic attitude that with scientific exploration, with the use of technology we can get to a future that's a lot brighter than our present. But most of the theorists have acknowledged that this is a sort of strategy for discussing present issues in a somewhat safer space. And the most famous of these theorists is a gentleman called Darko Suvin and his theory is extremely dense and so there are a lot of researchers who write about him as opposed to writing about Science Fiction. Or they write about him and Science Fiction. Sort of in the way that you have Donna Haraway and cyborgs or Homi Bhabha and The Other. It's not only that they developed a theory but they developed a theory that sparked a lot of further conversation.

And what Darko Suvin said that resonated so much with all the other— most of the other academic theorists was that Science Fiction is the interaction of estrangement and cognition. So the estrangement is that United Federation of Planets, or the Alpha Quadrant. The estrangement is 'that strange new world' that Science Fiction takes us to. And cognition is when we apply the lessons that we learned there to our own world. So the cognition is bringing it back. The estrangement is going there to the imaginary world and the cognition is bringing the lessons we've learned back to our everyday existence where we hopefully do have a new attitude towards Vietnam or race or women or whatever. We bring that back with us and we look at our current situation and we look at it slightly differently because we've experienced these emotions in a safer place. And one of the things that has struck me is how similar this is to Victor Turner's theory of liminality. It's not his theory – I shouldn't say that – but he's the main person who has expounded the theory. He took it from sociology and the idea that in most cultures, there is a place where we go outside of our everyday life to explore things that would be too uncomfortable for us to explore in everyday life.

So for example, if we look at that episode of *The Lieutenant* where the Black military member attacks a white military member who he knows is a supporter of white supremacy and who beat him badly in the past. We might look at that and feel like, completely uncomfortable: Uncomfortable about the fact that we're empathising with these people, uncomfortable about the fact that we might be working with a white supremacist and we've never said to him: "Hey, that's not okay!" We may feel guilty that we might have a Black colleague in the military and we've never thought about what it might be like for him. So we have a lot of feelings of our own guilt and our own involvement. But if I take that to the planet Neural and I have two different races, one, for example, who has half-Black on the left and half-white on the right and the other one who has Black on the right and white on the left, I can look at these without feeling any personal involvement in them. I can just maybe in almost the way that Brecht suggested, I can look at this without engaging my emotions. I can have some distance. "Entfremdung". I can have some distance from it.

And that's why Science Fiction is such an excellent liminal space: Because it can provide you exactly with this safe space that allows you to think about racism, sexism, gender roles, immigration, refugees, COVID... It allows you to think about all of these issues, but in an arena where you can sit next to... You know, someone with a Booster-shot can sit next to somebody who is an Anti-Vaxxer and they can watch a *Discovery* episode about a plague on planet Ulyla III and they don't necessarily

have to get into an argument with each other: They can both watch it and they can think about it and they can maybe even have a discussion about Ulyla III without realising that they are actually discussing their current differences.

AE: You mentioned Brecht just now and I also thought this when you were talking about the estrangement and cognition, I think it's already drifting in that direction but I still wanted to ask you this: Is it potentially more effective to have the estrangement and then the cognition? So, if you have the – in German you call this the “Aha-Effekt” – so when you have this moment of recognising what you were actually just watching, moralising about, discussing, that the effect of this can be stronger than if, for instance, you kind of took that layer of fictionality away, or of science fictionality away, and discussed the issues outright. So apart from what you said from the opportunity to talk about this in a safe space, can it also be more effective?

CBG: I think definitely it can. You are also in Science Fiction, there are other genres that do this too, but often in Science Fiction you are then lead to that ‘Aha-moment’, so you are made to empathise with the character who is seemingly sympathetic, seemingly has shared values and then you see how incredibly dangerous their behaviour actually is and so, yes, that could potentially make you think: “Oh wow, I was totally on board with this character and now I can see, the actual line of thinking is quite dangerous or potentially has very serious consequences that I hadn't thought about.” So yes, definitely.

AE: Or even the other way around: You sympathise and empathise with a character and then you afterwards realise that these are people who in real life you could also sympathise with. And because also, as you kind of said before, because it is this kind of safe space that you're in, where you're not initially talking, thinking, debating about issues in our real world, in our everyday lives. It lets you kind of ease into it more, I think, then if you put people in front of a war drama or documentary film.

CBG: That's definitely the idea. It's tricky though. It's very tricky. Because you're also saying that even in an imaginary world, these exact same social ills exist. And that's where a really tricky part comes into it: In the case of *Star Trek*, there are any number of episodes where we see racist behaviour in alien species. And of course the idea behind it is that we watch that, we see that racist behaviour and then we think about our own behaviour in our everyday world, how we treat people that are different from us. But by the same time, *Star Trek* is saying: “Well, guess what? Klingons are racist, Vulcans are racist, Ferengi are racist, Cardassians are racist, Bajorans are racist. Basically everybody out there, other than the humans, is racist!” And so at some point the question arises: Are you now emphasising with the idea that racism is the natural course or the universe and pretty unavoidable and maybe ‘I don't have to work on it in my everyday life, because it's just the way things are!’

AE: Or even being intrinsic— It in itself being racist by saying humans are the only intergalactic race that has this moral superiority, while all of the others are kind of a bit backwards and have to be educated by humanity.

CBG: Yeah. And this doesn't really work well with the *Star Trek* world view. It's a sort of a problematic aspect. And Roddenberry believed this. Roddenberry believed that humans needed to evolve to an anti-racist stance. I won't say post-racial, because that's way too laden. But an anti-racial stance. But in the course of the show, the fact that no other race has really gotten past racism, I find very

problematic. It would be refreshing to have aliens who didn't have any racial issues. But part of the problem is the exigencies of a television show. It would be very difficult for them to have a planet where no two people looked the same, but where we could immediately identify them as Dromedans. You know? How do we know they're Dromedans if Dromedans have absolutely no unifying visual clue?

And so we have for example all of the Vulcans looking rather East European or Asian and when we had a Black Vulcan, people flipped: "That's not the way Vulcans look, Vulcans aren't Black!" Or Klingons are all huge and muscular and war-like. And so we don't have a thin, petite Klingon. We do have a fairly thin and petite Half-Klingon in *Voyager*. All the Cardassians are more or less the same colour, so you have that problem of not having visually the multi-cultural alien societies and I understand that you want that quick identification. "Oh, that's a Vulcan"; "Oh, that's a Klingon" It is a problem. It is a problem that they all seem to be monolithic cultures with pretty much biologically identical individuals.

AE: They seem, I mean they do become kind of an add-on to humanity then. Because humanity has, even in the early *Star Trek* some degree of diversity and then the Vulcans and the Klingons and so on, become more diverse segments of humanity and kind of a projection but they aren't really humans.

CBG: Well, Daniel Bernardi makes exactly this point as do some other Science Fiction theorists. We always are going to relate aliens to groups we know on the planet earth. Because we know aliens don't exist, so we don't have anything to compare Vulcans to, other than humans, and so immediately – you know, just go into any of the chat rooms – most of the people see the Vulcans as being some sort Asian culture, they see the Klingons as being Soviets, they see the Ferengi— And this is very controversial, of course and probably the point where *Star Trek*'s most racist moment came, is that a lot of people identified the Ferengi as Jewish. While I don't want to get into it, to be honest with you. But there is a lot of stereotypes of the Ferengi that overlapped with the extremely racist notions of Jews. The Bajorans were also seen as being Jewish, or Tibetan and the Cardassians either Nazis or Chinese. So people immediately try— And argue about this! They'll say: "No, the Cardassians, Cardassians! It's obviously the Nazis!" And other people say: "No, no, no! It's clearly China and Tibet" And, you know. You can make these arguments but they are almost naturally made, because you can't say "Oh that's not a typical Cardassian!" because the only other Cardassians you have are the ones *Star Trek* have produced. There is no real Cardassian to compare it with.

AE: And it's also, the show from the concept itself kind of invites this idea of mapping our world onto the Science Fiction world, by doing that themselves. If the show is constantly working through and dealing with and debating social issues from our world, it kind of logic then follows that people look for the key to solve the puzzle of what is supposed to be what.

CBG: Absolutely, yeah! And that's, you know, there's a lot of fan-service, according to that too but I mean, let's just look at the original series, the character names. We've got Uhura, who's the African, we've got Chekov, who's the Russian, we've got Scotty, who's the— Scot! We have Sulu, whose name comes from an ocean off of the Philippines (the actor himself is Japanese but the name was supposed to show all Asian countries) and even the guest stars, you know? There's a Finnegan and he's singing Irish songs, traditional Irish songs, we're in the twenty-third century but Finnegan knows all sorts of Irish songs that, you know— "I'll take you home, Cathleen" and whatnot, I don't know,

maybe they'll be big hits in the twenty-third century but I'm dubious. So you have this kind of –

I don't mean to be mean about it because at the time it really was important to people, you have to understand that before Roddenberry, every Science Fiction show was lily, lily-white. And if you were Black, or you were Asian, or you were anything other than lily-white, you had to ask yourself why aren't there any of me in the future? So you know obviously there's been a horrible genocide where all of my race has been wiped out. So it was so important what he did, but it's not on like the kindergarten party, where everybody's got. . . you got the Chinese girl, you've got the Russian person and you know you got a German with a beer stein and a lederhosen and a French guy with a beret and a baguette under his arm. It's sort of a superficial multiculturalism, there isn't a lot of depth to these people's ethnicities or their nationalities. Look at Jean-Luc Picard, in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, he can't even speak French, the actor, as brilliant as he is, does not speak French and has a horrifying accent when he does speak French so, you know, in *Picard* they take it back into this French vineyard and his lovely French manor house, but he's still a British actor who doesn't have any real affinity to the culture. So it's a very superficial, sort of a multiculturalism that I think as the show evolved became more and more problematic and is dunked pretty much by the time you get to *Deep Space Nine*. There is Miles O'Brien who identifies as Irish but he's a carry-over from *Next Generation* so maybe you can excuse him in that way.

AE: So apart from this cultural tokenism, you indicated earlier that there are some issues with *Discovery*'s attempts to kind of bring all of the social problems into one bag and probably attempt to solve all of them, so can you just say a bit more about that now?

CBG: Yeah that's probably a good way to sort of tie everything together. Here's the problem, and it's a basic conundrum: if you say that Science Fiction is a way of having a conversation about the present in the future, you deny that there has been that progress we've been talking about. Because in the future they have the same or very similar problem to the one that we have now and *Discovery* for example, it has had this problem in its gender issues. *Star Trek*— and I don't know whether this is in the DNA of this show, because Roddenberry was aggressively heterosexual, he would not have made it through *Me Too*. He wasn't quite a Harvey Weinstein but he was guilty of a lot of practises that would not hold up anymore in his casting and his treatment of female cast members. So I don't know if that's in the DNA of the show or not but there was never any real engagement with gender issues.

The actor who plays Sulu, George Takei, is a big gay rights activist and he says that he did discuss it with Roddenberry and Roddenberry told him it was simply something that the networks would not accept, period, end of story, so he couldn't do it. But this sort of belies what Roddenberry said, why couldn't there be a planet without gender? You know? Why couldn't there be? And there's only one episode in *Next Generation* that deals with it and it kind of horrifyingly identifies with the very conservative viewpoint. In it they have a race that is non-gendered, there is a member of this non-gendered society who actually feels like a woman and falls in love with Riker and at the end of the episode she's forced to go through conversion therapy and is grateful for it, is happy to have been normalised. So you know, that's a little bit of a problematic thing.

And then most of the shows don't deal with it, even when there's some really questionable things, for

example Seven of Nine (character)— if you're a Borg, you're actually plugged into the consciousness of a million other individuals. So every sexuality is your sexuality. You can't have one sexuality because you've got a million people's sexualities having run through your brain. Nonetheless she's very typically feminised and sadly, really sort of taught that in order to be human she has to be female, she can't be, you know, everything anymore, she has to be female. So when we get to *Discovery*, *Discovery* has the first openly homosexual couple in *Star Trek* history, which is kind of sad for a socially progressive show, this is what we're bragging about in 2019? It's slightly sad. The world is already ahead of them, we already have homosexual marriage, legal in the United States by the time *Star Trek* gets around to showing one. So they're kind of behind the ball here.

This is where you get into a problem, because right now they're trying to be very progressive about these issues but by thematising it over and over again in the future you kind of feel like 'wow, we really haven't made much progress, have we?'. If in the twenty-third, twenty-fourth century we are still having to discuss what we call someone who doesn't identify as one gender or the other and they're insisting on being called *they* and I'm thinking, well I watched this, are we not further than this by the twenty-third century? Have we not solved these linguistic problems, do people still need to debate these issues, shouldn't it just be portrayed as absolutely perfectly normal? That people have whatever gender they want to have and nobody talks about it. But of course, if we're talking about the present in the future, they have to thematise it. And this has become much more difficult as people have become far more aware of these representational issues. Yeah, it's part of this conundrum: how do you talk about the present in the future and show that the future has evolved well beyond where we are now?

AE: Would you say that this is an issue with, you already said, more awareness in general society for this sort of things, but also that *Star Trek* can't be progressive in the same way that it was in the 60's, because the world has become more progressive around it?

CBG: Certainly the world caught up to *Star Trek*. And that happened a long time ago, that happened before *The Next Generation*, so yes, that did happen. What I find a little bit more troubling is that by the middle of the 90's, you know, most Americans believed they were living in a post-racial society. And I think *Star Trek* had a lot to do with that, I think that it really influenced people to believe 'oh yeah, we're going to reach this future, where race has no effect on anybody and we see past people's exteriors and only their capabilities and talents are important'. The flipside of that is that then anybody who's not a valued member of society must be personally defective. It can't be because of racism or sexism or ableism or any of the other prejudices that are very, very real in our society today. It's potentially dangerous to say that individual worth is more important than any other factor. First of all you'd have to decide what individual worth is and, second of all, you'd have to ignore the fact that if you're born with capability and talent you didn't exactly earn it, but beyond those two factors it really denies any kind of institutional or systemic issues and so that's a really big problem with *Star Trek* '66 versus *Star Trek* in the mid 90s, when you get *Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine*, *Voyager*, trying to be modern, trying to push the envelope. But, my god, we have women who are leading countries right now so thinking that 'Wow, look! A woman is ahead of a starship in the twenty-third century, my goodness!', you know, we're already further than that. That shouldn't be a big deal.

AE: Yeah. This point of individualism that you just made: Would you say that *Star Trek* is a very specifically American and maybe even patriotically American utopia?

CBG: I think that the Federation is clearly America and I think that all of the writers, or the vast majority of the writers are Americans who grew up in America and were socialised in America and you can see that their notions of other countries are only skin-deep, as we mentioned before, you know, a Frenchman has to have a vineyard, right, I mean, what other kind of Frenchman is there? It's not going to be a Frenchman who is in, you know, a computer engineer or something, that's— French people drink wine. So I think that it is very definitely an American in tone, but I think that the seeing past race, colourblind racism if you would like, I think that that's not a solely American issue. I think that that also very much exists in Europe— That what seems very positive, 'I don't see colour, I look at the individual not at— you know, what group they belong to'. That seems very positive but the downside of it is that, very quickly, anybody who hasn't made it is defective. And it doesn't take into account, you know, whether you were born into a crack addicted family in an urban setting or whether you were born to a real estate mogul. [AE: Yeah.] If you look at the people who are rich in this world, whether it's Boris Johnson or Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos, their parents were usually well-off, well educated people. And so individual worth is a real problem.

And that's why people are not talking about post racist anymore but anti racist because how you feel and how you think are very difficult things to measure but what you can do is measure a person's actions. And so science fiction potentially could play a really important role there of trying to get people to act in their contemporary lives, based on this sort of evolution they've gone through from watching this, estranged environment and seeing how things function there. And seeing the suggestions of progressive writers as to how some of these problems can be solved. If we go back to *The Omega Glory* for example, most people think that this is a hyper-patriotic episode because at the end the Yongs parade in an American flag and "Oh, say can you see" is in the background, so the national anthem is being played and they read from the constitution but by the same token, Kirk's final speech is "These rights mean nothing if they're not applied to both the Yongs and the Kohms" and that for 1966-67 is a revolutionary message, that we have to treat Soviets exactly the same as we treat Americans. So if people take that message back into their everyday life and act on it then Science Fiction is enormously powerful. If they go to Science Fiction to escape the action, then Science Fiction is counterproductive.

AE: Now we've talked only about *Star Trek* so far and I know that this is what you're working on mostly. Just out of curiosity and it's absolutely fine if you don't have any other examples, but I was just wondering if there are any supplementary examples to *Star Trek*, where we can find similar, or also completely different ways of dealing with issues like that.

CBG: Well, *Star Wars* is an interesting example, because *Star Wars* has never done this, *Star Wars* is far more of a fairytale and a fantasy, but one of the huge critiques of *Star Wars*, the first *Star Wars*, is that there were no Black people. And so people asked, what happened to the Black people of the universe? Did they just— you know. And in this corner of the universe there are no Black people is problematic. You can imagine. So they introduced Lando Calrissian in the second movie but it's in *Star Trek*'s DNA and that representational aspect, even if the colour blind racism taints it, even if the fact that they didn't remain progressive taints it, even if the essentialism they show towards aliens

taints it, that representation was enormously important to people. To people who were on the show, famously Martin Luther King refers to Uhura as being the first really important black role model on American TV, because it shows that we have survived and thrived in the future.

So *Star Wars* seems because it's— I don't know, it has another dimension of popularity and consumer approval that *Star Trek* somehow avoided, maybe because Roddenberry was such a prickly bastard, but you know, in *Star Wars*, if you saw the last trilogy— the second one really did actually try and deal with some social issues, with poverty, with this gambling planet, where there are very clearly extreme differences between the classes, and it went over like a lead balloon, the Black actors in *Star Wars* have faced prejudice that the non-white actors in *Star Trek* had not faced – they had faced it, don't get me wrong, but not to the same degree – the non-body-standard people have faced criticism on a different magnitude than people in *Star Trek* do. The whole notion that it could have a social aspect seemed to really infuriate people. So I think that *Star Trek* has been able to almost stand alone as having a different project, because Roddenberry very clearly stated it from the beginning and because *Star Trek* has a fanbase unlike any other, partially because of its longevity, partially because of the conventions, partially because of the role fans have played, both in keeping it on the air and in writing scripts! There are fans who wrote fanfiction and then were hired to write actual episodes based on their fanfiction. So if you look at the internet, at *Project Alpha*, I mean it's crazy how invested people are in the *Star Trek* universe. So perhaps because of that *Star Trek* has been able to stand a little bit alone as being a truly social and a socially progressive project. Not to say there aren't frictions between fans, but still, I think it does stand alone.

But there are a lot of other shows, *Battlestar Galactica* had a lot of issues, even the recent reboot of *Lost in Space* has some issues and some of them are really obvious metaphors, like a lot of the zombie Science Fiction which deals with issues of addiction, issues of late stage capitalism, I'm not an expert on *The Walking Dead*, so I'll leave somebody else to discuss that with you but there are many other Science Fiction venues that reflect modern social concerns because what else would they reflect? We can't— we don't have any future individuals to write fiction for us so it has to be contemporary people and what contemporary people care about are contemporary social issues.

AE: I think these are very nice closing words! Thank you very much for taking the time to do this, especially on such short notice and, as always, thank you very much for your expertise on *Star Trek*!

CBG: You're welcome! It was a pleasure, as always.

AE: And thank you all very much for listening. This is the last episode before the holidays so we'll be back in January with a talk on Vergil's *Aeneid*. If you can't get enough of this lecture series or are otherwise very bored in the interim, you can also listen to last year's lecture series in its entirety and you're still welcome to send a comment in response to all of this year's talks, of course. Much more importantly though, I hope that you all have a good break and take some time off over the holidays.