“Most Damning of All... I Think I Can Live with It”:
Captain Sisko, President Obama, and Emotional Geopolitics

David K. Seitz
Centre for Feminist Research
York University
Toronto ON M3J 1P3
E-mail: davidkseitz@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the proliferation of geographical inquiry into popular culture as a prism for understanding geopolitical processes can benefit from more sustained engagement with psychoanalytic theory, particularly the work of Melanie Klein. Klein’s account of guilt and the urge to make reparation as both central to the development of conscience and profoundly unevenly distributed contributes to a critique of dominant, uneven geographies of guilt and encourages a nuanced approach to guilt’s potential ethical implications. To illustrate, I identify resonances between the contradictory legacy of the Obama administration and the character of Captain Sisko on the television program Star Trek: Deep Space Nine. Both Obama and Sisko, in some ways uniquely empathetic to the uneven distribution of suffering, also authorize forms of violence that differentiate among the relative values of civilian lives. Yet Sisko’s and Obama’s “bloody messes,” I insist, prove not simply individual failings, but matters of unevenly shared, collectively scaled responsibility.

Key Words: geopolitics, emotional geopolitics, Melanie Klein, guilt, reparation

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary geographical scholarship has tendered greater insight into the role of popular culture in refracting, diffusing and contesting geopolitical processes like nation-building, citizenship, war, terrorism, immigration, climate change, and trade, to name a few (Dittmer 2010, see also Schnell 2011). In particular, attending to the mediations of geopolitics in popular culture offers one way of apprehending the profoundly affective character of geopolitical life. Advocating what she terms “an emotional geopolitics,” geographer Rachel Pain (2009) urges that scholars “rework our understanding of geopolitics to take greater
account of emotions,” and encourages geographers writing on geopolitics to “seek to understand and incorporate emotions in nuanced and grounded ways” (474, see also Pain and Staeheli 2014).

To that end, this paper contends that the endless task of interpreting the emotional and intimate life of geopolitical processes can be helpfully supplemented by more sustained engagement with psychoanalytic theories, which approach the mind, particularly the unconscious, as a social and spatial effect of power (Nast 2000). Following Steve Pile (2010), I argue that scholarship in emotional geographies in general and emotional geopolitics in particular benefits from attending not only to conscious emotions and their political valences, but also to the unconscious, to the contradictions and conflicts within the subject (see Nast 2010). I likewise build on scholars in contemporary cultural studies (e.g. Eng 2016) in turning to the Austrian-British object relations psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (1882-1960), whose insights about paranoia, guilt and the urge to make reparation can help to make interpretative sense of fraught geopolitical situations. While Klein has been taken up in some corners of the burgeoning subfield of psychoanalytic geography, particularly in David Sibley’s (e.g. 1995) writing on fear of urban crime and Liz Bondi’s (e.g. 2008) work on gender in therapeutic spaces, she has received far more thorough engagement from scholars in cultural studies working through questions concerning race, gender, colonialism and sexuality (e.g. Eng 2016, Diaz 2006).

What makes Klein so useful for thinking about intimate geopolitics, I suggest, is that her understanding of emotional life treats aggression, envy and rage (conscious and unconscious) as both impossible to eradicate and potentially productive, precisely because of the guilt that often accompanies aggressive feelings. Paradoxically, Klein reads guilt as value-neutral, yet crucial to the formation of conscience. At the same time, her account of guilt also points to its profoundly uneven distribution – and, we might add, geography. Only certain people and populations are deemed worthy of remorse and reparation, and the blame for such uneven distribution lies not only with agents of the state, but unevenly, across entire polities. Klein’s work thus offers an important affective supplement to ongoing geographical debates on mass conflict, complicity, and guilt.

The remainder of this article first makes the case for a renewed consideration of Klein for scholars writing about emotional geopolitics, then puts Klein to work in a close reading of a rich geopolitical and pop cultural text: Star Trek: Deep Space Nine, or DS9. I focus in particular on the characterization of DS9’s protagonist, Captain Benjamin Sisko. Resisting strict analogies, I suggest that Sisko’s professional and political visages in some key respects uncannily prefigure many of the core features and tensions of Barack Obama’s presidency in the United States. While the character of Sisko was developed and produced well before Obama set foot on the U.S. or global political stage, I argue that a Kleinian reading of Sisko might, in an indirect way, provide affective and interpretive resources for making sense of Obama’s contradictory legacy.

The Obama presidency has come to an end. Looking ahead, it surely proves crucial for geographers to reckon with the manifestly spatial designs and practices of the new administration of Donald Trump, particularly with respect to concerns like social exclusion, nation-state sovereignty, environmental destruction, and reconstituted geopolitical order. For perhaps many of us, particularly Obama’s progressive critics, the temptation to wax romantic about the Obama administration (among others) may grow all the more irresistible.

Yet it will also prove crucial to remain committed to the work of critique – what Gayatri Spivak calls “the persistent refusal of that which one cannot not want” (Spivak 2010, 28, emphasis added), work that critical geographers pursue through “ongoing and significant contestation over how we should...
interpret existing spatial relations and how we might improve” (Berg 2010, 616-7).

KLEIN FOR EMOTIONAL GEOPOLITICS

First, why turn to Melanie Klein for a more refined understanding of the imbrications of geopolitics and emotional life? Rather than review her vast body of work, in the limited space available here, I want to highlight two key aspects of Klein’s observations of emotional life that I argue can help emotional or intimate geopolitics encounter its objects of study differently: (1) her understanding of aggression and guilt as core to both ethical and unethical forms of relationality and (2) her account of the capacity for reparation and forgiveness as unevenly distributed, at multiple spatial scales. It is my hope that papers like this one advance ongoing conversations about Klein’s potential to inform geographical research.

First, Klein understands guilt as both value-neutral and the crucible of conscience and moral development. While guilt has taken on a prevalent connotation as self-indulgent and anti-relational—as more preoccupied with the distance between the guilty subject and her ideal image of herself than with actual harm—Klein’s clinical interpretations of the emotional lives of her child and adult patients tell a more complicated story. In Klein’s view (1975), children unconsciously project aggression and hatred into those they most love and depend on, in large part because of anxiety and insecurity about losing the love of a parent or caretaker. To preserve a sense of safety and continuity, children fantasize about splitting the nourishing “good” parts of the parent away from the “bad,” inconsistent, disappointing or threatening parts. This aggression and hatred, in turn, prompts feeling of guilt and an urge to make amends—what Klein calls, “the drive for reparation” (286). In this way, aggressive, hateful unconscious fantasies end up playing a crucial role in helping people realize what we most love and value, and in the formation of ideals and a conscience that “strengthen… the loving impulses and further… the tendency towards reparation” (279).

Crucially, Klein emphasizes relative continuity between childhood and adulthood, suggesting that people continue to go through cycles of largely unconscious hatred, aggression, guilt and reparation toward various other people, ideas, institutions and places throughout their lives. The hope in Klein’s account of subject formation lies not so much in the prospect that the subject escapes this fraught psychic itinerary, as that moments of insight enable the subject to live with impure, sometimes disappointing, but ultimately worthwhile whole objects.

Klein’s (1975) turn to the Greek mythological figure Orestes proffers an instructive illustration of the value of her thinking about emotional life for studies of geopolitics in particular. In her reading of the myth of Orestes, who kills his mother after she kills his father, Klein examines how guilt, and obligations to both his parents, threatens to tear Orestes in two. Persecuted and put on trial for his crime, Orestes is ultimately acquitted by the deciding vote of the goddess Athena. As the goddess of wisdom, Athena presciently suggests that Orestes, who is heir to the throne of the Greek city of Argos, put his profound awareness of his capacity to do harm to work in the service of his citizens.

What might Klein’s reflection on the psychic life of an individual king tell us about the emotional geopolitics of large and complex societies? On the one hand, a focus on the personalities of individual leaders or agents of the state can worryingly personalize, or as Wendy Brown puts it, “Oedipalize” politics (Celikates and Jansen 2012). One might argue in response, though, that the body and the psychical lives of heads of state should indeed refract the contradictions of the social and geopolitical worlds—that such figures should share in Orestes’ sense of wrenching guilt and profound dilemma, if not his bloody deeds. In this sense, Klein’s use of a guilty head of state for thinking about conscience formation is a hopeful story, because it articulates the capacity to work
through and reflect on inner as well as outer contradiction as a core quality of ethical leadership. As Klein suggests, “People who have more insight into their inner processes and therefore use much less denial are less liable to give in to their destructive impulses; as a result they are more tolerant also towards others” (294).

On the other hand, in the context of democracy – so-called popular sovereignty – it is perhaps more accurate to say that the bodies and psychical lives of all democratic subjects bear ethical responsibility for their state’s bloody acts (Santner 2011), even its most undemocratic ones, and even if they do not bear this responsibility equally. From this vantage, though responses to guilt can surely prove instrumental, guilt itself is not necessarily self-indulgent, but in fact crucial to the formation of conscience for democratic subjects, to the prospect of meaningful political forms of reparation. What Natalie Oswin (2004) writes of complicity in the queer geographies literature could easily extend to geopolitics here: “Instead of thinking complicit space as total and negative, we might reconceptualize it as ambivalent and porous, as an undetermined set of processes that simultaneously enables both resistance and capitulation” (84). As Dittmer (2010) and others have suggested, it is precisely such pressing ethical questions around uneven complicity and unresolved collective responsibility that popular cultural texts addressing geopolitics mediate and work through.

The diffuse, distributed character of ethical responsibility brings me to the second, profoundly spatial Kleinian insight that might productively inform thinking about geopolitics and emotional life. Klein makes very clear that reparation has an uneven geography – that psychic deliberations about which objects or populations are worthy of remorse and repair are notoriously selective. Many have noted that Klein (1998) makes the worrisome use of colonial metaphor in her writing on reparation, comparing a child’s desire to replenish their psychic life to a colonist’s desire to make reparation to a colonial landscape they have genocidally purged of inhabitants. In a revealing slippage, Klein suggests the colonist’s drive to repair might repopulate the colonial landscape, not with Indigenous people, but with their fellow European nationals (Alford 2001, Eng 2016). To be sure, we have to read Klein against her own Eurocentrism here (Seitz 2017). Yet Klein’s hint that affective reparation has an uneven geography—that people only feel guilty and seek to make amends to certain people or populations that they have harmed, harm, and not others—adds important nuance to debates on affective geopolitics. Many important scholars of geopolitics and emotional life have noted the ways in which love, hate and fear are profoundly structured and dispersed on nationalist and white supremacist terms (see Ahmed 2004, Pain 2009). In that vein, Klein indicates that reparative impulses also allow for greater “separation” between loved and hated aspects of a community as they jump scale from family to school to nation. Her view also suggests that people do not only or simply love, hate, or fear at global scales, but they experience conscious and unconscious gradations and itineraries that toggle between and even integrate love and hate, among other affects. Moreover, Klein’s view suggests that guilt can lead to a range of outcomes. Guilt can propel practices of denial, or fake forms of reparation or disingenuous apology. But it can also lead to acts of reparation that are richly informed by greater self-awareness around one’s own capacity to do harm (Alford 2001).

Klein’s complex way of thinking about guilt proves both apposite and essential, I contend, for making sense of the geopolitical legacy of Barack Obama. After all, Obama seemed in some respects quite uniquely sensitive to the uneven distribution of suffering and empathy within the United States. At the same time, Obama’s geopolitical legacy suggests he felt some populations (e.g. most U.S. citizens) were more worthy of remorse and reparation than others (e.g. Iraqi, Afghan, Yemeni citizens or residents), a view that had
deadly and immiserating consequences. With Klein’s insights around guilt and its uneven geography and the contradictions of U.S. geopolitics both in mind, I want to turn to a close reading of Captain Benjamin Sisko, a figure who grapples with strikingly similar affective, ethical and geopolitical dilemmas.

**MAPPING GUILT IN DS9**

I am far from the first to observe that *DS9* is a particularly fecund text for working through the affective and political contradictions of race, sex, colonialism, kinship, or war. Indeed, other scholarly critics have extolled the profound significance of the figure of Captain Sisko as boldly insisting that Blackness has a future (Carrington 2016). Captain Sisko also makes a fascinating interlocutor for President Obama, and not only in identity-based terms. Both are Black American leaders of complex multiracial polities, highly cerebral men of deep religious faith who have cultivated a “family-friendly” image, in contrast to white predecessors (Captain Kirk, Bill Clinton) known for their many romantic liaisons. Both take an approach to “domestic policy” animated by profound empathy for historically maldistributed suffering. Yet both find their efforts are complicated, and at times gravely compromised, by a deep and in some cases misplaced sense of duty to dominant military, economic, and political interests and elites.

The Sisko-centric episode I have elected to focus on here—season six’s “In the Pale Moonlight”—is perhaps the most popular in the entire series. It is also among the most troubling. Indeed, the very features that draw people to *DS9*—its long story arcs, focus on “internal,” psychical life rather than exploration, darker view of the United Federation of Planets and the liberal humanist Enlightenment values that inform the *Trek* franchise—tend to make people especially fond of “In the Pale Moonlight.” Conversely, viewers averse to the series’ complex political storylines or the turn away from *Star Trek’s* confident, white, masculine, “alien of the week” ethos are sour on the episode for a corresponding and opposed set of reasons.

For *DS9*, importantly, is not only a story about fatherhood or diversity, it is also a story about war—about the exceptions, exclusions and lacunae constitutive of liberal democratic orders that can become all the more evident through careful study of war (Reid-Henry 2007). By season six of the series, the United Federation of Planets is embroiled in a devastating military conflict with the Dominion, a totalitarian multispecies empire from the other side of the galaxy. The Federation, allied with the Klingons, is losing badly to the Dominion and their local allies, the Cardasians. As Captain of the space station Deep Space Nine, which lies next to a wormhole to the Dominion’s side of the galaxy, Sisko played an integral role in the ultimately failed efforts to prevent a Dominion invasion, and now helps to lead the war effort.

At this point in the series, viewers had certainly seen Sisko stubbornly, even quite recklessly pursue military imperatives before, particularly around the dogged search for former Federation citizens whom he had viewed as “treasonous.” “In the Pale Moonlight,” however, takes Sisko’s willingness to sacrifice his values (or exploit their inherent contradictions) to fulfill a strategic imperative to new heights. Among the most striking features of the episode—and one that makes it particularly amenable to analysis through Klein—is its focus on Sisko’s internal object world, on the guilty ruminations of a Sisko as a subject. Such a singular focus, an attempt to give narrative coherence to traumatic events, is atypical of *Trek*, and indeed even of *DS9*. The entire episode proceeds as a rather troubled series of attempts at composing a personal log entry. Sisko recounts his efforts to bring the Romulans—a secretive, technologically sophisticated, sometimes antagonistic empire that has signed a non-aggression pact with the Dominion—into the war on the Federation’s side.

The captain begins by recounting his frustration at posting yet another list of Federation casualties, a practice that has
become something of a dour weekly ritual. Commiserating, two of his staff point out that many Dominion sneak attacks on Federation personnel come from Romulan space, a violation of sovereign territory that the Romulans appear willing to forgive or simply overlook. Sisko sees an opportunity, and begins speculating about the strategic advantage of bringing in the Romulans as an ally. One of his officers suggests that to do so, Sisko will need proof that the Dominion has not only briefly transgressed Romulan territory, but actively conspired against the Romulans. Finding such evidence, of course, requires gathering solid intelligence on the Dominion – a suggestion that sends Sisko to Garak, a wry, effete “former” Cardassian spy and the station’s tailor. An exile from his home planet, Garak is the perfect man for the espionage job Sisko has in mind, precisely because, in Sisko’s words, he “specializes in gaining access to places he’s not welcome.”

Garak initially resists the captain’s entreaty to call on his remaining intelligence sources to ferret out evidence of “Dominion duplicity.” Doing so, he worries, “would use up every resource I have left on Cardassia. And it may be a very messy, very bloody business. Are you prepared for that?” Sisko insists he is indeed prepared, averring that given the threat to Federation lives, he will do whatever is necessary. Fascinated by the alacrity of the typically by-the-book Sisko to make recourse to the “bloody” mess of espionage, Garak agrees to help. At this point, Sisko reflects, he had not yet traversed any bright ethical lines. Illegal espionage is normal and expected in a time of war, he reasons. Yet in that moment of assent to Garak’s somewhat nebulously defined “bloody, messy business,” Sisko demonstrated his willingness to go further.

The remainder of the episode toggles largely between Sisko’s reflections and self-recriminations, and increasingly fraught dialogue between Sisko and Garak. Garak’s sources are unable to find any dirt on the Dominion, for the simple reason that they are all killed within a day of speaking with him. “I hope you’re not giving up that easily,” the tailor baitingly tells a rattled Sisko.

The two then conspire to construct a fake record of a Dominion plan to attack the Romulans, one sure to have a deleterious effect on Dominion-Romulan relations.

Pursuing this goal, however, requires Sisko to consent to a series of increasingly ethically hazy transactions. First, he must arrange the stay of execution for a talented forger with a penchant for drunken violence. When the forger attempts to kill one of the business owners on the station, Sisko must swallow his pride and buy the victim’s silence. Once the forger’s work is complete, Garak kills him. Next, Garak arranges the purchase of stolen Cardassian technology needed to ensure the forgery’s apparent authenticity – from a seller who only accepts payment in a rare, contraband substance used in genetic experiments and biological weapons. Sisko reluctantly agrees, ordering the recalcitrant station doctor to assist. Finally, Sisko must attempt to convince a Romulan Senator of the putative Dominion threat to Romulans. While initially impressed by the record, the senator takes it for further scrutiny, then furiously confronts Sisko, and in one of the series’ campiest scenes, reproaches: “It’s a fake!”

His desperate machinations exposed, Sisko is despondent – and self-effacing. With no one but Garak aware of the extent of his deceitfulness, Sisko’s reckoning with guilt is a profoundly lonely, anxious, and even paranoid one. When Sisko receives word that the senator has been killed, he flies into a fit of rage, finds Garak, and begins wrathfully beating him.

Garak implores Sisko to let up, and then reveals that their plan will in fact work: Garak, who planted the bomb that killed the Romulan Senator, has carefully manipulated events to place blame at the hands of the Dominion. Here, Garak simultaneously plays the roles of persecutor, defense lawyer, and Athena to Sisko’s guilty Orestes. Admonishing persecutor, ambivalent jury, and empathetic judge, Garak might also be read as a kind of enabling subordinate, speaking from the space of exception, a site of torture or
extraordinary rendition inadmissible in the United States but persistent in grey spaces of exception (Reid-Henry 2007):

That is why you came to me, isn’t it, captain? Because you knew I could do the things you weren’t capable of doing yourself? Well, it worked. And you’ll get what you wanted -- a war between the Romulans and the Dominion. If your conscience is bothering you, you should soothe it with the knowledge that you may have just saved the entire Alpha Quadrant. And all it cost was the life of one Romulan Senator, one criminal, and the self-respect of one Starfleet Officer. I don’t know about you, but I’d call that a bargain.

Later, and alone, Sisko reflects on Garak’s words, simultaneously proclaiming his guilty conscience and seeking to expunge it:

I lied. I cheated. I bribed men to cover up the crimes of other men. I was an accessory to murder. But most damning of all... I think I can live with it. And if I had to do it all over again... I would. Garak was right about one thing — a guilty conscience is a small price to pay for the safety of the Alpha Quadrant. So I’ll learn to live with it. Because I can live with it. I can live with it. Computer — erase that entire personal log.

Yet, and resonant with Klein, repeated viewings of the episode suggest that Sisko is perhaps not so alone in his complicity. Recall the initial suggestions made by his officers — around the advantages of bringing the Romulans into the war, and how one might do so. What would it mean to read such comments as not only soliciting, but as lending legitimacy to Sisko’s actions? What could this affective scene of wrenching but also shared guilt, somewhat tremulous insistence that some populations are more worthy of reparation than others, and disavowal teach us about contemporary geopolitics?

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION: SISKOBAMA?

From one angle, Sisko’s forgery rather advisedly echoed the infamous 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident, in which the U.S. National Security Agency dramatically exaggerated claims of North Vietnamese Navy aggression against the U.S.S. Maddox, reports then exploited by the Lyndon Johnson administration to legitimate a dramatic expansion of conventional U.S. military activity in Southeast Asia. Yet one might also think of the Obama administration’s prolific use of drone warfare, and continued use of extraordinary rendition. All of these tactics share in an externalization of responsibility — to CIA black sites, to unmanned vehicles, to a Cardassian spy, to a falsified record or a dead forger — by means of a technical, expert or spatial fix. Yet all such disavowals, devolutions, deferrals and delegations ultimately incur more blood and “mess.” As Ian Shaw (2013) writes of U.S. drone warfare, which has killed hundreds if not thousands of civilians in the Middle East, “while the White House goes to great lengths to connect drone warfare to a clean, crisp battlespace, where the “conduct of war comes to be ever more calculative than corporeal”, the reality for those subject to Hellfire missiles is similar to the drone programme itself: messy and all-too-human” (543). In Kleinian thinking, the externalization of responsibility comprises a “paranoid” orientation toward collective life; instead of asking “What is my role in all of this?” (as Sisko does) one asks, “Why is this happening to me or my fellow nationals?” (Alford 2001). One might wonder: Are Obama and his associates as menaced by guilt over civilian drone deaths as Sisko or Orestes by their transgressions? Are U.S. citizens, or citizens of other nation-states contributing to or benefitting from the “War on/ of Terror” (Pain 2009)? Why or why not? And which citizens?

This paper has offered a narrative lens allowing for a more ambivalent interpretation of Obama’s legacy, with a particular eye toward the tensions in his presidency between
the promise of “domestic” enfranchisement and the consolidation of empire in the putatively “foreign” domain of geopolitics. Indeed, what Baher Azmy, Legal Director of the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights, once said of former U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder could easily apply to Holder's former boss:

[W]hat’s disappointing, I think, is that Holder’s great empathy and thoughtfulness about the role of race in this country and state violence in this country, I would have hoped could have informed the use of war and state violence against detainees in Guantánamo, innocent civilians killed by drone strikes abroad, and the simple perpetuation of raw executive power under legal cover (Democracy Now! 2014).

Any account of Obama’s “great empathy and thoughtfulness” on “domestic” matters of race and state violence is surely rendered problematic by the precipitous rise in deportations of undocumented people since 2009 (Rogers 2016). Moreover, a properly geographical evaluation of Obama’s political legacy also requires that one re-entangle the rather neat binary (and often quite masculinity) schism between “foreign” and “domestic” (Loyd 2014, Cowen and Gilbert 2008). Still, the tension between “domestic” empathy and “foreign policy” catastrophe proves to some extent salient, given the often bracketed mass catastrophe that the continued U.S. War on Terror—what Rachel Pain (2009) aptly calls the “War on/of Terror”—has visited upon millions of civilians in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and elsewhere. Kleinian thinking on the uneven distribution of guilt and reparation proves helpful here; what might it mean to read Captain Sisko’s “bloody messes”—and perhaps, by extension, President Obama’s—as a matter of unevenly shared but collectively scaled responsibility? What instances of guilt and the urge to make reparation might prove empathetic, ethically distributed and geographically transformative?

Critical human geographers have written at length about activist formations that contest both racism and imperialism in ways that flout a domestic/foreign split (see Loyd 2014); my questions are meant to affectively recalibrate how such projects are apprehended. One can love having had a Black president and still relentlessly critique his/our complicity in empire; much of the work of anti-racist, anti-imperialist movement and critique depends on insisting on that very possibility. By asking us to imagine a future that in fact shares many of the contradictions of contemporary liberal empire, DS9— with a little help from geography and psychoanalysis — proves good to think with for the work of social critique in our dark times.

NOTES

1. For the purposes of this paper, I use “affect” in the psychoanalytic sense of conscious or unconscious feeling or emotion. Following psychoanalytically informed geographers, I understand emotions as simultaneously subjective and profoundly socially organized, but not always accessible in direct or conscious ways. As Pile insists, that humans are both conscious and unconscious creatures, divided, strange to ourselves, “undermines any cognition-centered emotional geography that thanks for granted the genuineness of expressed emotions” (Pile 2010, 14).

2. While science fiction is not necessarily reparative, it can enable reparative insights by refracting our unconscious conflicts and desires and projecting them onto alternative futures and worlds.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In addition to the scholars who edit this journal and special issue, and an anonymous reader, the author would like to thank Mic Carter, Beyhan Farhadi, Jordan Hale, Elsie Lewison, Tim McCaskell, Helena Najm and
Adam Zendel for their insightful feedback on this paper.

REFERENCES


ABSTRACT

_Star Trek_ has long used its unique situation as a socially and politically engaged television show to approach contemporary, historical, and futuristic ideas of race, labor, gender, nature, landscape, and place. The concept of alternate perceptions of history continues to provide engaging insights into historical representation. This paper explores how _Star Trek_, as an example of performance, media, and popular culture, contributes to dialogues of alternate pasts, presents, and futures. It builds upon these concepts to engage with and influence geographical dialogues of public space, nature, geopolitics, and societal structure. I explore examples from the television show and the wider universe, particularly two episodes from _Star Trek: Deep Space Nine_ that are both influenced by historical figures and events and, through time travel, reveal their own historical narratives. While _Star Trek_ continues to operate in fictional space, constructing an ‘idealized’ future and imagined landscapes, this paper recognizes that its influence shapes an experienced and an embodied sense of alternate past, present, and future.

Key Words: _Star Trek_; popular culture; history; imagined landscapes; futures

GEOGRAPHIES, FUTURES, AND _STAR TREK_

_Star Trek_ first aired in 1966, followed by thirty seasons across six different series, with the newest premiering in January 2017. The various television shows, thirteen feature films, well over one hundred works of literature, and numerous expressions of fandom through conventions and exhibitions have found their way into the very fabric of our society, influencing even NASA’s first named space shuttle: Enterprise. _Star Trek’s_ place both within and beyond popular culture has enabled it to engage with critical social and political issues. This engagement is enhanced
through the show’s ability to approach modern, historical, and futuristic ideas of race, labor, gender, nature, landscape, and place. Because *Star Trek* is set between the years 2151 and 2378, even events that occur in our near future, when viewed through the narrative of the show, are examples of alternate “past” narratives. This mirror “back” into our future enables these alternate pasts to become manifest as alternate presents and futures.

Jane Palmer wrote that “the often invisible past may be a source of unexpected alternative futures” (2014, 30). Furthermore, it is important to recognize that our understanding of the past is simply the consumption of events interpreted and written by those with the power and means to do so. In this way, our past is simultaneously real and imagined. Depending on who holds power and how that power is challenged, there are any infinite number of very “real” pasts which can be consumed. These alternative histories, particularly within science fiction, as Barney Warf (2002) stated, hold “important implications for social and spatial analysis” and are inexplicably tied to alternate futures. Uncovering these alternate histories, and giving power to the voiceless, exposes alternative pasts for present and future consumption.

This conceptualization, coming out of the transdisciplinary field of futures studies, has yet to find traction within geographic research. Geographers often allude to the future, through geopolitics (Dittmer and Dodds 2008) and landscapes (Kadonaga 1995), but we have yet to engage with the nearly fifty years of literature, methods, and theory developed in the field of futures studies. This field explicitly addresses the role of futuristic perceptions to tangibly alter our present and our remembrance of the past. One exception to geography’s oversight of futures studies is the work of David Hicks. Hicks (2007, 181 citing Bell 1997, 236) applied futures studies—focused on “discovering or inventing, examining, evaluating and proposing possible, probable and preferable futures”—to geography through education. This article was one of the first times geography addressed futures studies, and it offered valuable perspectives into an enhanced geographic curriculum and pedagogy that encouraged students to actively construct their work around and apply it to perceived future issues and concerns, such as climate change. Hicks, however, does not offer applications of futures studies beyond education and pedagogy.

Despite being one of the longest running and most successful science fiction franchises, *Star Trek* is woefully underrepresented in geographical engagement, despite the recent popularity in popular geopolitics, cinematic geography, and fictive geographies (Sharp 2000). Probably most notable for geographic engagement with *Star Trek* was Jason Dittmer’s (2010) monograph, which began by using *Star Trek* as an allegory for geopolitics. While only a short engagement, Dittmer (2010, xiii) viewed *Star Trek* not as something that “followed from ‘real’ geopolitics,” but something filled with agency, because to him “[Star Trek] was geopolitics.” Heather Mair (2009) also engaged in this discourse of *Star Trek* as both imagined and real in an analysis of Vulcan, Alberta. Much like Riverside, Iowa, has transitioned from the fictional to the material “pre-” memorial landscape of where Captain Kirk will be born, Vulcan, Alberta has become a *Star Trek*-themed tourist destination. Besides hosting signage, artwork, and events from the franchise, the “vulcanization” of Vulcan challenged the community identity by, at times, forcibly embedding ideas of post-capitalist or post-racial society into a traditionally conservative community. Here *Star Trek* went beyond landscape and “became part of the mix that shapes how community life if experienced over time” (Mair 2009, 480). In both cases *Star Trek* is not relegated to simple representation of history, but becomes active, embodied, and experienced. In this article, I engage with *Star Trek’s* role as a memorial landscape, as a space and place of memory, and with its ability to create alternate pasts, presents, and futures, through an in-depth examination of two episodes of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (DS9).
This work forms a new geographical framework utilizing futures studies. Ahlqvist and Rhisiart (2015, 94) cited the necessity for the field of futures studies to continue (and particularly expand) upon its history of critical engagement to contribute in social theory through its transdisciplinary aspects, through its methodological basis, or through its orientation as a discipline combining empirical analysis, specific philosophical basis, imagination, and a practical planning orientation.

While Sardar (2008, 893) stated that geographers were among those engaging with futures studies, Toni Ahlqvist (a geographer himself) and Martin Rhisiart (2015, 94) failed to cite a single study when they stated that human geography was among those social sciences that critical futures studies needed to further engage. This provides further evidence not only for the need to critically engage, as geographers, with the field of futures studies, but the amount to which that engagement has thus far been underdeveloped.

Futures studies engagement with geography, beyond a 1997 special issue in Futures (Batty and Cole), has been limited. Except for Saunders' and Jenkins' (2012) research on the role of fear and the envisioning of a future as a response to absent narratives in education, recent research does not follow the call for a transdisciplinary, socially engaged, and multi-perspective geographic engagement with futures studies. This paper begins a critical geographical engagement with futures studies, utilizing an understanding of a socially constructed ideal of the past and future. Davies and Sarpong (2013) stated that it is not the individual components, political and economic influences, imagining of the past, present or future, or the affect of art that forms a study. Rather, an analytical futures studies framework develops from attention to multiple scales, institutions, actors, and times. Futures studies’ unique situation at the confluence of many social sciences and the transdisciplinary nature of blended methodologies, perspectives, and disciplines is a valuable tool for the future geographer.

This work also engages with a unique aspect of landscape studies: imagined landscapes. Drawing on the work of Crouch (2013), Edensor (2005; 1997), Gonçalves (2016), Johnson (2004), Merriman and Webster (2009), Pollock (2004), Rogers (2012), Tyner (2005), and others, this paper examines the role of landscape construction through film, just as others have understood it through dance, theatre, literature, music, and art. In this way, though some of the representations (such as an artwork or a stage) may be visual and material, the experienced cultural, political, social, and physical landscape is constructed mentally. The impact this has on the memorial landscape is equally significant. Edensor (1997; 2005) for example, described the role of the 1995 film Braveheart in crafting an imagined, or “filmic,” landscape of memory and heritage in Scotland, which permeated audiences’ perceptions of Scotland and its history locally and globally, despite certain historical inaccuracies. In this case, the way audiences understood William Wallace, the rural Scottish landscape, and the significance of Scottish nationalism was mythically crafted through the imagined landscapes of the film. Harvey (2013, 153) pointed out this changing trend of heritage landscape analysis: from traditional enquiries of the material “…towards an analysis of the intangible and relational.” In this way, Star Trek is one of these intangible and relational landscape generators. In the examples below, the show provides ideas of both future and past urban, racialized, and class-based landscapes, which can become internalized as representations of what these landscapes might be like.

Star Trek itself has attracted scholarly attention from numerous fields, on subjects as diverse as Cold War geopolitics (Sarantakes 2005), narratology, or the study of narratives, (Jones 2016) and gender representation (Dove-Viebahn 2007). There are also many examples of scholars engaging with the se-
ties as an illustration of alternative pasts and futures. Some work has been done on role of Star Trek: The Next Generation as a narrative of jazz culture and a uniquely utopian future (Jones 2016; Barrilleaux 2015), but most other examinations take a more critical approach. Of particular interest has been the role of DS9 in breaking the racial hegemony of “whiteness operating as the determinant of historical memory” (Kilgore 2014, 31-32; Alexander 2016; Pounds 2009).

DS9 ran for seven seasons starting in 1993 (2369 in Star Trek time) and stood apart from the rest of the franchise in two very distinct ways. First, the majority of the show took place on a space station and not a mobile ship, so the show became more about relationships (personal and societal) than about exploration. Second, the captain Benjamin Sisko was played by African-American actor Avery Brooks. As the first Black star and captain portrayed in a Star Trek series, the show was presented with a number of obstacles and opportunities. The chief concern was Sisko’s identity, as Alexander (2016, 151) wrote,

in other Star Trek incarnations, black human characters had few, if any, ties to black history and culture…. While race does not necessarily define Sisko’s relationship to the people around him, Sisko retains connections to his racial heritage, and it does help to define his character.

This is done through Sisko’s appreciation of African art, his interest in the Negro Leagues and famous Black baseball players, and his family heritage centered on Louisiana and Cajun food. My focus here is specifically on Deep Space Nine and its conceptualization of alternate pasts, presents, and futures.

Pound has argued that DS9 is set apart from the rest of the series:

These episodes suggest that at the centre of this new Star Trek series is an intention to use its lead character’s complicated identity through which his ethnicity is threaded as a narrative engine for generating stories that might go beyond broken warp coils, trans mats and food processors and begin to ask audiences to be entertained by future societies’ unfinished business in politics, religion, philosophy (issues ranging from defining terrorism vs. freedom fighting, examining euthanasia and exploring military culture vs. peace, etc.), Terran vs alien psychology, race (adoption of children from one alien group by a member of another alien race), being a bi-racial or bi-species being, raising gender issues and the imperialistic lust for power and domination (Pound 2009, 215).

Although DS9 did so most explicitly, many of the Star Trek series have followed creator Gene Roddenberry’s vision that the show fundamentally address current issues (Alexander 2016). The Next Generation and Voyager both tackled topics of race and gender, for instance, in a multitude of ways (Jones 2016; Dove-Viebahn 2007).

Ostensibly, Star Trek depicted a utopian future that is non-racial, non-classed, and non-gendered. However, Kilgore has pointed out the irony in the often Western-oriented, white, human-centered future of Star Trek where command still remains “the exclusive right of white (human) males (from Iowa)” (Kilgore 2014, 34). These barriers were later broken down by DS9 and Voyager.

The importance of Star Trek is not always in the narratives it provides, it is in the way those narratives are delivered. Because the show is set in the future, it enables audiences to view the show’s past (which can be our present, past, or future) in a different perspective. In other words, when the characters travel back in time, they may be traveling to the time that the show was made, or to any time between the date the show was produced and the date the franchise is set in. Thus, it is possible for the characters in Star Trek to travel back in time to the viewer’s future. This enables historic stories that are often untold to be revealed (or changed), helps understand political or social move-
ments through their embodiment in an actor, and enables the viewer to visualize past or future places and landscapes. These may be landscapes we have experienced, imagined, or know nothing about; all are made ‘real’ through the art of science fiction.

**EXAMINING THE GEOGRAPHY OF STAR TREK**

By conducting critical narrative analysis on *Star Trek*’s content and imagined landscapes, I explore the various ways that *Star Trek* engages with historical and cultural geography, memory studies, and the role of popular culture in our understanding of history and memory. Narrative analysis has long been used in literature, film, music, and poetry as a means of extracting geographic meaning from media sources (e.g. Tyner et al. 2016; Tyner et al. 2015a; 2015b). Central to narrative analysis is the interpretation of broad themes used to generate meaning.

My focus in this manuscript is on two episodes, both within the same series. I do so for several reasons. First, the series, *Deep Space Nine*, is heavily cited as the most influential and provocative of the franchise when it comes to dealing with historical narratives. Second, the two narratives I chose are both time travel episodes that venture both into our not-too-distant past and into our future. Third, these two episodes are closely linked to my own expertise in early 20th century African-American history and current issues around the privatization of public space.

The second method I use is landscape analysis. Landscape analysis focuses on the extraction of memory, history, and culture from space and place. Landscapes are windows into the ideology and narratives of those who shape, influence, and experience them, and in the case of *Star Trek*, offer valuable information about the role of the past, present, and future in historical representation and narratives. Significant as well are the ways that audiences come in contact with these narratives, and that those in power script those narratives. Landscapes include both material artifact and performance, a palimpsest of past, present, and future social and cultural practices and their material evidence, in this case through sets, stages, and cinematography (Schein 2009). Not only do landscapes reveal ‘social worlds of the past’, but they represent continued values of the present (Doss 2010).

**IMAGINED LANDSCAPES & ALTERNATE “PASTS” OF STAR TREK**

When speaking of *Star Trek*’s creation of imagined landscapes out of events (altered, invented, and/or recreated) in our past, present, and future, the options are endless; the holodeck², time travel, and flashbacks continually offer glimpses into the fictional world’s past and often our own present, past, or future. What follows are two examples of *Star Trek*’s creation of these virtual landscapes through the use of time travel. In each section I describe and analyze the imagined landscapes and fictitious narratives, how those imaginary landscapes are also sites of alternate pasts, presents, and futures, and how these concepts situate more broadly within actualized historical landscapes and narratives.

“FAR BEYOND THE STARS” AND THE EMBODIMENT OF THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

The most-cited episode in the entire franchise regarding exploration of historical narratives is *DS9*’s “Far Beyond the Stars” (Kilgore 2014; Alexander 2016). In the episode, Captain Benjamin Sisko, played by the African-American actor Avery Brooks, is exposed to an alternate reality where he is actually a 1950s New York City science fiction writer named Benny Russell. The episode embodies a past of both *Star Trek*’s and our own universe, and explores issues of racial bias, segregation, and violence. While not based on any one specific story, the narrative hearkens back to one of Brooks’s own roles, as Paul Robeson, the African American singer,
actor, political activist, scholar, and athlete. In “Far Beyond the Stars,” Sisko’s Blackness is both an element that is to be hidden from the readers of the publishing house he is working for and a barrier preventing him from writing the types of stories (with lead African American characters) he would like to. In the episode, Benny Russell attempts to publish a pulp fiction novel about a futuristic space stationed captained by an African-American. Throughout this process he is ridiculed by those in the community and ultimately fired from the publishing firm.

Brooks’s 1995 Broadway performance of Paul Robeson, which depicts Robeson’s similar experiences as a lawyer in 1920s New York, came just three years before the airing of this episode and significantly influenced DS9’s writers and producers. William Shatner even stated in The Captains Close Up (2013), there would be no Star Trek without Paul Robeson. In this way, history (albeit represented in a fictional TV show with fictional characters) is visualized through the characters in Star Trek as embodied and empathized narratives of the past.

The historical landscape is also a significant portion of “Far Beyond the Stars.” Set in 1950s Harlem, there are a number of explicit and banal social and cultural references played out on the landscape. In the show, the publishing office itself is located in the Trill Building, a play on words combining Trill (an alien species common in DS9) and the Brill Building (for which the Brill Building genre of early rock-and-roll music was named). Again, while this is just a fictional landscape, this is still an act of commemoration, just as a university might name a building the Paul Robeson Cultural Center or the W.E.B. DuBois Library. In doing so, power is transferred via the commemorative process. In this case, the Trill Building comes to memorialize “an influential source of national and international musical activity at a crucial transitional stage in the evolution of popular music” (Inglis 2003, 214). Further examples of the historical Harlem landscape are expressed through boxing advertisements, street preachers, and jazz clubs and street performances.

The alternative representation of the past brings the opportunity for alternative presents and futures as well. Star Trek challenges the audience not only to identify with this embodied past, but to place it into the present. This episode particularly highlights the racialized violence of the 1950s. When Benny rushes to help a Black friend of his who has been shot by the police, he himself is viciously beaten badly enough that he cannot go into work for weeks, and even then must use a cane. Similarly, redlining is brought up when the local Black baseball star who plays for the Giants mentions that despite being wealthy he is still unable to live anywhere outside of Harlem.

These events and representations become excellent examples of the blurring of past, present, and future because of their continued relevance today. As Avery Brooks stated, If we had changed the people’s clothes, this story could be about right now. What’s insidious about racism is that it is unconscious. Even among these very bright and enlightened characters—a group that includes a woman writer who has to use a man’s name to get her work published, and who is married to a brown man with a British accent in 1953—it’s perfectly reasonable to coexist with someone like Pabst [the episode’s antagonist]. It’s in the culture, it’s the way people think. So that was the approach we took. I never talked about racism. I just showed how these intelligent people think, and it all came out of them. (Erdmann and Block 2000, 56)

Such stories in popular culture—about the real Paul Robeson or the imagined Benny Russell—enable relevant issues to transcend scale. They originate as ideas which occur to individual writers, those ideas are then produced at a global scale through television episodes aired around the world, and are interpreted again at the individual level as
audiences watch the episodes. Furthermore, these ideas become embodied in a character with whom audiences empathize and bond. Dittmer and Dodds (2008) studied the role of fandom in geopolitics, but fandom, the deep emotional bond that bridges material and virtual space, has an even broader impact when ideas of equality or social justice transcend the scales involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of popular culture.

The actors themselves speak for this process in a series of interviews about the episode. Supporting actor Armin Shimerman stated in 2002 that “Far Beyond the Stars” was “without a question my favorite episode. Star Trek at its best deals with social issues and though you can say, ‘well that was prejudice in the ’50s,’ the truth of the matter is here we are in the 21st century and it’s still there.” This episode reminds us of that continued prejudice. Co-starring actor Rene Auberjonois said it was “one the best [episodes] of the whole series,” while Avery Brooks stated that “it was the most important moment for me in the entire seven years” (Mission Inquiry 2003).

By connecting the racialized landscapes and spaces of the past to audiences well aware of the current events of the present, episodes such as this hope to influence change in the future. Whether the issue at hand is racial discrimination in the work force or racial segregation and landscapes of violence, presenting both the fictional and real landscapes and events of the past, embodied and experienced through empowering characters helps to challenge the continued social issues we face today.

“PAST TENSE,” PUBLIC SPACE, AND POPULAR CULTURE

DS9’s story arc also explicitly engages in debates and conceptualizations of public space and protest. In the two-part episode “Past Tense,” audiences are exposed again to a historic narrative, only this time, despite traveling back in time, the entire show takes place in the audiences’ future. The episode takes place 350 years before the time of DS9, which situates the events in the year 2024, thirty-one years after the episode’s 1995 airing. The plot of the episode centers on the notion that in the early 21st century the United States abandoned economic or medical support for citizens. Most cities then create what are called Sanctuary Districts, which were supposed to be safe economic zones where the homeless and unemployed could voluntarily go to seek employment and safety. The landscapes we see through the eyes of the Star Trek characters, however, are virtual prisons, entire blocks where anyone who is homeless, unemployed, or mentally ill are forced to go and then unable to leave. Inside, there are food and housing shortages, internal gang violence, and daily examples of police brutality. The plot of the episode revolves around staging a protest (known in the 24th century as the Bell Riots) to expose (and ultimately end) this enclosure and criminalization of public space and to bring back the 1946 Federal Employment Act, which was dismantled at some time prior to the riots.

In the episode, the dialogue between Captain Sisko and Dr. Bashir is revealing as to how the Bell Riots come to be memorialized in the future:

Sisko: You ever hear of the Bell Riots?
Bashir: Vaguely
Sisko: It is one of the most violent civil disturbances in American history and it happened right here, San Francisco, Sanctuary District A, the first week of September 2024…
Bashir: Just how bad are these riots going to be, Commander?
Sisko: Bad. The Sanctuary residents will take over the district. Some of the guards will be taken hostage. The government will send in troops to restore order. Hundreds of sanctuary residents will be killed… The riots will be one of the watershed events of the 21st Century. Gabriel Bell will see to that.
Bashir: Bell?
Sisko: The man they named the riots after. He is one of the sanctuary residents who will be guarding the hostages. The government troops will storm this place based on rumors that the hostages have been killed. It turns out, the hostages were never harmed because of Gabriel Bell. In the end, Bell sacrifices his own life to save them. He will become a national hero. Outrage over his death, and the death of the other residents will change public opinion about the sanctuaries. They will be torn down, and the United States will finally begin correcting the social problems it had struggled with for over a hundred years. (*Past Tense, Part I 1995*)

These conditions, while both fictive and futuristic, are based in historical events and speak to numerous geographical concepts. Gross and Altman (1995) reveal that Ira Steven Behr, a co-writer of this episode, based it upon two historical events: the 1971 Attica Prison riot and the 1970 Ohio National Guard shootings which killed four and injured another nine students on the Kent State University campus.

Chief among these geographical explorations is the theme of public space and its privatization (Mitchell 1995; 1997; 2003; 2005). We see this trend continuing in our future (or our alternative future). In the episode, the characters who time-traveled to what appears to be a ultra-modernized San Francisco Financial District are almost immediate accosted by law enforcement for laying down on the sidewalk next to subway station. Furthermore, once the protests in the sanctuary campus begin, there is an almost immediate response from local law enforcement and then the federal military to use force to quell the protest.

Post (2016), in a recent publication on public space and memory of the May 4 sites of Kent State, echoed these concerns about the privatization of public space. Overall, we are seeing the progressive neoliberalization of spaces of assembly, free speech, and protest. In the episode, not only is homelessness criminalized, those who violate such laws by not having a job in the ultra-capitalist future literally become less-than-human and are instead referred to through derogatory code names such as “dims” (i.e. the mentally ill) or “gimmies” (i.e. the homeless or unemployed). As one character in the show states, “the social problems just got too big… [people] forgot how to care” (*Past Tense, Part II 1995*).

One problem we continually see in commemorative space is the continued exclusion of certain narratives. Post (2016, 148, 150) addressed these concerns in the context of May 4 and “the annihilation of public space” as he stated, we need “a public pedagogy outside the classroom that empathizes with the causalities of tragedies such as May 4 and re-humanizes those victims…” *Star Trek* provides this pedagogy for both May 4 and other excluded narratives through the processes of embodiment. Humanizing narratives and ideologies, and exposing discourses that have been or are in the process of being threatened, such as human rights, public space, and processes of protest and activism, are key functions of this episode. And while these narratives are fictional, they instill powerful ideas of what could be remembered while still drawing from very real historic events and landscapes, such as May 4 and the Attica Riots.

**CONCLUSION**

Through the futuristic lens of history, *Deep Space Nine* challenges hegemonic conceptualizations of race and public space in our past, present, and future. Viewing these exposed (and often excluded) narratives opens the possibility for an alternate future on the grounds of a better understanding of racial discrimination, police brutality, homelessness, capitalism, and public space, both in our past and our present. This research paves the way for multiple future
studies. Further engagement with *Star Trek* by geographers is necessary, especially as the films and new television series garner attention. The feminized spaces in *Voyager*, for example, or a post-colonial or Marxist theorizing of the franchise as a whole have yet to be undertaken. Such work seems likely to reveal future affect and power structures imbued within the multiple manifestations of the series. Further engagement between media geographies and popular geopolitics and futures studies is also necessary. Finally, the material culture and spatiality of *Star Trek* through exhibitions, conventions, and other places of fandom have yet to be explored.

*Deep Space Nine* explored racialized, privatized, and exclusionary landscapes. The landscapes, however, are unlike those of, say, Martin Luther King Jr. (Alderman 2003) or slave narratives (Schein 2009), whose histories are rooted in a supposedly “true” past. Here, an imagined future’s imagined past (at times our present) is experienced through film and television. This empowers audiences to ask questions previously not thought of, expanding both the experiences of individuals and the possibilities of geography (Kadonaga 1995). Such fictionalized performances of memory are just as much key elements of historical representation as traditional memorial landscapes, because they similarly evoke emotions, narrate historical pasts in order to shape alternate futures, and are emotionally, visually, and sonically experienced. Likewise, science fiction employs the power of memory, memorial landscapes, and the development and transcension of space and place to shape alternative pasts and futures. In this way, both science fiction and memory serve as powerful agents for social justice and shapers of place, space, narrative, and landscape. These places, spaces, narratives, and landscapes of *Star Trek*, while often imagined, are embedded with meaning which have continually been written, re-written, and contested to address alternate pasts, presents, and futures.

### NOTES

1. Vulcan is the name of the planet and species that Spock is from. Vulcans are both the first alien species to formally make first contact with humans and one of the original and primary civilizations in *Star Trek’s* United Federation of Planets.
2. In the holodeck, environments, people, and experiences were holographic. These rooms, or alternative versions of the holodeck, were prominent features of *The Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine*, and *Voyager*. They enabled those who experienced these spaces to speak to historic individuals, relive pivotal moments from the past, or combine these past people and places with contemporary situations.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to my fellow panelists at San Francisco’s AAG meeting for collectively developing our ideas into this exciting special issue. Fiona Davidson and Hannah Gunderman were particularly helpful in earlier drafts of this work, and the editorial guidance of Steven Schnell is also greatly appreciated. I would like to further thank Chris Post, Jennifer Mapes, and the anonymous reviewers for their feedback. LLAP.

### REFERENCES


ABSTRACT

This article considers the work of Giorgio Agamben’s ‘Anthropological Machine’ (2004) in the depiction of human-nonhuman interactions in Star Trek. While Star Trek aims to present a utopian vision of the future, a contradictory reading is equally plausible. Instead of embracing novel encounters with nonhuman life and technology, Star Trek retreats into an idealized vision of the human. Encounters with the nonhuman become vehicles through which to reinforce this vision of a bounded and pure human subject. In Star Trek, humans are made to be human through their constant encounters with nonhuman forms, and the possibility of nonhuman flourishing is constantly foreclosed upon. However, in foregrounding these boundary struggles, Star Trek unwittingly deconstructs its own vision of the human subject. The more difference that Star Trek presents, the more apparent it becomes that the human subject to which it is compared is itself an unstable entity.

Key Words: Star Trek, anthropological machine, posthumanism, Othering, cyborg

INTRODUCTION

Star Trek has one of the most extensive runtimes in the history of science fiction film and television. In turn, this has led to the creation of a rich and complicated mythology attracting a plethora of academic interest in both its fans and its content (Kerry 2009; Tullock & Jenkins 1995). This depth of interest contributes meaningfully to the show’s richness as a text, whilst simultaneously providing a large pool of literature from which to draw ideas and inspiration. As the other articles in this special issue help to demonstrate, Star Trek is an ideal experiment-space in which to explore the cultural anxieties of its originary culture and how these have evolved over the past 50 years (Barrett & Barrett 2001; Richards 1997). Star Trek is fictional, but...
there is something particular about science fiction as a genre: it takes the unreality of its premise and attempts to deal with it seriously, creating characters that respond to imagined worlds in plausible ways (Kitchen & Kneale 2002; Suvin 1979). It is a genre which has inspired many of the scientific advances it initially conjured as fantastical (Dator 2012). As a consequence, science fiction opens up a unique and resonating “metaphorical double-space between real and framed space” (Ballhausen 2009, 35; also Connolly 2011; Poulaki 2010) that helps to shape reality even as it seeks to reflect it.

With *Star Trek* returning to television in 2017 with CBS’ *Star Trek: Discovery*, it seems prudent to re-examine the imaginative world that this media franchise constructs and the messages we might take away from it. This article focuses on how *Star Trek* presents a vision of humanity’s future. This analysis considers *Star Trek* as a machine that produces and discloses worlds through the deployment of particular discourses (Ivakhiv 2013). The article begins by considering *Star Trek* alongside posthumanist literature. Thereafter, the article considers human interactions both with alien life and with technology. In both instances we find that, in spite of the potential to radically reshape how we think about humans, interactions with alien life and technology in fact do the opposite. Aliens and technology are both used as points of difference, divergences from an idealized human norm that are used to illustrate what does and does not constitute a bound subject that we might call ‘the human.’ In tracing the above, something Agamben (2004) calls the ‘anthropological machine,’ we can locate an underlying instability in *Star Trek*’s concept of the human. In *Star Trek*, the human is not a coherent entity but something rather more fluid: an ideology that works to preserve itself by identifying ‘human’ traits in aliens and technologies and subsuming them under a banner of humanity. This perpetual reimagining of the human in the face of new externalities maintains a paradox at the heart of the show, in which otherness remains at the forefront of the narrative despite constant attempts to subjugate it. Far from the utopian imaginary of Gene Roddenberry, for whom *Star Trek* presented a bright inclusive future, I might suggest that in reality *Star Trek* represents a somewhat more regressive vision of humanity’s future.

**TRACING ‘THE HUMAN’**

It is a gross simplification, but I might suggest that modernist thinking imagines the human in greedy and essentialist terms. Writings on the ineffable qualities of the human, and humanity’s place at the top of the great chain of being are in no short supply (Frayn 2006; Fukuyama 2002). This kind of thinking serves to render the human as the embodiment of a cultural and evolutionary apex, knowable only unto himself, and a safeguard against a ‘moral chasm’ of the nonhuman world below (Castree et al. 2004, 1345). Against the chaos of the nonhuman world, modernist thinkers have attempted to ‘fix’ the human subject, making a stable entity out of a bundle of contradictions (Pettman 2011, Braun 2004). Importantly, it is the very desire to maintain sharp distinctions between what is human and what is not that has created a proliferation of hybrids that do not map to either status. In this sense, the modernist imaginary of the human has been about purification and hybridization, with the first activity celebrated and the latter denied (Bennett 2001, 96; Latour 1993).

At the heart of this paradoxical dynamic lies Agamben’s ‘anthropological machine’. The machine functions such that if we accept the modernist vision of the human, we commit to a “state of exception, a zone of indeterminacy in which the outside is nothing but the exclusion of an inside and the inside is in turn only the exclusion of an outside” (Agamben 2004, 37; also Pettman 2011). Despite having no inherent characteristics of its own, an idea of the human can be perpetually recycled in contrasting terms to what it is assumed not to be, producing stability for the notion of humanity through perpetual
Othering. In response, posthumanist thinking has sought to destabilize the boundaries that hold this anthropological machine together. While some authors argue that modernism itself was never a coherent project (Latour 1993; Haraway 1991; Braun 2004) the notion of ‘post-’ state provides a useful grammar for changing our interpretation of entities like the human that modernism (broadly) treats as stable. At the heart of posthumanist thinking is a desire to look across assumed dividing lines between the human subject and the nonhuman world and to engage with the hybrid identities that modernist thinking actively denies a clear status (Stevenson 2007; Pettman 2006; Haraway 2004; Wolfe 2003; Bingham 2002). Rather than being discrete in any essential way, the human and the nonhuman are “disassembled and reassembled from the other beings in our worlds with their own partial and fractured identities” (Stevenson 2008, 103). Whether we take posthumanism to be an ideological framework (Campbell 2006) or a deconstructive perspective (Castree et al. 2004), both enact the very possibility of change, creating a space to transcend the “vision of disconnection that has isolated the human for so long in its own conceit of uniqueness” (Clarke 2008, 196). It is by engaging with these posthumanist themes and their destabilization of the human subject that we can expose how the human subject of Star Trek is in fact wholly contingent on juxtaposition with and assimilation of the Other.

THE FLOURISHING OF OTHERS IN FEDERATION SPACE

Star Trek set out its utopian credentials early on, positing a post-scarcity future world far removed from the reverberations of twentieth-century war. Nonetheless, when we start to peel away at Star Trek’s representations of alien life, we find a more uncomfortable narrative. We start to recognize a colonialist vision that rejects nonhuman perspectives (Geraghty 2007; Barrett & Barrett 2001) and celebrates the use of technological power in their subjugation (Ono 1996). Contra to Star Trek’s intended message, the Federation’s mission is not so much to explore the galaxy, but rather to impose its values on those whom it encounters (Tullock & Jenkins 1995). Space travel becomes a metaphorical extension of the American West, and in so doing fulfills the American dream by providing an endless ‘final frontier’ in which expansionism is wholly naturalized (Shaw 2006). The clarion call of the Federation, to both ‘seek out new civilizations’, and ‘boldly go where no one has gone before,’ only makes sense when we read it through the recursive lens of a frontier ideology “which grants new civilizations existence only to the extent that the originary culture has found them” (Fulton, quoted in Shaw 2006, 67). Despite lofty ideals, Star Trek nonetheless takes a kind of human exceptionalism for granted (Short 2003; Jenkins & Jenkins 1998), an act that diminishes the possibilities for interacting with alien life in meaningful ways. Of course, it is not with the intention of diminishing the potential of nonhuman life that Federation crews set out. Instead they are governed by the ‘Prime Directive’, the command that they are not to interfere with the development of alien cultures. The Prime Directive is the only codified ethic we encounter in the Star Trek canon, and it is designed to prevent the protagonists “from turning into the kind of monsters and bullies against which they fight” (Bertonneau & Paffenroth 2006, 83).

Adhering to this code serves to make the protagonists better than the misguided entities they encounter (Boyd 1996, 81). We see this dynamic in TNG’s “Encounter at Fairpoint” (1987) and the 2016 film, Star Trek Beyond. Nonetheless, the Prime Directive almost always disappears when the Federation is faced with a contest of equals (Richards 1997, 14). In this way, the Prime Directive becomes a tool for diminishing human culpability for moral conduct; a lofty ideal that is ignored where it jeopardizes the safety of Starfleet crew. In this sense the Prime Directive is a false morality; because it is treated as valid only where it is assumed that it will be ac-
cepted and reciprocated. It creates a space for alien life so long as it acts ‘human’.

The Prime Directive is designed to mediate interactions with ‘undeveloped’ species, but it does not provide a vocabulary for similarly developed, yet different, species. Religion is dismissed as backwards (Berthonneau & Paffenroth, 2006) and cultural practices belittled in subtle ways (Richards, 1997). Star Trek’s indifference to those characteristics shared by its protagonists and the aliens they encounter only highlights the differences that remain. Undoubtedly a consequence of budget, the vast majority of the species given significant airtime look mostly human. Nonetheless, Star Trek retains a cheap visual trick of distinguishing good aliens from bad aliens with the use of contrasting soft and hard facial features. We know that Bajorans, Vulcans, Romulans, and the Trill must share our values because they look like ‘us’. Reminiscent of early theories of scientific racism (Gonineau 2010), the Klingon, Romulan, and Cardassian peoples have ugly, ominous features, and their association with national and political stereotypes—Klingons as Germanic barbarians, Romulans as Romans, Cardassians as Nazi—clues us as to their intentions (Barrett & Barrett 2001; Jenkins & Jenkins 1998). The disconcerting use of actors from nonwhite ethnic groups to represent aliens—like Michael Dorn as Lt. Worf—leaves difference highlighted “both internally and externally to the story” in problematic ways (Richards 1997, 9; also Greven 2009). Part of the key issue stems from the essentialist and progressivist view of evolution Star Trek adopts. Evolution (both biological and cultural) is not understood as a random process of adaptation, but rather as a tool of progress towards a better—ideally humanoid—end state (Wagner & Lundeen 1998; Porter & McLaren 1999). As we see in TNG’s “Genesis” (1994), to bend away from this trajectory is to devolve into monsters. This creates a sterile universe where the possibilities for truly alien encounters are fleeting and rare.

Novel lifeforms do appear, but their treatment by the show and its characters is rarely better. Instead it is only in death that alien flourishing becomes permissible. In TNG’s “Emergence” (1994) the Enterprise starts to malfunction after randomly jumping to warp speed. However, it quickly becomes apparent that, had the ship not done so, it would have been destroyed. An investigation leads to the conclusion that the ship is beginning to show signs of an emerging sentience. Eventually, the ship’s efforts lead to the creation of a new lifeform (with the ship itself conveniently ‘dying’ thereafter). Picard lets the emergent life leave the Enterprise on its own terms. In his view, the creature has been born of the memories of everyone on board; assuming his crew’s conduct has been honorable, so too must the emergent life form be. It is, after all, the sum of their memories from which this creature has been born. In both cases, the currency of freedom is won as a result of the visible presence of human emotion, and on the judgement of the highest ranked Federation officer present. In TNG’s “Galaxy’s Child” (1991), the Enterprise encounters a large creature in deep space which they accidentally kill during defensive maneuvers. Discovering that the creature was pregnant the crew performs an emergency caesarean using the ship’s phasers. Crucially, sympathy for the creature is anchored in the metaphorical space of mammalian reproduction, enabling rescue from the dead mother’s ‘womb’ by ‘C-section’, and thereby avoiding confrontation with body-space challenges or novel biology (see Lorimer 2007, 920). When the newborn then attaches itself to the Enterprise in order to feed, it is no longer the act of a parasite, but rather an act of nursing. The analogy carries through to the episode’s conclusion, wherein the newborn is detached once they “sour the milk.” The creature’s physiological similarities dissipate its otherness and afford the Federation a position of scientific authority over the creature by being the only ones capable of birthing it. In the process the creature’s fundamental novelty is bartered away in return for empathy.
Despite consistently negative treatment of alien life, the trend of aliens longing to experience human life constitutes a constant throughout *Star Trek*. From *TOS*’ omnipotent Trelane in “The Squire of Gothos” (1967) to the noncorporeal beings found in *TNG*’s “The Child” (1988), “Clues” (1991), and “Imaginary Friend” (1992), *Star Trek* lauds human curiosity. These episodes constitute a raw celebration the power of our supposed illogicality to uncover new truths. This supposedly fundamental aspect of humanity seeks to pique the aliens’ curiosity about us, and not the other way around. Greven (2009) suggests that *Star Trek*’s strength lies in its willingness to question authority, but in allowing Captain Picard in *TNG* the opportunity to explain the value of parental authority, “The Child” and “Imaginary Friend” actually serves to reinforce and reify human preferences. In *TOS*’s “By Any Other Name” (1968), a group of stranded Kelvins take human form to in order to capture the Enterprise. Thanks to the Kelvins’ unfamiliarity with their newfound human form, the crew is able to recapture their ship, and Captain Kirk overwhelms the lead female by kissing her and forcing a human emotional response from her. The Kelvins learn to recognize the value of the human form and they abandon their attempt to hijack the Enterprise.

*Voyager*’s “In the Flesh” (1998) works with the same idea. Encountering a Species 8472 staging point for a reconnaissance mission against the Federation, the crew of *Voyager* beams aboard to discover that Species 8472 have genetically modified themselves to physically imitate mankind. Ultimately, détente is achieved thanks to the superior moral judgement of Captain Janeway. Once more, however, it is a male character’s dalliances that strike the winning blow. To extract information, Commander Chakotay attends a date with an 8472 disguised as a female human, although they are both aware that the other is an imposter, he slowly earns her trust. Finally, it is a kiss that they shared earlier (used at the time to acquire a DNA sample) that the 8472 seeks to revisit at the end of the episode. Embodiment does not serve to allow the aliens to experience humanity from their own perspective and comment on it, so much as to reinforce a belief in humanity’s superior facets. And, while Wilcos (1996) suggests that miscegenation can undermine the othering process (69), in *Star Trek* this power is exclusively wielded by male humans over female aliens. In the process, the kiss becomes a weapon by which to extend the human self onto the other (Pettman 2006), and the moment of emotional realisation exists as a transformative epiphany for the alien who cannot normally experience such things. Aliens become pitiable things that lack our own heightened emotional repertoire (Žikić 2010).

The rugged-male stereotypes embodied by *TOS*’s Kirk, *TNG*’s Riker, and *Voyager*’s Chakotay tie in with a larger undercurrent that presents the “modern, Western, nuclear family as the acme of social development” to be united under the watchful eye of male authority (Shaw 2006, 67). In this sense, the anthropological machine works such that others must continually seek to meet us on our terms if they wish to flourish or be granted legitimacy in a galaxy that *Star Trek* presents as Federation space (Boyd 1996; Hanley 1997).

**TAMING THE CYBORG**

The dividing line between alien other and technological other is not always clear-cut in *Star Trek*, but there are very few representations of explicitly alien-technological hybrid characters in *Star Trek*. Where they do exist, the dual facets of their being are treated separately. What this suggests is that, similar to *Star Trek*’s treatment of alien alterity, the show is uncomfortable with the existential risk that technology presents to its imaginary of the bounded human subject and instead seeks to manage the role of technology. Curiously for a show about (mostly) human space exploration, *Star Trek* does not dedicate much effort towards depicting the technologies that permit human space flight in practice.
Humans cannot survive the vacuum of space unaided, and must instead rely on a plethora of technologies to do so (Cortellessa et al. 2009). Away from the comforts of a home world—and the prospect of support and resupply—the importance of a closed loop between human and technological systems becomes essential (Lester & Thronson, 2011; Kalery et al. 2010; Cortellessa 2009). Nonetheless, Star Trek buys into a myth that emerged from NASA's paradigm of space flight in which the human pilot was given extensive control over flight controls and other systems despite the superior ability of automated systems to handle these tasks (Dator 2012, 59). Thus, in Star Trek, the ship is little more than a bubble which protects the crew; a representation that absolves the characters of the need to form meaningful relationships with the technology on which they are so thoroughly dependent (see Kendrick 2002).

Instead, technology only becomes visible where it threatens the show’s protagonists. Whether through the ever present risk of warp core breach or the failure of life-support-systems, Star Trek often diminishes the techno-human relationship at the heart of human space flight. Star Trek treats biotechnology with particular contempt, reducing it to the cause of humanity’s own ‘historic’ eugenics wars and placing it at the center of the Dominion’s aggressive and violent war (as portrayed in the latter seasons of DS9). It appears that Star Trek has a “[deep], principled reason for machine failure,” with the implication that machines are incapable of dealing with the irrationality of the human condition and the supposed paradoxes that result from it (Hanley, 1997: 57). TOS in particular regularly dismisses technology in such a way, with Captain Kirk regularly using daft logic loops to do away with murderous computers. The implication is that machines might have the capacity for superior intelligence, but their obedience to logic denies them the proverbial ‘right stuff’ (see Wolfe 2005) possessed by humans.

Despite this broad discomfort with technology, Star Trek does make space for a pair of technological hybrid characters with more-than-human potential: the android Data, and a rescued (cy)Borg drone called Seven-of-Nine. Nonetheless, both of these characters fulfills a similar narrative purpose. They abandon the facets of their personality that make them distinct in order to be more human. This character trope was arguably established with Spock in TOS, who —while imbued with superior strength and logic— is defined more by his companionship with the emotionally charged Kirk. Data and Seven-of-Nine follow a similar narrative arcs. Both look mostly human —distinguished only by yellow skin and remnant Borg implants respectively—and both possess a posthuman human level of intelligence that regularly saves their human counterparts. Nonetheless, this more-than-human potential is made into a problematic otherness. In TNG’s “Elementary Dear Data” (1988), “Data’s Day” (1991), “In Theory” (1991), and the movie First Contact (1996), Data moves in the opposite direction of many characters in posthuman literature, as he delimits his more-than-human potential for the sake of forming emotional connections with the humans that surround him (Stevenson 2007).

Star Trek constantly demands that Data strive to be human (it is his self-avowed ambition), while simultaneously denying him the possibility that this ever could happen. In fact, Data only comes close to this goal on three occasions. The first is in “First Contact,” wherein the Borg Queen attempts to corrupt his allegiance to humanity by offering him his own, in the process giving him artificial skin. The choice is of course unfair, hampered by the realization that to accept this Faustian pact would be to destroy humanity, thereby rendering his own goal pointless. The second is in attempting vengeful murder in “The Most Toys” (1990). But in granting Data human imperfection, the episode brings him closer to his goal “than we would ideally desire” (Short 2003), and reminds us that nonhumans who mimic un-
desired human flaws are intolerable (Pettman 2011). When Data’s experience is contrasted with that of Captain Picard we find a productive paradox. Picard himself has an artificial heart and was once assimilated into the Borg collective. Nonetheless he gets to maintain an essential humanity—a product of birth—that is denied to characters who are not born human, no matter how hard they might work to ‘earn’ that humanity.

Many elements of Seven’s narrative mirror that of Data. In her case, however, she moves from a technologically augmented Borg drone—the “morally repugnant” (Porter & McLauren 1999, 74) and dystopic vision of the synthesis between humanity and machine (Cowan 2010)—to a ‘normal’ heterosexual human female capable of forming relationships and even falling in love. What is particularly interesting about Seven is the way in which her sexuality is used against her to disrupt the potential for any pleasure to be found in the confusing boundary between organism and technology (Haraway 1991). Rather than inhabiting a space from which biological determinism can be suppressed and contained, and traditional boundaries of gender and sexuality be overcome (Campbell 2006), heteronormative notions of femininity and being are reinforced by Seven’s journey towards the human. Throughout her recuperation she is refolded into the familiar social mesh of female objectification, as in Voyager’s “Someone to Watch Over Me” (1999) in which she is pursued by many of the show’s male characters. Disappointingly, Seven even goes so far as to embrace this tendency, constantly making use of the show’s holodeck to reimagine herself without her Borg implants. Throughout the episode “Human Error” (2001), Seven struggles to find a balance between her work and emotional life, jeopardising the crew due to an inability to concentrate on her job in astrometrics. Regardless, this episode makes it clear that submission to femininity and emotion, and an abjuration of her Borg-human hybridity, are essential even if it threatens her more-than-human potential.

The treatment of Seven’s femininity in this way is entirely consistent with older Star Trek adventures. As Cranny-Francis notes regarding Kirk’s many dalliances in TOS, Kirk only has eyes for “the passive, submissive, girlish, instinctive, and compulsively emotional child-woman, whom he almost invariably ‘loves and leaves’” (1985, 275). In the episode “Elaan of Troyius” (1968), Kirk thwarts a female character who violates their ‘natural role’ by attempting to usurp his own leadership role. Representation of powerful females is never favorable, variously portrayed as “siren, temptress or whore” (Cranny-Francis 1985). The only female for whom this portrayal is convincingly avoided is Dr. Carol Marcus, with whom he is bound by a male child. As becomes apparent for Seven, her power over the crew is not a result of her intellectual prowess—she is almost always awkward in social interaction—but rather in the eroticism of her corseted sexbot physical form.

Further, despite this setup, the possibility of machine-sexuality is left untouched. The film, Star Trek: The Motion Picture (released 1979) contains no reference to human-human sexuality despite the ‘merger’ of human crew members with a sentient probe. Tellingly, the female crewmate only participates due to her affections for the male (Blair 1983). In this way, The Motion Picture sets a precedent for later characters implying a compulsory and subservient heterosexuality (Dove-Viebahn 2007; Shaw 2006). With the revelation in the series finale of Voyager (2001) that Seven has married Lt. Commander Chakotay, “a clear equation is made between humanity and heterosexuality, belying the promise of a character whose first close emotional relationship was with [the female] Janeway” (Shaw 2006, 70; also Pettman 2011). Ultimately, Seven’s identity is not subject to the novelty she brings to the show’s character set, but by her willingness to conform to existing gender roles. It is a disappointing conclusion to a narrative arc that is mirrored in the nightmare matriarchy the show eventually constructs around the
Borg. It renders Seven’s soft femininity even more sympathetic but implicitly reinforces the normalcy of the Federation’s own patriarchal leadership (Balinisteanu 2012).

CONCLUSION

In the film The Undiscovered Country (1991), Kirk tells Spock that “everybody’s human,” by which “he really meant that everybody he liked was human” (Barrett & Barrett 2001, 62). In this way, Star Trek sets a precedent for downplaying difference by implying it is only a superficial mask to fundamental similarities (Boyd 1996). This obsession with blanketing all characters under an ever-expanding rubric of ‘humanity’ demonstrates a core discomfort with the consequences of difference despite the centrality of difference to the narrative world that Star Trek creates. While Star Trek has sought to forward a utopian vision, it is hobbled by its own unreconstructed vision of the human, so much so that it became a tool for espousing a series of more dangerous myths. Star Trek demonstrates a recursive construction of the human subject through difference. The interstellar proliferations of Star Trek’s own anthropological machine are always inhibited by a play of continuity and difference of form that must be maintained in order for us to be human (Parker 1984). Throughout the show, this anthropological machine preserves the human by constantly eliding difference and reconfiguring the boundaries of humanity in the face of new externalities. As a result, Star Trek maintains a commitment to centrality of the human subject to all our notions of justice (Fukuyama 2002).

In Federation space, the only emotion is one of welcoming, provided one checks unwanted baggage at the door. Even the nastier traits of humanity—like the Moby Dick-inspired obsession and vigilante justice we occasionally witness in the Star Trek movies—gives way to a smug pride in the homogenizing power of the Prime Directive. As Pettman notes, pride in no longer punishing animals “rests on the self-serving knowledge that we have domesticated all animals” (2011: 65). With domestication, the other—all others—fall under an ever-expanding empire of liberalism, one that doesn’t seek to conquer difference outright so much as subsume it, and then tout its own liberal credentials at having restrained itself (Barrett & Barrett 2001). Ultimately, this work is hard won; it is only through the creation of characters that challenge the human that Star Trek is able to reaffirm what the human means. From a broad discomfort with non-humanoid life and an unwillingness to deal with truly radical difference, to the proliferation of technological and hybridized characters, the difference Star Trek seems so keen to elide, hide, and deny always exists at the forefront of the franchise’s narrative. Attention to the show uncomfortable hybrid spaces helps to demonstrate how the human subject around whom the show is centered is in fact highly unstable and contingent on the juxtaposition with and assimilation of the Other. Star Trek does still occasionally challenge; note the “humbling premise” (Pettman, 2011: 247 n30) of the film Star Trek: The Voyage Home (1987), in which a probe visits Earth from deep space to investigate the disappearance of whale song rather than to make contact with humans. There are still hopeful messages in Star Trek, the anthropological machine at play is abstract in its configuration and ungoverned by any real sense of guiding authority (Connolly 2011). It is perhaps an outcome, more than a design feature of the franchise. Despite this willingness to elide difference and treat the human subject with a sense of purity, it is exactly through messy and uneasy interactions with hybrid identities that this purity is achieved (see Bennett 2001; Latour 1993). It is those hybrids and the awesome potential for change they hold that drives the constant reimagining of the human. The more difference that Star Trek presents and works to assimilate, the more apparent it becomes that the human subject against which the rest of the galaxy is to be judged does not really exist at all.
NOTES

1. On the franchise’s science and technology see Jenkins & Jenkins (1998) and Krauss (2010); on religious allegory see Richard (1997) and Porter & McLauren (1999); on gender and sexuality in the franchise see Shaw (2006), Crann-Francis (1985) and Haffner (1996); for examinations of motherhood in the show see Rashkin (2011). For an exploration of the psychology and mindset of the franchise’s extensive fanbase see Geraghty (2007).
2. I term this a ‘recursive’ ideology because it appears that Star Trek leans into an astrofuturistic commitment to the notion that the conquest of (all) space could lead to a utopian future. In truth, the assumption of peace-through-conquest is both self-evidently contradictory, and was already delegitimized in real world geopolitics by the time Star Trek first appeared on the airwaves.
3. The depiction of the various alien species as antagonistic in Star Trek is subject to change throughout the franchise’s run-time but is dealt with here in only the broadest sense.
4. TNG’s “The Chase” canonizes a perverse humanoid creation myth by implying humanoid life was seeded across the galaxy by a forerunner race.
5. Aliens from the Andromeda Galaxy.
6. An insect-like species and significant antagonist in the series.
7. This in contrast to the Soviet paradigm which massively reduced the central responsibilities of the human pilot (Grahn 2009, 88).
8. Historic within the narrative timeline of Star Trek universe.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper initially emerged from a Master’s dissertation at the University of Edinburgh. I am grateful to the original supervisor on that project, Dr. Franklin Ginn (University of Bristol), for helping it to find shape. I am also grateful to Mark Rhodes (Kent State University) for inviting me to participate in this special issue, Steven Schnell (Kutztown University of Pennsylvania) for helping me to clarify my arguments, and the reviewers for offering some excellent suggestions for improvement.

REFERENCES


Žikić, B. 2010. We are Me, and They are Hive: Individual and Collective Identity as a Relational Characteristic of Humans and Aliens in Science Fiction. Anthropology Magazine, 10(1): 111-122.
ABSTRACT

The plotlines of many science fiction television programs and films establish the identities of the protagonists and antagonists at an early stage of the viewing experience. These boundaries serve to position the viewer on a particular side of the story, rendering it difficult to fully consider the Other’s actions and motivations. It is in this manner that media influences our perceptions of place and social dynamics through a formation of popular geopolitics. In this paper, I present the Cardassians, an extraterrestrial species in Star Trek: The Next Generation and Star Trek: Deep Space Nine, as a case study in considering how a re-reading of the shows’ antagonists serves to contextualize the meanings behind being “bad.” I use the Cardassians to explore how a de-villainizing of a science fiction antagonist can lend insight into real-world reconciliation and understandings of those deemed to be the Other.

Key Words: geopolitics; popular geopolitics; Cardassians; empathy; Star Trek

INTRODUCTION

In 1964, Gene Roddenberry finished a science-fiction script with the intent of teaching morality and ethics through the lens of a fantastical voyage, a creation which was later named Star Trek (Alexander 1994; Simon 1999; Gale Research 2016). Star Trek, and a species known as the Cardassians, are the focus of this paper. The Cardassians, recurring characters on Star Trek: The Next Generation (Paramount, 1987-1994) and Star Trek: Deep Space Nine (Paramount, 1993-1999), are somewhat easy for the common viewer to dislike, and even hate. To the protagonists...
of these series, their actions are considered xenophobic, senseless, murderous, and ruthless, and the geographic areas that they inhabit exist in the plot as negative spaces that are embodiments of violence and war. Of particular significance to this assertion are their actions during the Occupation, referring to the Cardassian Union’s half-century military control over the planet Bajor. Cardassian brutality during this occupation was characterized by forced labor, slavery, mass genocide, and exploitation of the planet’s natural environment.

Using the Occupation as an example, even a cursory analysis of the interactions between the Cardassians and the United Federation of Planets reveals similarities to real-world geopolitical interactions between countries across the globe, particularly when we consider the current, often violent, occupations of spaces across the world which include, but are not limited to, Palestine, Kurdistan, and Tibet. These geopolitical interactions are often framed in a binary manner, through a protagonist (whether it be a country, a region, an individual) operating against an antagonist, whose identities shift depending on the media outlet commenting upon the interaction. Media outlets, particularly those with a strong bias such as Fox News, which takes a far-right stance on most issues (Dellavigna et al. 2007), vilifies not only individuals and populations, but the broader geographic areas in which they exist, influencing how viewers construct their internal mental maps of landscapes of violence, and landscapes of peace and safety. Analyzing these cases in simple binary terms, geopolitical media situates antagonist spaces as Othered and detrimental to the welfare of the protagonist’s spaces. Of course, we cannot reduce the impact of geopolitics to geographical and cultural binaries: media geopolitics represent a deeply multifaceted commentary on spaces of perceived danger and, conversely, spaces of perceived safety.

In this paper, I will consider how representations and dialogue surrounding the Cardassians mirror a real-world geopolitical reading of global landscapes of peace and conflict, with attention paid to the role of popular geopolitics in influencing compassion and empathy for the Other. I will begin this paper with an introduction to the science fiction protagonist/antagonist binary as it relates to this research, followed by literary analysis of popular geopolitics and a geopolitics of peace, and then reflect upon the limits to empathy that geopolitically-influenced Othering can present. Then, I will specifically analyze three episodes of Star Trek that display the Cardassians as antagonists to the United Federation of Planets, and use them to argue how an empathic reading of the Cardassians (i.e., an analysis which includes the historical context influencing their current actions) can begin to blur the protagonist/antagonist binary. For each episode, I will provide a brief synopsis of the plot, followed by commentary on how understanding the historical context of the Cardassians serves to blur the protagonist/antagonist binary present when considering these villains. This presents learning opportunities for deconstructing the often harmful, media-influenced geopolitical borders of Planet Earth. The Cardassians are an appropriate example for this type of empathic reading, given their often-violent actions influenced by a tortured past. Further, the Cardassians, much like the races, nationalities, and regions vilified within U.S. popular geopolitical media, occupy a space associated with violence and destruction, but a critical understanding of the historical context of the region reveals a deeper geopolitical interaction far more complicated than “good versus bad.”

THE SCIENCE FICTION ANTAGONIST

Throughout this paper, I consider a protagonist to represent the moral actor within a situation, whose actions are attuned to the well-being and desires of the dominant system. The antagonist, conversely, works directly in opposition to the dominant system. This definition is inspired by the work of Noy...
Blurring the Protagonist/Antagonist Binary through a Geopolitics of Peace

(2017), who studied protagonist/antagonist rhetoric in the context of how museum visitors respond to exhibits that can be emotionally gripping. Popular geopolitics, and more specifically, notions of what it means to be a protagonist or an antagonist, can be heavily influenced by the genre of media that is being consumed. Carter and Dodds (2011), for example, explore how Hollywood’s engagement with 9/11 through the action-thriller genre produces certain types of political sensibilities, particularly in films such as *The Kingdom* (Universal Pictures 2007) which set up a clear antagonist/protagonist geopolitical binary.

This is also the case within science fiction, whether in the form of film, literature, television, or graphic novels. While it would be a gross simplification to categorize all science fiction as using this binary classification, it can be applied to many of the genre’s most popular works. For example, the British Broadcasting Corporation’s show *Doctor Who* generally outlines the characters/groups that functionally operate as the protagonist and the antagonist within each episode. In the American television series *Firefly* by executive producer Joss Whedon (20th Century Fox 2002), the Reavers are considered one of the most violent and murderous antagonists that the protagonists, a renegade crew of explorers, of the series face. In the series that I focus on in this paper, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, the Cardassians are among many of the antagonists that threaten the welfare of the protagonists of the United Federation of Planets.

**POPULAR GEOPOLITICS, BORDERS, AND SCIENCE FICTION**

The theoretical focus of this paper lies in the area of popular geopolitics, referring to the “various manifestations to be found within the visual media, news magazines, radio, novels and the Internet” which allow for the “production and circulation of geopolitical theories and perspectives” (Dittmer and Dodds 2008, 441). Popular geopolitics can effectively be studied in conjunction with audience studies as a means of gauging “audience reception towards media representations of geopolitical affairs” (Woon 2014, 660). This echoes Muller’s agency-centered focus on geopolitics, which highlights the power of the individual actor in popular geopolitics: “Much of geopolitical writing starts from the assumption of the autonomous subject who has control over texts, knits them into narratives, and...turns them in a vehicle through which it exercises power. Narratives are here associated with the agency of the subjects as individuals. Individuals produce narratives” (Muller 2008, 328).

While popular geopolitics are often concerned with broader implications of people-media interactions on nation-building, the very premise of popular geopolitics itself is that one individual’s interaction with media should be considered significant, and such interactions build upon themselves to create a community’s interaction with media, a country’s interaction with media, and so on. This hearkens to the philosophy of cosmopolitanism, which places an individual person at the center of a web of humanity, where the actions and thoughts of the individual extend to family, community, region, and the world (Warf 2015). I use the theory of cosmopolitanism, as it relates to popular geopolitics, to highlight the importance of understanding individual viewer responses to television, particularly characters that are considered antagonists, as a way to understand how humans respond to antagonized landscapes and populations of the real world.

Science fiction as a genre can inherently blur the boundaries between a protagonist and their associated antagonist by presenting non-human representations of an individual being. More specifically, science fiction media such as *Star Trek* can blur the boundaries between what constitutes the soul and body, further blurring what it means to be an individual (Magerstädt 2014). We often see examples of the individual representing a collective in science fiction: consider the Borg and the Q of *Star Trek*. Both of these
species are populated by individuals who are connected to a greater web of intellectual cohesion, echoing Warf’s (2015) statement on cosmopolitanism and the importance of the individual mind in creating a larger society. These species influence viewers to consider the “criteria of personhood,” as explored through questions presented by Biderman, including “What makes me a person? What is it about me that make[s] me the same person over time?...Even if I know what makes me a person, what makes me, as opposed to someone else?” (in Sanders 2008, 39). Individuals in these collective webs can also separate from the “hive,” causing serious positive or negative repercussions for the group as a whole. This reinforces the importance of understanding not only the group dynamics of a certain population, but also the individuals that make up these populations. Their significance as individuals can be immense—to understand how places are made, we must understand the everyday geographies of the individuals that inhabit those spaces. Further, as we consider science fiction as a lens through which the protagonist/antagonist divide can be blurred, we can begin to develop commentary on the significance of the individual person within a population. Popular geopolitics often vilifies an entire group as the antagonist, when in reality only the actions of certain members of this group contribute to this oppositional stance. Linking the importance of studying the actions of the individual as it relates the global geopolitical environment directly to the Cardassians of Star Trek, I argue that each episode of Star Trek creates its own microscale geopolitical environment through its characters, plotlines, and story arcs. I argue that Star Trek writers are seeking to draw connections to real-world geopolitics through the episodes, and the effectiveness of those connections depends upon how well the viewer can tie the plotline of the program to the broader geopolitical environment surrounding the viewer—the geopolitical every day that has been shaped by the media they consume. Put another way, can the viewer connect science fiction politics to those of international geopolitics, drawing similarities between the two? Or a lack of similarities? Each episode that features the Cardassians as antagonists to the Federation represents a broader commentary on the perceived antagonists that present a threat to the well-being of the viewer’s beyond-screen geographical spaces—perhaps emboldening viewers to consider the borders and perceptions that popular geopolitics have influenced in their own lives, regardless of the writers’ original intent for the episode.

Science fiction’s representations of aliens provides commentary on geopolitical notions of borders: aliens force us to consider “the critical fact that the story of the alien is always the story of borders and of the institutional forces that try to neutralize and control those borders in the name of a certain political economy” (Beehler, in Slusser and Rabkin 1987, 26). Geopolitics informs where borders are drawn, and popular geopolitics informs how we perceive those borders, as well as how we view the populations associated with those borders.

Scholars have explored the significant effect of the discourse in the media sources an individual consumes on their opinion of border regions (Holmes 1998; Timothy and Tosun 2003; González-Gómez and Gualda 2016), as well as on geopolitical understandings (Boydston et al. 2010; (Jones et al. 2013; Schuck et al. 2013). We see the same influence in science fiction media: consider Star Trek’s wormhole in Bajoran space that leads from the Alpha Quadrant to the Gamma Quadrant—the protagonists of the series position themselves near this wormhole’s entrance so as to guard it against access by the Cardassians. While the Federation and their allies often view the wormhole as a negative border region through which evil nemeses can cross, what if we consider the wormhole from other points of view? Could the wormhole represent exploration? Or progress? Is the wormhole itself inherently evil? It is the dialogue and discourse that we
consume regarding a border that render it negative or positive in our minds, particularly the discourse that is present in popular geopolitics. This connection between science fiction geopolitics and real-world geopolitical understandings is receiving increased academic attention. Scholars have begun to critically examine popular interest in science fiction antagonists and their connection to real-world, geopolitically-shaped ideas of global antagonists. For example, “following the attacks of 11 September 2001…zombies have become phantasmal stand-ins for Islamist terrorists, illegal immigrants, carriers of foreign contagions, and other ‘dangerous’ border crossers” (Saunders 2012, 81).

A POPULAR GEOPOLITICS OF PEACE

In reviewing the geographic literature pertaining to popular geopolitics, it should be noted that much of the dialogue concentrates on popular geopolitics of violence and war, asking questions such as “Where is the conflict?” and “What has contributed to this violence?,” and focusing much of the research on the antagonist/protagonist binary politics of the situation (Most and Starr 1980; Deudney 1983; Geyer 1996; Falah, Flint, and Mamadouh 2006; Sharp 2011). However, there is merit in moving beyond the protagonist/antagonist binary and considering other complicating factors in conflict, such as historical context and the deeper geopolitical complexities of cultural interaction. In doing this, I advocate for using a geopolitics of peace to read and analyze situations of conflict. Geopolitics of peace has been explored by many scholars within and outside of geography (Deudney 1983; Koopman 2011; Megoran 2011; Pumain 2012; McConnell, Megoran, and Williams 2014; Paris 2014). Scholars of geopolitical peace explore many important questions of geopolitical understanding: when we view a landscape through a lens of conflict, by proxy we also learn about peace; for example, if we are discussing insurgent violence in Afghanistan, we indirectly envision geographic areas where such violence is not occurring. However, in these instances, peace is an afterthought, and left “undefined and barely conceptualized…The implication is thus that peace exists only as a point of reference, an empty signifier defined by an absence of violence” (McConnell, Megoran, and Williams 2014, 22). A geopolitics of peace recognizes that multiple narratives and practices of power influence conflict and peace-building, and the lack thereof, accordingly asserting the importance of considering these many influencing factors in a geopolitical analysis. Through such analysis, the protagonist/antagonist binary of conflict is often quick to crumble. In this paper, I analyze the Cardassians through a lens of the geopolitics of peace: what historical factors, cultural interactions, and political influences can provide the viewer with a deeper understanding of, and potentially an empathy for, the actions of the Star Trek antagonist?

DE-VILLAINIZING THE OTHER

The broader intellectual stance of this paper is rooted in gaining empathy for the Other through a lens of the geopolitics of peace, whomever the Other may be as they are represented in the media source at hand. Scholars have grappled with the implications of an uncritical binary (us vs. them) usage of the term. The exact interpretation of whom/what constitutes the “the Other” varies among scholars and some find it problematic to refer to a “singular and amorphous ‘Other’ in geographic scholarship” (Inwood 2013, 721). I echo Inwood’s concerns, and in the case of this research, I do not attempt to define a singular Other. Rather, the Other can represent a more complex relationship than a traditional protagonist/antagonist binary, as I will demonstrate with an extended focus on the Cardassians. Throughout the article, I acknowledge the many narratives and systems of power that define the identity of the Other. I advance notions of a multi-faceted, dynamic Other through a process
of de-villainizing, in which I conduct an empathic reading (i.e. an analysis of a group's current actions through a lens of historical context) of the Cardassians, and suggest ideas for applying this same method to real-world villainized populations. It must also be noted, however, that *Star Trek* has been criticized for exhibiting liberal color-blindness and unreflective plotlines (O’Connor 2012) throughout much of its existence, and is a viewpoint that must be considered when commenting upon the show's ability to represent compassionate understandings of the Other.

To de-villainize an individual, species, population, or region, it is important to recognize the significance of knowing the villainized subject’s historical context. Retz (2012) has studied the strong connections between empathy, historical understanding, and social responsibility. Retz notes that students often dismiss the actions of historical figures as illogical and see them as morally inferior to our current society, immediately influencing their own disengagement. Thus, we do not learn from their actions because said actions are dismissed as being the product of a person's moral inferiority, neglecting the possibility that certain social and/or spatial characteristics influenced their behavior. We can extend this to modern-day villainizing of individuals and groups—often, their historical context is not considered when developing a perception of their actions, allowing them to be cast as the Other, existing as morally opposite. This dichotomy can create an immediate barrier to empathy, lessening the possibility for reconciliation and understanding between the protagonist and their associated antagonist. A de-villainizing of science fiction antagonists, such as the Cardassians, presents an opportunity to use historical context to influence one’s own perceptions of those deemed as Others.

In science fiction, villains are often Othered through their contrast with the protagonists of the plot—the actions and movements of the protagonists are normalized, while the actions and movements of the antagonists are seen as foreign, unnecessary, violent, threatening, or, simply, “bad.” However, we know that these relationships are often complex, and many science fiction works disrupt the protagonist/antagonist binary: for example, a brief analysis of the Ferengi, a humanoid extraterrestrial race from *Star Trek*, presents an opportunity to de-villainize an established science fiction antagonist through acknowledgment and awareness of the social and cultural spaces and conditions in which their race exists. I offer this example as a precursor to the focus of the paper, a de-villainizing of the Cardassians.

In many episodes featuring the Ferengi, the viewer learns that their culture is heavily driven by financial gain and profit, often achieved through actions of dishonesty and swindling of those with whom they conduct business. Sexuality, misogyny, and forced sex labor have also been associated with the Ferengi race in *Star Trek*. Much of the Ferengi culture is displayed through Quark, the charismatic, yet often conniving host of “Quark’s Bar” in Deep Space Nine’s Promenade (a commercial area at the center of Deep Space Nine which serves as a core for social activities). Quark’s often problematic business actions can cast him (and perhaps the Ferengi race more broadly) in a negative light for viewers, but his status as an antagonist becomes blurry when he (albeit rarely) engages in activities for the betterment of Deep Space Nine as a whole, such as negotiating compassionate business deals for individuals in need. Although these positive actions are rare for Quark, when the viewer considers aspects of Ferengi culture itself, it lends insight into why and how he operates this way.

A de-villainizing of the Ferengi can offer insight into how viewers form notions of characters in a show: the Ferengi as a whole are often portrayed through their obsession with money and rampant misogyny. However, Quark’s actions often disrupt this understanding, blurring the perception of the Ferengi as a true antagonist within the show. Connecting this to the Cardassians, an empathic reading of the villainized extraterrestrial species, even if it is through...
individual representatives of the species, can present a unique opportunity to learn about gaining empathy for an Othered population, and can potentially influence a viewer to consider empathy for Others beyond the screen (see, e.g., Chory-Assad and Cicchirillo 2005; Hunt 2006; Greitemeyer, Osswald, and Brauer 2010; Yeager 2010; Rutkowski et al. 2011; Oliver et al. 2012; Bal and Veltkamp 2013; Cummins and Cui 2014; Hutton and Mak 2014). Collectively, viewers who consider the multiple narratives surrounding the actions of an antagonist construct a broader popular geopolitics of empathy associated with the television show, which I argue could translate into empathic readings of real-world individuals and populations deemed as antagonists.

Science fiction, including *Star Trek*, is a highly appropriate genre in which to study empathy. Nicholls described the importance of science fiction in forming commentary on the real world through its use of metaphor to describe reality, urging us to read beyond the superficial meanings: “To read it literally is not to hear its profoundest and most disturbing reverberations” (Nicholls 1976, 8). While Nicholls was referring to written science fiction, the same notions can apply to visual forms as well. Science fiction media facilitates emotional connections between the viewer and the subject based on its describing of reality through a lens of fantasy (Lips 1990; Piana 2002; Landon 2011; Chapman 2013; Tapper 2014). Through their research, these scholars demonstrate that, although many fantastical works depict non-existent landscapes and species, these depictions are often poignantly related to real-world issues and populations. Film and visual culture more generally has been “credited with considerable capacity to shape prevailing understandings of people and places” (Carter and Dodds 2014, 57). Such fantastical plotlines and themes often estrange the viewer from their preconceived understandings of historical events, figures, and socio-cultural dynamics, creating a new lens through which the subject matter can be interpreted.

**DE-VILLAINIZING THE CARDASSIANS**

The Cardassians are an established villain of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*: ruthless, xenophobic, and violent, they are considered one of the notable enemies of the Klingon Empire and the United Federation of Planets. They are known to torture their prisoners for information, accept bribes in return for discounting questionable occurrences, and are seen by most members of the Alpha Quadrant as ruthless killers.2

Thus, the Cardassians are undoubtedly science fiction antagonists, ruthless in their actions and demeanor. However, understanding of their history lends the viewer insight into their current actions. Cardassian society was once known as the Hebitian civilization, occupants of the planet Cardassia Prime, known for fine art and beautiful architecture. However, due to strain caused by decline of the planet’s natural resources, the Hebitian civilization disintegrated, causing millions of its members to starve, almost driving the population to extinction. Surviving members of the society turned to military action and exploration to perpetuate the continuation of their species, commencing the Cardassian expansion into the Milky Way Galaxy (documented in episodes *TNG*: “Chain of Command, Part II”; *DS9*: “Duet”).

It is through this historical understanding that we see that the Cardassians’ military exploration (and associated ruthlessness) came from a state of desperation: it was only after the virtual collapse of their species that surviving members turned to violence. This historical context is not only crucial to understanding the actions of the Cardassians, but also significant in demonstrating why historical context is important when considering the actions of any “villainized” group. If we are to see the Cardassians as acting in a negative manner that results from desolation and a destruction of their natural resources, perhaps we can extend the metaphor to human groups who are villainized due to their
daily actions and/or their race, gender, ethnicity, or class. Unfortunately, popular news media, as well as purveyors of fake news, regularly villainizes certain individuals or geographic regions without reference to any geographic, historical, economic, political, or cultural context that could help us understand their actions. Science fiction, and particularly this example of the Cardassians of Star Trek, can teach viewers the importance of seeking out the historical context of the actions of the Other.

A further example of de-villianizing the Cardassians comes from Episode 2x05 from Deep Space Nine, titled “Cardassians.” In this episode, a young Bajoran child (who visually appears to be Cardassian, but is being raised by a Bajoran father) physically attacks Garak, a Cardassian exile who lives on Deep Space Nine. Doctor Bashir, the physician of Deep Space Nine, speculates that the boy has most likely been raised to fear, or perhaps even hate, the Cardassians. Throughout the episode, the viewer learns that the boy’s story is deeply complicated and extends significantly further than a simple adoption by a Bajoran man. By the end of the episode, the viewer learns that the child has been the victim of illegal Cardassian smuggling, orchestrated by Gul Dukat, a Cardassian military officer who wished to humiliate the Cardassian politician Kotan Pa’Dar. The young child, phenotypically and genetically Cardassian, is the son of Pa’Dar, but has been raised by a Bajoran man who likely passed on knowledge of the violence committed by the Cardassians to his son. Even the most casual viewer may come away from this episode with contempt for Dukat, but feel mercy for the young boy, since his dislike of the Cardassians stems from a long process of betrayal, displacement, and social conditioning. While dislike for Dukat is entirely fair, the young boy’s convoluted history could present an opportunity for the viewer to consider the Cardassian’s complicated political and social history when viewing these interactions with young Cardassians. This is not to say that the viewer will condone and support the actions of Dukat, but rather can understand the social conditions influencing his actions, blurring his role as an antagonist within this episode.

A final example of empathy building is “The Chase” (Episode 6x20 of The Next Generation), which focuses on the search for pieces of an early genetic puzzle that may provide evidence of the origin of life in the Alpha Quadrant. This search is supported by the Federation (the United Federation of Planets, to which Starfleet belongs), Klingons, Romulans, and Cardassians (all extraterrestrial races). The search ends at the final planet, Vilmor II, where members of the party wish to take tricorder measurements of lichen growing on a rock face. Once readings of the lichen are taken and input into a computer program, the program triggers a holographic message that shows a humanoid explaining that all life in the Alpha Quadrant comes from a common origin—from the humanoids, who once lived in the galaxy alone before any other life forms were developed. They scattered their genetic material to other planets, hoping to create a broader population of humanoids. The hologram then states that knowledge of a common ancestor will hopefully lead towards peace. However, the Cardassians, having considered themselves to be superior beings, are angry at such a discovery. We can revisit the aforementioned discussion of Cardassian history and how such elitism developed—out of a sense of desperation. Their perceived superiority was essentially developed as a coping mechanism in dealing with the destruction of their own planet. In episodes such as “The Chase,” it is important to have historical context in order to truly understand the reactions of the Cardassians to this DNA discovery.

While this is my own empathic reading of the Cardassians, I encourage readers to conduct their own de-villainizing not only of antagonists within fictional tales, but also of antagonists that exists in their real-world geography. Carter and Dodds discussed how film plotlines, particularly those representing a conflict, often do not “provide a clear
sense of the wider geopolitical conflict…” (Carter and Dodds 2015, 58), presenting a possible barrier to empathy as the Other is contextualized as morally separate from the protagonist. However, in cases where filmmakers include the geopolitical and historical contexts influencing the Other within the storytelling, the protagonist/antagonist dichotomy can become blurred. A blurring of this dichotomy can lend itself to empathy for the portrayed Other, which arguably can lead to an overall dissolution of the artificially created boundaries between Us and the Other, at a viewer-by-viewer level.

THOUGHTS FOR MOVING FORWARD

In this paper, I do not attempt to argue that considering the background and social upbringing of an antagonist renders their actions excusable and unpunishable. Nor do I suggest that in all viewing situations, empathizing with a science fiction character will translate into the viewer’s daily life, allowing them to empathize with the actions of an individual or group considered to be a “real-life antagonist,” whose identity is often shaped by international geopolitics. The myriad spaces of social injustice in modern society cannot be completely eradicated by my call to consider empathy towards villainized science fiction characters. However, in moving forward, it is important to consider the ramifications of viewer-level increases in empathy towards Othered individuals and populations, particularly when we consider the importance of individual affect within forming a broader emotional community (see cosmopolitanism in Warf (2010)).

Contrarian theories must be acknowledged and considered in this research. Scholars have questioned whether media can truly influence and create empathy, or if highly empathic people are consuming the media already, therefore more likely to have an empathic response to the subject material (Bal and Veltkamp 2013). Are viewers of Star Trek more likely to be empathic individuals regardless of their viewing habits, and certain episodes elicit this empathy? Would a person less capable of feeling empathy have a different response to the same episodes? While these are valid remarks to consider, it does not negate the importance of this research. There is real value in exploring how media programs such as Star Trek can elicit empathic responses towards Othered individuals, particularly when scholars such as Rutkowski et al. (2011) have used brain-computer and machine interactive interfacing studies to suggest a strong connection between a broadcasted emotional stimulation and empathic user responses shown in the brain. For future researchers, it would be intellectually lucrative to employ longitudinal studies on the responses of viewers to Star Trek and their perceived empathic responses to Othered subjects in the storylines, considering the aforementioned academic literature that supports the connection between media and empathy development.

Given creator Gene Roddenberry’s gumption for tackling (often with a liberal focus) many political and social themes in Star Trek (O’Connor 2012), the highlighted episodes were written in a manner consistent with Roddenberry’s political motives, and put forth a message of compassion for Othered individuals and groups. As active consumers, viewers of Star Trek can decide to agree or disagree with the actions of the Cardassians, but more importantly, coming to such a decision requires a deeper understanding of the many narratives that define what it means to be an antagonist. As we navigate a political climate dominated by highly fractured media representations of perceived antagonists, it is important that the individual consumers of media sources consider a deeper engagement with the history of all actors involved in a geopolitical situation. As I have shown, Star Trek offers us a venue in which to practice this de-villainizing, and it is my hopes as the author that I may inspire readers to consider not only a de-villainizing of the Cardassians, but also a de-villainizing of the antagonists in their own geopolitical spheres.
NOTES

1. In *Star Trek*, the Alpha and Gamma Quadrants refer to quadrants of the Milky Way Galaxy. The galaxy is split into the Alpha, Beta, Gamma, and Delta Quadrants. The Bajoran are an extraterrestrial species native to the planet Bajor, located in the Alpha Quadrant.

2. All information can be found at [http://memory-alpha.wikia.com/wiki/Cardassian](http://memory-alpha.wikia.com/wiki/Cardassian).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Mark Rhodes, Fiona Davidson, Steven Schnell, and the anonymous reviewer for their incredibly helpful feedback during the revision process for this manuscript. I would also like to express gratitude to Emma Walcott-Wilson for first introducing me to *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, and who has taken part in many deep conversations of the social, cultural, and political themes of the show, which ultimately inspired this research.

REFERENCES


