
New Trek, 90s Trek, & the Permanence of Racism

Josephine Collins

Course Design: Counterstory

Professor: Dr. Aja Martinez



Josephine Collins is a native Texan who recently earned their English Writing and Rhetoric BA from the University of North Texas. They are continuing their education in Library Science and plans to complete their master's in 2025. During their university education, Josephine has become interested in the effects of race and racism in popular

media. By including their own Queer, disabled, and colored identities in their analyses, they are better able to understand the implications of seemingly harmless media. Writing has always been Josephine's passion, and they are excited to extend their skills into critical race theory. Josephine recognizes the importance of diverse stories and is increasingly concerned with the country's book-banning trend. As a potential librarian, they have a more personal connection with these bans and plans to preserve threatened texts in the future. Until then, Josephine plans to continue their scholarly writing in hopes of spreading more awareness to marginalized stories, experiences, and knowledge.

Setting: Yates¹, Tilly², and James³ find themselves in an online debate. Yates recently posted her essay about *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-94) and James disagrees with its thesis. Her essay dissects the colonial undertones of the *Star Trek* franchise despite its faux anti-colonialism rhetoric. She is an older fan of the series and prefers *Deep Space Nine* (1993-9). Although she understands the negative aspects of *Trek*, she remains faithful in favor of the redeemable aspects. James has a similar history to the franchise. He's a traditional *Trek* fan that sees no wrong with the original series or its following spin-offs. He's audacious, says what's on his mind, and believes *Trek* is about taking hold

of the galaxy. Tilly is representative of a newer generation of *Trek* viewers. She's able to look at what new and old *Trek* have to offer and isn't opposed to critiquing the media she loves. As such, she's an avid reader of Yates's *Trek* blog and frequently comments under her articles. Their conversation starts in the comment section under Yates's post:

@tilly80true: great essay, are you planning on writing about any new trek series? the recent *Discovery* season has me hooked!

@James_793: You know, I haven't been a fan of NuTrek. It just doesn't feel the same. It's too woke. Frankly, I don't think this author would be able to assess any series.

@WillYates: What makes it "woke"?

@James_793: TV these days always tries to put as many gay people in the show as possible, it's just forced diversity and I don't want to think about that kind of stuff.

@WillYates: [She reflects on the unsaid aspects of this statement. It isn't just queer people but people of color too, both of whom have existed in *Trek* for decades.] But minorities think about that "stuff" nearly every day. Why not have it represented in our media? Furthermore, it's a reflection of our world's evolving politics. Mini skirts just aren't political anymore⁴, now we're focusing on this generation's fight.

@James_793: Fight for what, exactly? *Trek* has never been about politics, it's a show about exploring space

1 Yates is the last name of the *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (DS9) character Kasidy Yates-Sisko, and she is married to the franchise's first Black Captain. She often grounds him during his moral debates about racism.

2 Yates's fan is named after Sylvia Tilly from *Star Trek: Discovery*. She often speaks out of turn and shows reverence to her superiors. *Discovery* is considered new *Trek* (sometimes called "NuTrek" on internet spaces) and many fans disregard the series as "not *Trek* enough."

3 James is named after James T. Kirk, the Captain most people remember when they think of *Star Trek*. His "shoot first, ask questions later" attitude explains many of his actions.

4 One of the original series' hallmark characteristics is its inclusion of mini-skirts as a sign of female empowerment.

and punching aliens. It should stay away from any agenda and just be.

@WillYates: Star Trek has always pushed an agenda. Even the originals wanted a diverse cast (of course, that diversity could've been improved). Its politics revolved around female autonomy and racial integration—both we take for granted today. Now we're asking for more of that. More independent women⁵, more people of color holding important jobs, and more queer people leaving the closet⁶.

@tilly80true: i completely agree, i've been watching 90s trek recently and i'm shocked at how outdated it can be. ds9⁷ had a lot of good points, but new trek feels more familiar. idk i've only been watching the franchise for a few months

@James_793: Did we not get diversity in The Next Generation? What about Geordi, Worf, or Guinan even? Your essay critiques everything, I'm beginning to think you don't like the show at all, you just want to make everything into a problem.

@WillYates: [She ignores the fact that Worf and Guinan were aliens played by Black actors. Important still, but not weighted the same as Black humans and the history that evokes.] I do love this show, including its problems. And you're right, not everything about Trek is political, Voyager's Threshold⁸ certainly wasn't.

@tilly80true: LOL

@WillYates: You must understand that our media is representative of our current realities. We cannot create the future

out of nothing, it's simply unpredictable. Science fiction has always been about warping our current reality, and our current reality is still concerned with race and queerness.

@James_793: But ideally, the future exists outside of race. How are we going to move on from the past if you keep bringing it up?

@tilly80true: seriously dude?

@WillYates: [She cringes at the race-blind argument, wondering for a moment if she should abandon the conversation altogether.] Even star trek doesn't believe that. Let That Be Your Last Battlefield⁹, Measure of A Man¹⁰, and Journey's End¹¹ (to name a few) directly tackle race. I mean have you watched Far Beyond The Stars¹² before? The captain is transported to the past and struggles with 1950s racism. It directly contrasts other trek attempts at putting our characters in the past by being realistic about its consequences.

@James_793: To be honest, I've never cared for deep space nine. Too boring, I wanted to watch people find strange new worlds and all that.

@WillYates: [She wonders if his disdain for DS9 has to do with its cast and the heavy subject matter. After all, this show is arguably more diverse than a lot of new *Trek*. She digresses and starts to unpack the colonial aspects of his argument, the main subject matter in her essay, which he likely didn't read past its abstract.] Trek is constantly perpetuating colonist fantasies, it's no wonder TNG is more exciting to you.

5 Nyota Uhura was one of the first Black women on major television to work alongside white men. She was not a servant or maid, but rather an independent officer with her own credentials. The same can be said for many of the women in *Star Trek: The Original Series* (TOS).

6 One of the main cast members of TOS was a composite Asian character named Sulu. His actor, George Takei, came out as gay in 2005—well after TOS had ended. Modern *Trek* actors can play characters that reflect their orientation, but that wasn't the case in the 1960s and Takei kept his identity secret from his employers.

7 *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993-9).

8 Credited by fans as one of the most absurd *Star Trek* episodes ever aired. It has arguably no moral dilemma or significant message beyond entertainment.

9 *Star Trek: The Original Series* (S3 EP15) episode in which aliens on planet Cheron discriminate against those with black skin on their left side, and white on the right. The dominant race on Cheron have black skin on their right, and white on their left. The episode is meant to showcase the absurdity of race and racism.

10 *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (S2 EP9) episode in which Data, the only sentient android in known existence, is debated as property. Captain Picard argues on behalf of his autonomy and reflects on the moral and historical implications of enslaving an entire race.

11 *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (S7 EP20) episode in which Indigenous Puebloan peoples advocate for their right to own their own planet. They searched for 200 years for new land after being forcibly removed and have made Dorvan V their new home. However, a brutal alien race threatens to remove the Puebloan settlement as per their Federation treaty.

12 *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (S6 EP 13) episode in which Captain Sisko hallucinates living as an underappreciated writer in the 1950s. He lives through the time period's racism as a Black man and struggles to publish Black leaders in his science fiction. The story ends with a core message that Captain Sisko is "the dream" that Black Americans fought for.

@James_793: Oh here we go

@WillYates: No listen. Remember Journey's End?

@James_793: Yes, with the Maquis right?

@tilly80true: i just watched it! after a group of Indigenous peoples spent 200 years searching for new land, they finally landed on Dorvan V. the alien cardassians then try to remove the humans because the planet is theirs by treaty. they are allowed to keep the planet, but not after a revolutionary group called the Maquis forms.

@WillYates: Yes exactly Tilly. It's supposed to be a disturbing repeat of past relocation attempts. One of the questions I presented in my essay asked: why didn't United Earth return Puebloan land in the first place? Why did UE make the Puebloan people feel like they had to leave the entire planet to find peace? UE actively ignored their ongoing participation in American colonization. And, in setting up this episode, the writers continue a cycle of violence that could've been avoided had the federation ended their occupation.

@tilly80true: earth isn't united unless all voices are present

@James_793: Again, the future has no colonization. They had their planet in the end. Did you even watch the episode?

@WillYates: [She ignores the jab, internally acknowledging they watched two versions of the same episode.] Why would the writers create this plot in the first place if not to perpetuate Indigenous suffering? The episode reeks of ignorance, and there are multiple instances of TNG trying and failing to tackle important issues.

@tilly80true: no seriously, Code of Honor¹³ almost made me stop watching altogether

@James_793: I think we can all agree that that episode was racist.

@WillYates: Can we though? This episode was written, acted, and wasn't prevented from airing. It's definitely racist, but did any of the creators care enough to stop its production? The insensitivity Trek often displays shows how ill-informed the writers can be. The same can be said for their colonist rhetoric.

@James_793: You can't enjoy anything can you? Honestly, it was a different time back then. 😊

@WillYates: It's difficult when your favorite shows don't understand the harm they perpetuate. My writing concerns all aspects of the show—that means acknowledging the negative and positive.

@tilly80true: @James_793 i think you're being unfair, she's clearly a trek fan. i haven't been watching for nearly as long as @WillYates has, but i read her article and she has valid points. is there anything specific you have a problem with?

@James_793: @tilly80true I don't understand why you're still intruding in our conversation. Both of us have watched Trek throughout our childhood and I've been following @WillYates's work for a couple years now. She's been drilling this thesis since day one, she's never satisfied.

@tilly80true: she likely isn't satisfied because people like you keep popping up. she wrote an essay using evidence from the show and you still insist that she doesn't know what she's talking about. you said it yourself, she's been a fan since you've been. what makes her points any less valid than yours? if anything, her argument makes more sense because she has the evidence.

@James_793: What is all this "evidence" you keep talking about? She's repeating the same woke talking points that every liberal says about everything.

@tilly80true: i can easily tell you because I read her article. think about trek's refrain: "to boldly go where no man has gone before" this sounds like the european idea of the "new world." they didn't recognize that the new world wasn't in fact "new," but preoccupied by Indigenous peoples. the same goes for many trek episodes: our characters search new worlds for new resources only to find the planet full of alien life, it's manifest destiny all over again. the prime directive protects juvenile civilizations, but the moment they reach warp capability they are deemed advanced enough for contact. the federation is quick to swoop in to assimilate these races once they are legally allowed to do so. if that's not space-colonialism, i don't know what is 🙄

@WillYates: Precisely Tilly. It's important to note that these sentiments are undertones within the show. Very rarely are we confronted with the reality of the Federation and its assimilationist tactics. Take Ro Laren for example: when she joined the Enterprise, she was

13 *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (S1 EP4) episode in which the main cast meets a primitive, African-themed alien race. The episode is largely regarded as racist by fans, actors, directors, and critics for its harmful stereotypes.

told that her cultural earpiece was against Starfleet's uniform regulations. Worf can maintain some of his Klingon regalia, but only to a certain degree. How many alien races are being forced to discard their cultural artifacts because it doesn't fit their dress code? It's impossible to tell, but small details like these are what signaled a red flag for me. The underlying message here is "we'll tolerate your differences until it becomes inconvenient for us to do so."

@tilly80true: yes! i also liked your point about resource control. one of the federation's main benefits is the sharing of resources and technology. this scientific exchange thus becomes a new form of currency and planets are weighted by how much they can provide.

@James_739: So @WillYates's essay is about undertones turned overtones, it sounds like.

@WillYates: Now you're getting it. Nothing in the show outwardly labels the Federation as colonialist, but their actions speak for themselves. By connecting these fictional instances of racial intolerance, we can better understand where Star Trek stands in terms of race and racism. Give my essay a read, for real this time, and let me know when you've come up with a valid argument beyond "this is too woke."

— @WillYates has muted the thread —

Setting: Ending the thread has left Yates rather unsatisfied—she's shutting out another vocal critic. After conversing with dozens of people just like James, however, the recurring talking points around 'wokeness' have become too exhausting to deal with. Communication goes both ways after all, she cannot teach if they will not listen. This Tilly has potential, and Yates has decided to message her directly so they may continue their conversation privately.

02/23/23 – 5:03 PM

Yates: Hello there! Sorry to mute the thread, I felt the conversation was becoming circular. I appreciated what you had to say, it's been a while since I've spoken with a new trekkie, welcome to the community.

TillyT: all good, that guy was a bit annoying. thanks for DMing me tho, i really do enjoy your articles :)

Yates: Thank you for reading them. My blog is very small, but there aren't many places to display my media commentary. I've published in literary magazines of course, I just don't think they'd be interested in my Star Trek rambles.

TillyT: not at all! I'm a college student rn and i would love a break from all the intense research material. your blog is something I can understand, and it's helped me think about other shows I like in the same way

Yates: You certainly sound like a college student. I hope your studies treat you well!

TillyT: actually before you muted the thread i was gonna link an article i read recently. it's about white ownership, it could help put the conversation in context

TillyT: doi.org/10.2307/1341787

Yates: Thank you for that, I'll take some time later this afternoon to give it a read. I'll let you know my thoughts on it soon.

TillyT: cool, ttyl :)

02/25/23 – 10:31 AM

Yates: Hello again, it's been a couple of days hasn't it? I got caught up with work affairs, but I found the time to look through the document you sent me. Needless to say it was spot on! I've read similar arguments before, but I like Harris's concise explanation. What were your opinions?

TillyT: i thought James was feeling a sense of ownership over the series, ownership that his whiteness has always allowed him

Yates: Interesting thought, I'd have to agree. Harris immediately creates the connection between whiteness and property—both being a way to exclude¹⁴. In claiming his right to watch Trek without minority persons, James was claiming property rights through white entitlement. He ignores the overwhelming number of people of color who have enjoyed Trek since its inception—they too have equal "rights" over the franchise.

TillyT: for sure! the disconnect between his reality (white men being the sole leaders of science fiction) and the truth (non-whites and queer people being integral to SF) is what reinforces his

¹⁴ Early in Harris's article "Whiteness as Property," she cites the connection between whiteness and property as a method of exclusion. Only white people can have access to whiteness (and all that it provides) and non-whites who attempt to obtain the same privileges are thus trespassing (Harris 1714, 41).

mentality. he does not value¹⁵ the “ownership” that minorities equally share over trek.

Yates: While I often criticize TOS and TNG for being...unpleasant at times, DS9 is what really sold me. As I mentioned before, *Far Beyond the Stars* did not shy away from race as it presented an honest example of what Black time travel would look like. People of color cannot succumb to the fantasy of existing in a romanticized past because it requires a painful perspective¹⁶. Black ownership cannot exist without historical context, hence why trek’s race-blind shows are more popular with white audiences. Race makes them uncomfortable, and they like escaping the reality of history while indulging in their futures.

TillyT: wow, I sense a new article coming. perhaps you could also talk about whiteness being the “default” or “neutral standard.” i think many people, well many white people, don’t see their own historical significance because of this. James is wary of minority characters because they aren’t his normal, only *he* is normal as a privileged man

Yates: [She thinks about the idea, lets it run through her head for a moment. The inclination to write is nearly inescapable and so she opens a new document. Of course, the credit for this piece wouldn’t be hers alone.] Indeed. There’s a duality to trek that I enjoy, pieces I like and others that I don’t. Progressive writers make mistakes often, and many centrist writers give us just enough representation to maintain this sense of social progression. Many people of color my age are used to seeing themselves play a supporting, or even background, role in media. I’m glad things are changing now, but I can see that not everyone is welcoming the shift.

TillyT: well of course not. if whiteness and property are inherently intertwined, then our marginalized presence threatens their whiteness. after all, white identity is tied directly to the exclusion of others (saying “white” is more like saying “non-Black” than anything tangible) and thus this label is threatened under diversity.

Yates: And this is no doubt worsened by colorblindness. As Harris states, colorblindness “creates a false linkage between race and inferiority” and “denies the real linkage between race

and oppression under systematic white supremacy” (pp. 1768). Sorry for getting annoyingly academic with a direct quote, but Harris speaks well enough for herself. In viewing race and racism as simply prejudice (or simple rudeness, even), people like James can cite characters like Worf¹⁷ as a grand step towards equality. I appreciate diverse casting, but Worf was never meant to embody the future success of Black humans.

Yates: Would you like to write an article with me? I’m thinking we could explain the permanent nature of race in Trek, and science fiction more broadly, using our conversation. We’d have to exchange drafts for a while, but I think the collaboration would help the both of us. Only if you have time for the project, that is. I’ll credit your words regardless and I’ll happily send you updates if you’re uninterested in the writing aspect.

TillyT: i would love that! i hope my internet-speak hasn’t put you off (i promise I can write a decent paper). let me start writing my own ideas down and i’ll share them with you ASAP

Yates: Looking forward to it. Bye for now, I too need time to collect my thoughts. Thanks for indulging me with this conversation, we have much to say!

02/25/23 – 1:20 PM

Works Cited

- Harris, Cheryl I. “Whiteness as Property.” *Harvard Law Review*, vol. 106, no. 8, 1993, pp. 1707–91. JSTOR, doi.org/10.2307/1341787.
- Williams, Patricia J. *Giving A Damn: Race, Romance and Gone with the Wind*. TLS Books, 2021.

15 Harris uses whiteness as property to explain the devaluation of Black property/ownership. Black-owned land, for example, is still seen as less than white counterparts because of the devaluation of Blackness. See “How racial bias in appraisals affects the devaluation of homes in majority-Black neighborhoods” (Jonathan Rothwell & Andre M. Perry) for an example of arbitrary devaluation of Black property.

16 See Patricia J. Williams’s *Giving A Damn: Racism, Romance and Gone with the Wind* for further discussion about historical romanticism. Williams’s main point of reference concerns the book’s namesake, *Gone with the Wind* (1939), and its glorification of a notably dangerous time for Black people.

17 Worf’s character is indeed played by a Black actor (Michael Dorn) but is notably treated as a non-human alien. James referenced him earlier as an example of racial inclusion, but Geordi LaForge (Levar Burton) was the only Black human in the main TNG cast. He is outnumbered by the 4.5 white humans on the character list (of which there’s a total of five human characters and one half-human). No other race beside Black and white, including the actors themselves, were represented in the main cast.