



More Than “Just Uhura”

Understanding *Star Trek*'s Lt. Uhura, Civil Rights, and Space History

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As the scene opens on an isolated roadhouse bar, the viewers' first glimpse inside the establishment reveals a tall, attractive woman striding confidently toward a set of swinging doors, her profile reflected in the photographs hanging along the hallway. As she pushes through the doors, the music booms. She greets some friends at a table and heads straight for the bar, her long hair swinging behind her, her step in time with the music. At the bar, she places a large order of drinks with alien-sounding names. Her good time with her fellow Starfleet cadets is interrupted, however, when a young man, a local, whom the viewers recognize as an inebriated James T. Kirk, starts hitting on her, trying to buy her a drink:

“Her shot's on me,” he directs the bartender.

“Her shot's on her,” she answers. “Thanks, but no thanks.” As they banter, she remains unflustered, an equal in the verbal sparring. When Kirk asks her for her name, she replies, “It's Uhura.”



The author with actress Nichelle Nichols, who gave an interview for this chapter, in the National Air and Space Museum’s art gallery.

“Uhura what?”

“Just Uhura,” she replies. Her brush-off answer is an inside joke for *Star Trek* fans: in the original 1960s television show, her character never had a first name. (Kirk’s quest to learn her full name became a running joke throughout the 2009 film.)

But Kirk refuses to be deterred by her rebuffs. “So, you’re a cadet, you’re stunning. What’s your focus?”

“Xenolinguistics,” she replies, adding, “but you have no idea what that means,” lobbing another volley in their somewhat-flirtatious verbal duel.

Although this scene offered viewers of J.J. Abrams’s *Star Trek* (2009) their first view of Lt. Nyota Uhura, the character entered the room carrying a lot of history. First introduced in Gene Roddenberry’s original television program *Star Trek* in 1966, Uhura is arguably the most historically significant character in the

franchise. Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock may be the leads, but Lt. Uhura broke new ground in television and helped to change history for real women. Over the course of three seasons of the original series, the animated series, seven major motion pictures (including the 2009 film), as well as a series of novels, Lt. Uhura, a Starfleet officer from the United States of Africa, evolved from a miniskirted communications officer without a first name into a powerful central character with a talent for xenolinguistics and a vital role on the *Enterprise's* command team. More so than would be the case for a white male character (whose culturally invisible race and gender allowed for greater individuality in characterization), as a woman of color depicted in popular culture, Lt. Uhura both evoked and played against the contemporary historical context. Developed in the second half of the twentieth century, a period of tremendous change for African Americans and women in the United States, the character of Lt. Uhura cannot be understood outside of that historical context.

“Changing the Way People See Us”

Lt. Uhura represented a key part of the original *Star Trek's* racial, gender, and national diversity. Gene Roddenberry envisioned an integrated crew for the starship *Enterprise*, initially tapping a woman as the first officer (to be portrayed by Majel Barrett) and depicting a heterogeneous crew. Although NBC rejected that pilot (“The Cage”), when Roddenberry rethought the show he increased the emphasis on portraying a racially diverse crew. The new cast included Nichelle Nichols, the African American actress and singer with whom Roddenberry had worked briefly on *The Lieutenant* (1963–1964) for an episode that never aired. Nichols recalled that Roddenberry created the role of Lt. Uhura for her. In addition to Nichols’s portrayal of Lt. Uhura, actor George Takei appeared as Sulu, another character without a first name, but whose depiction of an Asian crew member cut against popular media stereotypes of Asian characters as villains. With those choices, Roddenberry’s vision offered a stark contrast with the

all-white universe presented in other contemporary science fiction television, such as *Lost in Space* (1965–1968). Unconventional racial and gender casting became one of *Star Trek's* hallmarks.¹

The decision to cast Nichols gave Roddenberry the potential for complexity in his series' characters. Nichols recalled, "He didn't want just a communications officer. Anyone could do that, could say lines. He wanted to add a dimension to [these] people who go out where no man or woman has gone before. To be real people. To have other talents. And so Uhura's [talent] was as a singer." Nichols also saw the character as a well-rounded person with strong personality traits. "She [Lt. Uhura] had a sense of humor. She had a no-nonsense mind. . . . That is, 'When I'm on the job, that's who I am. When we go into the relaxing area, then you can have fun.'"²

Throughout the three-season run of the show, Lt. Uhura broke barriers. Most notably, the third-season episode "Plato's Stepchildren" (original airdate November 22, 1968) included the first interracial kiss on network television, a forced embrace between Lt. Uhura and Captain Kirk orchestrated by a race of curious aliens. Moreover, every week Lt. Uhura's presence on the *Enterprise's* bridge inspired a generation of viewers and fans to imagine that the future of race relations could be different. African American viewers could see someone who looked like them on the bridge. Nichols herself recalled how powerful that depiction was: "And that [the original series] was done right at the crux of the [civil rights] Movement, in the transition from people thinking of people whose background were slavery . . . and their power, and their assumptions, and he [Roddenberry] took it [contemporary racism], in one fell swoop, and tore it all apart and threw it away."³

Lt. Uhura's significance as an African American character arose from the United States' peculiar history of socially constructed (but nonetheless real) definitions of race. Because of the legacy of slavery, for many years, even decades after slavery's abolition, people with any African ancestry in the United States were defined as African American. As a result, although Nichols has described her own heritage as "a blend of Races that includes Egyptian, Ethiopian, Moor, Spanish, Welsh, Cherokee Indian and a 'blond,

blue-eyed ancestor or two,” the historic realities of American racial definitions eclipsed such complexity. *Star Trek* viewers in the 1960s saw Lt. Uhura as an African American. Even within the narrative of the *Star Trek* universe, Uhura served in Starfleet as a representative of the United States of Africa, a futuristic vision of a unified African continent, asserted but never really explored by the show.⁴

Uhura's character appeared on television amid the historic struggles of several American postwar social movements, including the “second wave” women's movement, the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and the first stages of the gay liberation movement. The show first aired during the same year in which the National Organization for Women was founded. In 1966, Jim Crow laws still prescribed racial segregation in the American South, redlining was still common (defining neighborhoods as “whites only” through restrictive lending and real estate sales), and other de jure and de facto segregation kept African Americans from full citizenship and civic participation. On television and in films, African American actors appeared most often in stereotypical roles: as chauffeurs, maids, or servants. As the civil rights movement used marches, sit-ins, demonstrations, and legislation to dismantle segregation in the 1950s and 1960s, Roddenberry's creation of Lt. Uhura challenged convention.

Despite being an officer, Lt. Uhura remained a limited character. Clad in a miniskirted Starfleet uniform, Lt. Uhura sat at a console on the bridge, wearing a communications link device in her ear. Daniel Bernardi's assessment of race in *Star Trek* concludes that Roddenberry's vision of racial integration had limits: Uhura (and the other nonwhite actors) served as “background color” for the white leads. Uhura remained a supporting character, both on television and in the movies.⁵

Nichols herself sometimes chafed at her character's peripheral role in the *Enterprise's* business. Although Lt. Uhura opened most communications (often with her famous line “Hailing frequencies open, Captain”), she did not lead negotiations, nor did she always participate in the action. Her character usually remained with the ship, off screen and out of sight, when the action took the major

characters elsewhere. When asked in 1977 to name her favorite original series episode, Nichols replied, "It was called anytime Lt. Uhura got to get off the bridge."⁶ In reaction to the role's limitations and in pursuit of her musical theater dreams, Nichols decided to leave *Star Trek* after the first season—and inadvertently discovered Lt. Uhura's power.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. himself persuaded Nichols to remain on the show.⁷ Nichols recalled that she gave Roddenberry her letter of resignation near the end of the first season. "[I] thanked him profusely for the opportunity, et cetera, but I was bored. As an artist. I was recognizing how much this genius man was bringing, and I didn't want to get entrapped in it." She wanted to return to musical theater, to grow artistically. "All I remember, it was a Friday. He [Roddenberry] said, 'Take the weekend and think about this, Nichelle. If you feel the same way on Monday morning, you can go with my blessings.'" The next evening, she appeared at a fund-raiser for the historic civil rights organization, the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). "And one of the producers comes and says, 'Excuse me, Miss Nichols,' and he kind of had a little smirk on his face, 'I hate to bother you, but there is someone here who says he's your biggest fan and would like to meet you if you don't mind.'" It was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.⁸

When Nichols revealed that she was leaving the program, Dr. King reacted. "And he said, 'You cannot do that. . . . This show is changing the way people see us, and see themselves. And the manner in which they're seeing the world.'" King confided that *Star Trek's* racial integration made it one of the few programs that he and Coretta let their children watch. Nichols remembered that Dr. King argued, "You're showing them [racial integration]. The manner in which you have created your role is essential to that change." Dr. King said to Nichols, "Besides, you're the chief communications officer; you're fourth in command. . . . This is not a Black role; this is not a female role. Anybody can change that. If you leave, it will erase everything that you've done." The extraordinary timing surprised Nichols. "It was

bizarre; it was so unreal: the juxtaposition, one day to the next.” After the encounter, Nichols remained for the show’s full run.⁹

Her decision had long-lasting reverberations. Nichols recalled, “I later found out that there were dozens, I guess hundreds, of young white kids in the South who were not allowed to watch that show. And families. And who came together and watched it anyway.” Some of those fans probably reacted differently to racial integration because of what they saw. And some of them later helped to create the conventions that revived the franchise in the 1970s. Roddenberry’s casting even affected the real U.S. space program.¹⁰

“The Next Einstein Might Have a Black Face”

When the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) began recruiting mission specialist astronauts in the mid-1970s, agency leaders assumed that women and members of racial minorities would apply, allowing the space shuttle astronaut corps to be more diverse, a goal of the Space Shuttle Program. After all, the recruiting pool for mission specialists—researchers and scientists—was much more likely to contain women or racial minorities than the pilot astronaut pool, which solicited applicants whose background included “high performance jet aircraft experience.” Because women were banned from flying military aircraft from 1944 until the early 1970s, the same period in which jet aircraft first came into use, virtually no women were jet test pilots. Likewise, the racial integration of the military services that began in 1948 took a long time to penetrate elite assignments, such as jet test piloting. But many historically black colleges and universities had strong engineering and science programs, and, beginning in the 1960s, the number of women with PhDs also rose. The pool of applicants therefore could have included more female and minority applicants.¹¹

And yet, by February 1977, only months before the proposed astronaut selection, of the 1,500 applications submitted, only “approximately 30 were identifiable as minorities and only 75 were women.” NASA needed to address the legacy of its perceived

discrimination. Remarkably, when the space agency wanted to illustrate a racially integrated, mixed-sex, international space crew, *Star Trek* offered an excellent example.¹²

NASA's desire to have a more diverse astronaut corps for these vehicles reflected how the American workplace was transformed by legislation and social activists in the 1960s and 1970s. The 1964 Civil Rights Act required more equality for African Americans and also outlawed sex discrimination. The Equal Employment Opportunity Act was passed in 1972. But by 1966, NASA already had a sweeping antidiscrimination policy including not only race, gender, and creed (among other factors) but also physical handicap (discrimination against which did not become illegal until the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1992). Of course, implementation—the agency's policy enforcement across various NASA centers as well as the individual workers who were the first or second woman or person of color in an office—also had a complex history. But when asked in 1986 about visiting NASA headquarters in 1975, Nichols recalled, "I saw women, blacks, browns, and yellows working in every level of the agency, from maintenance to management. *Except* for astronauts."¹³

Nichols visited NASA because she had become fascinated by spaceflight. In 1975, she heard one of NASA's German rocket engineers, Jesco von Puttkamer, talk at a *Star Trek* convention in Chicago. "The moment I heard him speak, I was hooked." Soon, Nichols was speaking publicly about both spaceflight and *Star Trek*. When she became a National Space Society board member, she gave a speech titled, "New Opportunities for the Humanization of Space, or Space: What's in It for Me?" In it, she challenged NASA to "come down from your ivory tower of intellectual pursuit, because the next Einstein might have a Black face—and she's female." The audience chuckled in recognition. Unbeknownst to her, "the top people [at NASA], the Administrator, James Fletcher at that time, and the head of the astronaut corps . . . were in the audience and heard me take NASA to task."¹⁴

To fix the recruitment problem before the new candidates were announced, Fletcher invited Nichols to conduct a public

relations campaign encouraging qualified women and people of color to apply. Nichols remembered that she only agreed to assist if the agency was serious about real integration. "So, I said, if I take this on, and this becomes [real], I'll be your worst nightmare. . . . I intend to speak before Congress for this, and to all the newspapers and all the television [stations]. . . . I'm going after PhDs in physics, chemical engineering. . . . And these people, I will not insult by trying to convince them of something that is not possible." She told the NASA administrator that if she recruited talented candidates and then the new class did not contain real diversity, she would go to Congress to protest. "And Dr. Fletcher stood up, having listened to me, . . . and said, 'And we'll go with you.'" She agreed to help.¹⁵

Nichols donned a NASA jumpsuit to visit organizations and campuses across the country, recruiting mission specialists through personal appearances and public service announcements. As per her NASA contract, the agency paid all expenses while she donated her time. Nichols's close identification with the Lt. Uhura role drove the media coverage. Major news organizations, popular magazines, and supermarket gossip pages all called her Uhura when covering the recruiting campaign. To support the effort, NASA even made a *Star Trek* publicity photograph available, showing Nichols as Lt. Uhura in the 1960s. Years later, when she was promoting the *Star Trek* films, news articles about Nichols still mentioned her work with NASA.¹⁶

As she campaigned, Nichols battled NASA's legacy of perceived discrimination. Suspicions of NASA's intentions ran deep; simply opening up the selection process was not sufficient. When Nichols appeared at colleges and universities, students confronted her with the idea that NASA was using her. She often replied, "I know. And I'm using NASA, too. But if you don't apply, then they are right. If you qualify and you really wanted to [apply] and you don't apply, then they are right."¹⁷

Ultimately, Nichols's campaign changed perceptions and helped to change the face of NASA's astronaut corps. Several prominent mission specialists, including Dr. Judith Resnik and Dr. Mae Jemison, the first African American woman astronaut, credited

their astronaut careers to Nichols’s campaign. In a nod to that connection, Jemison later appeared in a *Next Generation* episode as a transporter operator. Of all of the original series characters who left their marks on American popular culture, only Lt. Uhura also shaped real space history.¹⁸

“Be Careful What You Wish For”

When the cast reunited for *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979), Nichelle Nichols reprised her role as Lt. Uhura. The opportunity to make six movies in eleven years allowed Nichols to revisit the character repeatedly—and solidified Uhura’s place in *Star Trek* fandom. Ultimately, however, Lt. Uhura was never more than a supporting character.

For the first three films, Uhura’s role initially remained as limited—if not more so—as it had been in the 1960s. She did not have any featured scenes, remarkable interactions, or memorable lines. When Captain Kirk gathers the *Enterprise* crew to brief them on Earth’s new threat in *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, all of the named cast members join him on the stage, except Uhura, who stands off to the side, in front of the general crew, but not with the command team. In the sequel, *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982), Uhura continues her role as the switchboard operator for the ship’s communications. At one point, however, she is rendered virtually mute. When the *Enterprise*’s away team boards the decimated space station Regula 1, Uhura’s image appears on a silent space station monitor, mouthing unheard, inaudible entreaties. She barely appears in the film afterward.

Similarly, Lt. Uhura is absent from most of *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (1984). She participates in the crew’s rebellious attempt to rescue Spock but, in doing so, she vanishes from most of the movie. Acting in cahoots with the rest of the crew, Uhura commandeers a transporter, locking an adventure-hungry technician in a closet at phaser point with the memorable line, “Be careful what you wish for.” She then beams Kirk, McCoy, Sulu, and Scotty aboard the *Enterprise*, agreeing to meet them later. The movie’s central

adventure proceeds with only the male cast members and the female Vulcan, Saavik. In the film's final scenes, Uhura reappears on Vulcan.

While the motion pictures were being produced, the character of Lt. Uhura also developed through *Star Trek* novels. Beginning in 1967, Paramount allowed publishing houses, including first Bantam Books and later Ballantine Books, to develop novels based on the *Star Trek* original series and the animated series. The novels sometimes developed plots and characters in ways different from canonical *Star Trek*. In particular, *Uhura's Song* (1985) by Janet Kagan, part of the *Star Trek* book series developed by Pocket Books after 1979, explored Uhura's complexity, giving her a central role in the book's action. When a planet of feline aliens suffers from a fatal AIDS-like illness, Uhura's close friendship with one of them provides the key to helping them. The friends bond over their shared love of music, communicated thanks to Uhura's fluency in the alien language. The character traits suggested in Kagan's novel shaped depictions of the character in later novels and films.¹⁹

The fourth motion picture, *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1986), showed some of that development: Lt. Uhura finally exhibited more complex skills. When the *Enterprise* crew approaches Earth, Uhura picks up "multiphasic communications, overlapping; it's almost a gibberish." Among the signals, she detects the distress call outlining the threat: an alien probe unwittingly disabling starships and damaging the planet with transmissions directed into Earth's oceans. Uhura modifies the transmissions, revealing how they would sound underwater: whale songs. Although the character remains underused throughout the whale's rescue, Uhura does accompany Chekov on a mission to steal nuclear materials from the twentieth-century aircraft carrier *USS Enterprise*.

The development of Uhura as a supporting character was not a linear progression toward a fully rationalized role, however. Although ideas from the *Star Trek* tie-in novels appeared in *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier* (1989), the overall portrayal of Lt. Uhura was mixed. In this movie, viewers saw the first on-screen suggestions of a romantic relationship between Uhura and chief engineer Montgomery Scott. When Uhura joins Scotty on the bridge

as he repairs the *Enterprise-A*, she delivers his dinner with an intimate caress of his cheek. But the relationship was not developed in the movie, and there was only one other subsequent hint of their romance. Uhura’s leadership opportunities were also spotty. Uhura answers Starfleet’s calls and reassembles the crew from shore leave to rescue the hostages taken on *Nimbus III*. But a subsequent scene contains an odd mix of Uhura’s talents and sexuality. As a distraction, once on the planet, Uhura acts as a siren, singing from a ridgetop while performing a fan dance. Uhura is the center of the action, although in an entirely physical, sexualized context. In the aftermath, Uhura is once again out of the action as the male leads engage in a firefight. Throughout the film, the character’s portrayal continues this mix of skills and weakness. Although Uhura pilots one of the shuttlecraft to the surface during the hostage rescue attempt, she also falls under the spell of Sybok, the empathic Vulcan Svengali hijacking the *Enterprise*. By the film’s conclusion, the character is once again in the background, out of the action.

As the real-life United States confronted the Cold War’s end—and the Soviet Union’s demise—the *Star Trek* crew faced the end of the Klingon Empire in *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* (1991). Uhura’s supporting role continued to be limited, although with flashes of more developed talents. When the crew gets called into a classified briefing about the Klingons’ plight, Uhura offers a hint of how her offscreen responsibilities had grown, complaining, “This had better be good. I’m supposed to be chairing a seminar at the Academy.” But for the rest of the film, other than a comical scene in which the crew pores through thick texts to communicate in Klingon, Uhura is relegated to the sidelines once again. The fullest development of the character would come when the franchise was revived in 2009.

“Was I Not One of Your Top Students?”

When J.J. Abrams’s film reinvigorated *Star Trek* in 2009, Lt. Uhura (as portrayed by Zoe Saldana) took on the traits suggested in the novelizations and motion pictures. Although inspired by the

original *Star Trek* series, rather than remaining in the background (or on the *Enterprise*) opening and closing communications, Lt. Uhura in the 2009 film serves as a central character, appearing throughout the film, participating in key plot developments, and facilitating the emotional development of the other main characters. After her introduction in the bar, Lt. Uhura's physical attractiveness initially seems to be a central trait. As Kirk hides out under the bed of Uhura's amorous Orion roommate in her Starfleet Academy dorm room, Uhura unknowingly begins to undress in front of him. But the scene ultimately serves not only to highlight Uhura's body but also to reveal that she had just detected an anomalous transmission from a Klingon prison planet. That transmission would prove to be essential to unraveling the mystery at the center of the film's plot. Uhura appears as a dedicated and talented officer, spending extra time at her post, ultimately to the benefit of all on board the *Enterprise*.

The reenvisioned Uhura portrayed by Saldana reflects a more well-rounded characterization, exhibiting attitude and spunk as well as intelligence and dedication. During Kirk's underhanded attempt to override the doomed Kobayashi Maru simulation (a "no-win" scenario intended to teach cadets to manage fear in the face of defeat, which Kirk reprograms in order to win), Uhura rolls her eyes at Kirk's brashness. Sarcasm creeps into her voice as she answers his request to be called "Captain." Moreover, later in the film, when a distress signal from the planet Vulcan requires that all cadets be assigned immediately to starships for emergency service, Uhura disputes her initial assignment vigorously. Assertive and direct, she marches over to Spock, demanding an explanation, "Was I not one of your top students? And, did I not, on multiple occasions, demonstrate *exceptional* oral sensitivity? And, I quote, 'an unparalleled ability to identify sonic anomalies in subspace transmission tests?'" In answer to Spock's assertion that her starship assignment to the USS *Farragut* was "an attempt to avoid the appearance of favoritism," Uhura declares, "No, I am assigned to the *Enterprise*." Spock quickly acquiesces.

The viewer later learns that Uhura was not only one of Spock’s top students but is also engaged in a romantic relationship with him. This unexpected revelation upended *Star Trek* fans’ expectations that Spock would be emotionally aloof and isolated from the other crew members while Kirk’s character would have love interests (and sexual conquests). More important, however, it offered the strongest evidence of just how much the Uhura character had developed. The depiction of Lt. Uhura in the 2009 film demonstrated that a powerful female character could be depicted with a love interest without reducing her to being “just” the love interest—something that *Trek* fans and feminist scholars had suggested, as recently as the late 1990s, might not be possible.

In her feminist analysis of space and science fiction, *NASA/TREK: Popular Science and Sex in America* (1997), scholar Constance Penley analyzed the fan fiction practice of “slash fiction” as a way of creating a “safe space” for women’s interests in the *Star Trek* universe. In such erotic stories, the traditionally heterosexual male leads, in this case Kirk and Spock, are rewritten as homosexual lovers. Because the heterosexual relationships in the original series between, for instance, Captain Kirk and the love-interest-of-the-week relied on flat, underdeveloped, overly sexualized, and often objectified female characters, Penley argues, slash writers, who were overwhelmingly women, created new stories more pleasing to their own interests by drawing out the homo-romantic relationship between the leads. Rather than creating original female characters, Penley argued, slash fiction writers eliminated male-female relationships to remove the heterosexual tension that otherwise dominated the series, leaving more room to explore the issues that slash writers found interesting.²⁰

And yet, with Lt. Uhura in 2009, *Star Trek* finally included a fully realized female character who could be in a romantic relationship without being overshadowed, defined, or otherwise reduced by it. In fact, Uhura acts as the emotional lead in the couple. When Spock retreats from the bridge to the turbolift after the planet Vulcan has been destroyed, killing almost all Vulcans (including

Spock's mother), Uhura follows him and, after the turbolift doors close, embraces him. As he stands impassively (he is a Vulcan, after all), she cradles his head in her hands and whispers over and over, "I'm sorry." She tries to draw him out, asking, "What do you need from me?" When he answers, in typical Vulcan fashion, "I need everyone to continue performing admirably," she tips her head and nods, understanding his limits. Uhura's departing kiss reveals Spock's willingness to be intimate.

Rather than overwhelming the female character, the romantic relationship enhances the depiction of Lt. Uhura. It is only during an intimate moment between the couple, as Spock prepares to transport off the *Enterprise* for a risky rescue mission, that the audience hears Uhura's first name, Nyota, spoken for the first time. During that scene, Lt. Uhura's flat catchphrase from the 1960s, "Hailing frequencies open," becomes a deeper promise to Spock, "I'll be monitoring your frequency." A passionate kiss ends their good-byes. As Uhura leaves the transport room, the other male characters exchange looks: Spock's relationship with the tall, beautiful, and intelligent officer has raised his standing in their eyes.

Throughout the rest of the film's denouement, Uhura is present on the bridge, acting as the ship's communications officer, having been elevated to that position at the beginning of the film because of her extraordinary language skills, including the ability to distinguish Romulan from Vulcan. In the 2009 film, not only has the character of Lt. Uhura been allowed to develop as a professional, making real contributions to the starship's command team through hard-won expertise and language skills, but she is also presented as a three-dimensional female character, one permitted to exhibit the greater range befitting a woman with romantic interests, strong opinions, and emotional depth.

Lt. Uhura represents an essential part of the mixed-sex, racially integrated, international space crew depicted in the *Star Trek* franchise, a depiction that was not only innovative at the time but that also helped to change history. When Whoopi Goldberg saw Nichelle Nichols on the first *Star Trek* series, she was delighted to see an African American face depicted in the future. When Gene

Roddenberry began work on *Next Generation*, Goldberg requested a role on the show (and was cast as Guinan) in tribute to Nichols’s path-breaking role. Moreover, the astronaut corps recruited by NASA in the late 1970s owed at least part of its racial and gender diversity to Nichols and her fame as Lt. Uhura. The evolution of the Uhura character both reflected—and spurred—historical changes for women and people of color in postwar America.

Notes

1. See Daniel Leonard Bernardi, *Star Trek and History: Race-ing toward a White Future* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); and De Witt Douglas Kilgore, *Astrofuturism: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

2. Bernardi, *Star Trek and History*, 40–42, 80; interview with Nichelle Nichols by the author, National Air and Space Museum, Washington, DC, May 24, 2011 (hereinafter “Nichols interview, May 24, 2011”).

3. Nichols interview, May 24, 2011.

4. Although race definitions vary around the world, in the United States, the distinction between “white” and “nonwhite” had real consequences for people’s lives. See Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America*, Race and American Culture series, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); F. James Davis, *Who Is Black? One Nation’s Definition*, 10th anniversary ed. (State College: Penn State University Press, 2001). Women in Motion Public Relations, “Profile: Nichelle Nichols,” 1977, 2, Nichelle Nichols biographical file, 001594, NASA Historical Reference Collection, NASA Headquarters History Office, Washington, DC (hereinafter Nichols bio file, NASA HQ).

5. Bernardi, *Star Trek and History*, 80.

6. Alice Jackson, “Nichelle Nichols (Lt. Uhura) Wants to Make Science of Star Trek Reality,” *Sun-Herald*, June 4, 1977, n.p., Nichols bio file, NASA HQ.

7. This story is also in Nichelle Nichols, *Beyond Uhura: Star Trek and Other Memories* (New York: Putnam, 1994), 164–165; and J. Alfred Phelps, *They Had a Dream: The Story of African-American Astronauts* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1994), 62.

8. Nichols interview, May 24, 2011.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. Joseph D. Atkinson Jr. and Jay M. Shafritz, *The Real Stuff: A History of NASA’s Astronaut Recruitment Program* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1985), 143.

12. NASA’s previous experience with *Star Trek* included naming the first space shuttle orbiter *Enterprise* in response to a fan write-in campaign in 1976. Women in Motion, Incorporated, NASA Contract NASW-3049, “Final Report by Women in Motion, Inc.,” August 10, 1977, NASA; Astronaut Recruitment (Nichelle Nichols) report file, 8935, NASA Historical Reference Collection, NASA Headquarters History Office, Washington, DC (hereinafter Nichols report, NASA HQ).

13. Amy E. Foster, *Integrating Women into the Astronaut Corps: Politics and Logistics at NASA, 1972–2004* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 71; Carrie Rickey, “Star Recruiter,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 12, 1986, Nichols bio file, NASA HQ.