

The Kelvin Timeline  
of *Star Trek*

*Essays on J.J. Abrams'*  
*Final Frontier*

Edited by  
MATTHEW WILHELM KAPPELL and  
ACE G. PILKINGTON

2019



McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers  
*Jefferson, North Carolina*

2016/04/22/opinion/whitewashing-a-long-history/s/chow-ss-slide-E871.html. Accessed 26 Jan. 2017.

Zushi, Yo. "Why Hollywood Whitewashing Isn't Always Racist." *New Statesman*, 18 May 2016, www.newstatesman.com/culture/observations/2016/05/why-hollywood-whitewashing-isn-t-always-racist. Accessed 26 Jan. 2017.

#### STAR TREK MEDIA CITED

Foster, Alan Dean. *Star Trek into Darkness* [Film novelization]. Pocket Books, 2013.

Johnson, Mike. *Star Trek: Khan*. IDW Publishing, 2014.

"Plato's Stepchildren." *Star Trek*, season 3, episode 10, written by Meyer Dolinsky, directed by David Alexander, 22 Nov. 1968.

"Space Seed." *Star Trek*, season 1, episode 22, written by Gene L. Coon and Carey Wilber, directed by Marc Daniels, 16 Feb. 1967.

*Star Trek Beyond*. Directed by Justin Lin, Paramount Pictures, 2016.

*Star Trek into Darkness*. Directed by J.J. Abrams, Paramount Pictures, 2013.

*Star Trek II: Wrath of Khan*. Directed by Nicholas Meyer, Paramount Pictures, 1973.

## Race, the Final Frontier

### Star Trek, *Trump and Hollywood's Diversity Problem*

PENELOPE INGRAM

In 2016, discrimination and diversity were the buzz words in Hollywood. For the second year in a row, The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences had failed to honor actors of color. Of the twenty Oscar nominations for acting, including Best Actor and Actresses in Lead and Supporting Roles, not one person of color was named. This had occurred in previous years when there were no viable contenders, but in 2016 there were several potential nominees, including Idris Elba for *Beasts of No Nation*, Benicio Del Toro for *Sicario*, Samuel L. Jackson for *The Hateful Eight*, Michael B. Jordan for *Creed*, and Will Smith for *Concussion*. Similarly, the nominees for Best Picture included white leads and predominantly white casts. Neither *Creed*, *Concussion*, nor *Straight Out of Compton* received recognition in the Best Picture category. While *Straight Out of Compton* did receive a nomination for Best Original Screenplay, the writers of the screenplay were all white. The hashtag #OscarsSoWhite (which first appeared in 2015 when the director and star of *Selma*, Ava DuVernay and David Oyelowo, were overlooked by the Academy even though the film itself was nominated for Best Picture) trended on Twitter and drew attention to the lack of diversity in Hollywood and in the Academy. Just a few days later, with rumors of a threatened boycott abounding, Cheryl Boone Isaacs, the Academy's first African American president, announced that it would double the membership of women and minorities in the academy by 2020 (Jagernauth).

A few weeks later, J.J. Abrams announced that his production company, Bad Robot, would institute a diversity policy with the aim of increasing the number of women and people of color involved in his productions. Citing

the Oscars controversy as a “wake-up call,” Abrams declared that Bad Robot would work with its agency partner CAA, as well as Warner and Paramount “to ensure women and minorities are submitted for writing, directing and acting jobs for the company in direct proportion to their representation among the US population” (Ford, Ryzik). It’s tempting to view Abrams’s policy as his response to the “whitewashing” controversy surrounding his 2013 reboot, *Star Trek into Darkness*, which cast white British actor Benedict Cumberbatch as Khan Noonien Singh, a South Asian, brown-skinned Sikh, played by Ricardo Montalban in both *The Original Series* episode “Space Seed” (1967) and *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982). But it’s also interesting in light of the progressive casting of John Boyega and Daisy Ridley as the leads in Abrams’s *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, the long-anticipated sequel to the *Star Wars* franchise. *The Force Awakens* (2015) might even be viewed as a corrective to the Khan debacle, generating its own racial backlash and hashtag—#BoycottStarWarsVII. Rather than being too white, *The Force Awakens* was considered by some diehard *Star Wars* fans as anti-white, some going so far as to say it promoted “white genocide” (Griggs).

In 2016, Abrams produced the third installment of the *Star Trek* reboot, directed by Asian-American director Justin Lin and featuring black British actor Idris Elba in a lead role as the evil Krall. On the surface, this film appears to be consistent with Abrams’s stated commitment to diversity. *Star Trek Beyond* includes the most diverse cast of all the reboots, and actors of color are given extended story arcs. Idris Elba’s character Krall, who plays the lead antagonist, is central to the film’s exploration of questions of identity and belonging. However, far from the progressive film it seems to be, *Beyond* reproduces some troubling stereotypes and can be seen to reflect the growing racial divide evident in the U.S. towards the end of Barack Obama’s presidency. Indeed, rather than standing as a corrective to *Into Darkness*, *Beyond* can be viewed as its natural successor, extending the disturbing racial politics of that film. The whitewashing controversy wasn’t the only one that beset *Into Darkness*; it also received criticism for its irresponsible celebration of urban terrorism, depicting an aircraft destroying a building. Instead of departing from these themes, *Beyond* continues them. But here the terrorist is a black man whose body is a biological weapon with the capacity to destroy the purity and uncontested superiority of whiteness.

The representations of both Khan and Krall go far beyond the well-travelled sketch of the terrorist frequently populating our big and small screens; rather they betray a palpable ambivalence about whiteness and blackness, and us and them, which mirrors shared anxieties about race in so-called post-racial America. Released in 2013 and 2016, respectively, these science fiction films provide a sort of road map for understanding that particular brand of white resentment and rage expressed by many who voted for Donald

Trump in the 2016 election (Painter). Operating as a form of popular fantasy, science fiction both imagines and projects our current social and political realities into a future time. Most obviously, science fiction attempts to articulate the anxieties people feel in relation to scientific experimentation and weighs both the benefits and costs to our current world and life, as we know it. In short, it offers a productive space to express cultural concerns about science and technology. Adilifu Nama and Isaac Lavender have recently argued that science fiction has a history of using alien difference to comment upon issues of racial difference. “Science fiction often talks about race by not talking about race.... Even though it is a literature that talks a lot about underclasses or oppressed classes, it does so from a privileged if somewhat generic white space” (Lavender 7). What’s different about these two recent *Star Trek* films is that racial difference is not transposed onto alien otherness; rather racial difference is clearly marked as human difference, even in the case of Cumberbatch’s lily-white Khan. The whitewashing of Khan has implications for our current moment that go far beyond the Hollywood tendency to cast white actors in roles written for people of color. It betrays a significant unease about the power people of color possess in a time when the U.S. population is expected to be majority minority by 2050. As a journalist covering the early day of the Trump presidency revealed in a recent interview: “[T]here’s a kind of deeper cultural discomfort with the growing population of people who are not white in this country, coming from a kind of traditional white sense of propriety of what America is about ... and it’s part of what’s driving the more extreme elements of this presidency” (Bazelton).

### #OscarsSoWhite and #BlackLivesMatter

It seems evident that the hashtag movement #OscarsSoWhite was attempting to reckon with more than the problem of racial diversity in the academy. Its use and popularity sprang from ground tilled by explosive racial relations between members of the black community, police, and the justice system, and should be understood in the context of the activism of the Black Lives Matter movement. The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter first appeared in 2013, after the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin. Black Lives Matter became increasingly visible and assumed a greater political and public role as violence against African Americans escalated in subsequent years. In 2014, communities of color were reeling from the fatal shooting of unarmed Michael Brown and the riots that followed the acquittal of Brown’s killer, police officer Darren Wilson. In 2015, racial tensions between African Americans and police escalated further. Freddie Gray was killed while being transported to a police station after the officers

failed to restrain him in the police van, causing extreme injuries to his spinal cord. A protest in Baltimore after Gray's death turned violent, and a state of emergency was declared by the Governor of Maryland with the National Guard being deployed. Charges against the officers were dropped. In May of 2015, *The New York Times* reported that "sixty-one percent of Americans now say race relations in this country are generally bad.... The negative sentiment is echoed by broad majorities of blacks and whites alike, a stark change from earlier this year, when 58 percent of blacks thought race relations were bad, but just 35 percent of whites agreed. In August, 48 percent of blacks and 41 percent of whites said they felt that way" (Sussman).

That race itself was the story at the 2016 Oscars reveals a number of things about the cultural politics of the second decade of the 21st century. Specifically, that "post-racial" or "colorblind" ideologies so prevalent after the election of Barack Obama in 2008, are not only myths, but covert exercises of white privilege. The attempt to sweep race under the rug, by liberals and conservatives alike, demonstrated in the subtly aggressive #AllLivesMatter, speaks to a greater fear about racial presence. Racial difference, it seems, is too visible, too threatening, and needs to be contained. As respected sociologists and theorists Michael Omi and Howard Winant make clear, "colorblindness" is not race neutral at all; rather it is a tactic utilized by the dominant racial hegemony for the purposes of containment and redirection. "As hegemonic racial ideology, colorblindness has to be enforced, not only in the state policies and court decisions, but in popular culture and everyday life as well" (Omi and Winant 263). Conservative anxiety about whiteness and its ability to stay dominant was heightened by Obama's presence in the White House and his popularity among diverse segments of the population. In his book, *A Black Man in the White House*, Cornel Belcher measured the degree of racial aversion among Democrats and Republicans during the two terms of Obama's administration and found that:

Not only did overall attitudes change over time, demonstrating heightened levels of negative racial attitudes during the Obama presidency, but individual levels of racial antagonism and opinions of the president varied by party affiliation over time: Democrats became increasingly racially positive over the course of the Obama election and presidency, while independents and, primarily, Republicans became significantly more racially resentful ... partisan racial polarization of attitudes remains and, indeed, jumped astonishingly among Republicans going into 2016, helping to explain Donald Trump as the nominee for the GOP [Belcher 26].

Americans' anxiety about racial issues crystallized during Obama's presidency and was articulated in a variety of guises; while Republicans have historically sought to limit the power of minority voting blocs through voter id laws, redistricting, and dog whistles to the alt right, a more subtle assault on racial equality was being waged in film and television.

Hollywood is adept at exercising covert racism. In fact, Hollywood is a reliable barometer of race relations and prejudices within the larger populace. #OscarsSoWhite was effective in that it drew attention to the fact that Hollywood in its hydra-like involvement in business, politics, foreign markets, etc., is not quite the liberal mouthpiece the right so often accuses it of being.

Of the 100 most popular movies released in 2014, only 12.5 percent of the movies' characters were black, according to a study done by the University of Southern California—and that statistic correlates to every year since 2007. It isn't just that the Academy—which was hugely revamped in June 2015 to become more diverse (a self-imposed change, by the way)—is largely uninterested in stories they consider "other"... The Academy picked a largely white slate of nominees this year (and last year), because that's mostly all they had to pick from. Yes, #OscarsSoWhite, but #HollywoodSoWhite is closer to the truth [Gruttadaro].

This disinterest towards, or active rejection of, otherness provides a context for the recent Sony Pictures email scandal. In December 2014, exactly one month before the first appearance of #OSW, Sony pictures made news when the emails of two of its key executives, Scott Rudin and Amy Pascal, were leaked to the press. The emails revealed a number of racist comments the two had made about President Obama, Denzel Washington, and Kevin Hart. They also speculated on Denzel Washington's lack of box office bankability in overseas markets (Stedman).

Far from liberal, these racially reactionary products coming out of Hollywood reflect a backlash against issues of race, or at least a degree of what some have called "racial fatigue."<sup>1</sup> But importantly these films don't just reflect, they also construct and shape those views about race at home and abroad. Furthermore, overtly racist representations often appear in movies which don't have specific racial storylines. Science fiction has a long history of obfuscating race, as Edward James notes in his seminal essay "Yellow, Black, Metal, and Tentacled: The Race Question in American Science Fiction." It's the sleight of hand, the overt allegorization of otherness in fantasy and science fiction where racial tension is evident. Nama agrees, "For the most part, black characters are absent from SF cinema, yet their omission does not eliminate blackness as a source of anxiety. Churning just below the narrative surface of many SF films, blackness is symbolically present" (Nama 11). Furthermore, as the #BoycottStarWarsVII "white genocide" claims reveal, when Hollywood remediates this absence, the white backlash is swift and decisive. Donald Trump's upset victory in the 2016 presidential election and the subsequent resurgence of neo-Nazi groups speaking on college campuses and openly demonstrating against the removal of Confederate statues in Charlottesville, VA<sup>2</sup> and elsewhere reveal that polarizing and vitriolic views about race have entered the mainstream. Trump, who ran on a racially divisive populist-nationalist platform, appealed, in part, to conservative, working class whites

who felt invisible in the political landscape of Washington and ridiculed by what they perceived as a discourse of liberal elitism emanating from the East and West coasts. As #OscarsSoWhite and films like *Into Darkness* and *Beyond* articulate, the assumption of the right that Hollywood is part of some out-of-touch liberal elite needs further scrutiny. Social scientists have long recognized that various forms of media reflect and reproduce social inequalities. Indeed, “the production, content, and consumption of media may be used to justify and encourage racist, sexist, classist, and heterosexist understandings of the way the world is or should be” (Sumerau and Jirek 72).

The recent *Star Trek* reboots reflect America’s changing views on race and bear the scars of the recent race wars. These films need to be understood as exemplary of the social discourse of our time and recognized for the part they play in responding to and shaping our racial landscape. Interpreting and analyzing films like these make visible the work that allegories of race in film perform and the ideologies that they veil. These ideologies seem particularly crucial to investigate in the new franchise because of Gene Roddenberry’s desire for *Star Trek* to reflect his own liberal views. As he said of his series, “*Star Trek* is my statement to the world ... [it] is more than just my political philosophy. It is my social philosophy, my racial philosophy, my overview on life and the human condition (qtd. in O’Connor 185). *Star Trek* of the 1960s expressed the “utopian passions of countercultural relativism.” “Refus[ing] to impose its values on alien races,” it spent its time “spreading the gospel of liberal understanding” (Rothstein). By contrast, Abrams’s reboots reinforce a neoconservative world order where whiteness trumps all.

### *Into Whiteness*

Many Trekkers were outraged when it was revealed that Benedict Cumberbatch was to reprise the role of Khan Noonien Singh in the second *Star Trek* reboot. Fans immediately reacted with claims of “whitewashing,” a disparaging term used when white actors are cast for non-white roles in film. Whitewashing was a common device in the early days of Hollywood film, when white actors would don blackface or yellowface, or adopt ethnically stereotyped accents or gestures. Some of the more egregious examples include Laurence Olivier as Othello in the 1965 film version of Shakespeare’s play; John Wayne as Genghis Khan in the 1956 movie, *The Conqueror*; and Mickey Rooney’s hideous caricature of the Japanese I.Y. Yunioshi in 1965’s *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. Whitewashing is related to “racebending,” where the ethnicity of the character is changed in a remake or alternative media version (video game, etc.) of the original production. The website racebending.com was swift to condemn the whitewashing of Khan in *Into Darkness*.

Racebending.com has always pointed out that villains are generally played by people with darker skin, and that’s true ... unless the villain is one with intelligence, depth, complexity. One who garners sympathy from the audience, or if not sympathy, then—as from Kirk—grudging admiration. What this new *Trek* movie tells us, what J.J. Abrams is telling us, is that no brown-skinned man can accomplish all that. That only by having Khan played by a white actor can the audience engage with and feel for him, believe that he’s smart and capable and a match for our *Enterprise* crew [Sammy].

*Into Darkness* manages to perform whitewashing and racebending at the same time. Benedict Cumberbatch is a white actor playing both a white character, John Harrison, and an Indian character, Khan Noonien Singh. *Into Darkness* doesn’t attempt to explain the illogic of this, but I think that the film’s two narrative strands of terrorism and superhumanness explain why Cumberbatch has to inhabit two entirely different ethnic identities simultaneously. In episode 24 of *TOS Space Seed* (1967), we learn that Ricardo Montalban’s Khan is a genetically bred superman from 20th century India who was part of the Eugenics Wars on earth. He and his crew were cryogenically frozen and drifted through space until 2267 when discovered by Kirk and his crew. Khan is literally the greatest man alive. (Although Khan’s crew are similarly engineered, he still assumes a position of power over them.) When Cumberbatch’s Khan explains his unique abilities to Kirk in *Into Darkness*, the facts of his “breeding” carry a different resonance: the threateningly superior brown man is completely erased by the British white man. After Khan explains to Kirk that his intellect and savagery were exploited by Admiral Marcus, Kirk asks: “Why would a Starfleet admiral ask a 300-year-old frozen man for help?” Khan responds: “Because I am better.” Kirk: “At what?” Khan responds: “Everything” (*Into Darkness*). From the mouth of the crisply British Cumberbatch, offering an emotionally wrenching performance worthy of the Royal Shakespeare Company, superhumanness gets tied yet again to Imperial British whiteness.

The sanctity and entitlement of whiteness saturates the film, from the depiction in the opening scene of indigenous white “primitives” and Kirk’s hubris in breaking the Prime Directive of non-interference, to futuristic London of 2259 where a black man devastated by the debilitating disease of his dying daughter performs a terrorist act for the white mastermind. In the Faustian pact, the child survives thanks to the restorative properties of Khan’s white blood, while the father must pay the price with his life. In this film, as in others of the genre, “[W]hite blood [is] presented as a means to cure and repopulate a diseased and dying world ... [and] draws on the dual racial eugenic propositions that not only is black blood a contaminant to white bloodlines but white blood is also considered a neutralizing agent for biologically dictated mental deficiencies in blacks” (Nama 49). Not only does

Khan's recasting from brown to white enhance this meaning, it's also instructive to note that the blood of the brown Khan, in both "Space Seed" and *The Wrath of Khan*, has no such lifesaving properties. Further, in the *Wrath of Khan*, it is Spock, the perennial other, who heroically saves the ship by sacrificing his life by locking himself into a radiation chamber. In *Into Darkness*, the heroics are left to Kirk, who does the same thing as Spock in the previous film, but rather than dying, he is brought back to life by Khan's blood. Here the symbolism of the transfusion takes on a different quality as Khan passes on symbolic superman properties to Kirk, reinforcing Kirk's natural "fitness" to lead the *Enterprise*. Furthermore, white Khan's transfusion of blood to white Kirk prevents any suggestion of miscegenation. For the "racial convention" of the one drop rule "is an integral part of the cultural politics of race in American society in which 'black blood' is viewed as not only a potent pollutant but also a fundamental element in assembling an essentialized racial identity for both whites and blacks" (Nama 43). Although Khan is not black, "brown" blood has historically carried the same stigma.

While it is not directly addressed, the question of the ethical use of eugenics or genetic engineering informs the premise of *Into Darkness*. In 1967 and 1982, when we learned that Khan was a product of the Eugenics Wars, the kind of eugenics that could produce a super human "species" like Khan seemed far off. Not so today, when we are capable of genetically modifying food; have the capacity to screen for and correct genetic deficiencies through somatic gene therapy; can transplant embryonic stem cells to repair any diseased or injured organ; and thanks to the completion of the mapping of the Human Genome Project, can identify which genes potentially control intelligence and how they might be manipulated. The possibility that a man like Khan could exist seems inevitable, if not now, in the near future. Part of the ethical conversation around genetic engineering involves equity and access to the new technologies, but these concerns usually refer to the disproportionate benefits that the wealthy would obtain from human improvements, such as designer babies with exceptional IQs. Here, however, in replacing the brown man for the white one as the perfect specimen of humanness, *Into Darkness* introduces a latent fear expressed by some conservative commentators about bioengineering. Could genetic engineering level the racial playing field, or worse, make whites inferior? Far from the state-sponsored sterilization and lobotomization of years past, the "new eugenics" threaten to enhance those whom society deems weaker or less intelligent. As conservative commentators like Francis Fukuyama, a member of George Bush's Council on Bioethics from 2001 to 2004, have noted, "Under this scenario it is entirely plausible that an advanced, democratic welfare state would reenter the eugenics game, intervening this time not to prevent low-IQ people from breeding, but to help genetically disadvantaged people raise their IQs

and the IQs of their offspring" (81). Lest there is any doubt that Fukuyama is making a connection between race and low IQ, elsewhere in his book he endorses Murray and Herrnstein's controversial findings in *The Bell Curve* that up to 70 percent (Fukuyama says the rate is closer to 40–50 percent) of IQ is heritable and that African Americans are genetically predisposed to have lower IQs. Further, he sees these new technologies as posing a danger to the political world order of the twenty-first century, cautioning that such technologies "will change our understanding of human personality and identity; they will *upend existing social hierarchies* and affect the rate of intellectual, material, and political progress; and they will affect the nature of global politics" (174, 82 my emphasis). In other words, they have the potential to push the white West off its perch.

By transforming superhuman Indian Khan Noonien Singh into the genetically gifted, white, British John Harrison, whose blood self-replicates and rejuvenates life, *Into Darkness* removes the possibility that non-whites could be stronger, smarter, and better than whites. This rewriting should be understood as a form of "racial rearticulation," which is employed by a dominant hegemony that "cannot explicitly name, utilize, or exploit the race concept; instead, it is forced to exercise racial rule covertly.... This is a contradictory and conflictual situation, in which the racial regime simultaneously *disavows* its raciality and *deploys* it as broadly and as deeply as ever" (Omi and Winant 263). Understood in these terms, the whitewashing of Khan not only reinforces the association between whiteness and superiority that the casting of Ricardo Montalban as Khan disrupted, it offers tacit support to the kind of white supremacist narratives that fueled support for Donald Trump in the 2016 election. When Khan reveals that he will undertake mass genocide of any species he finds inferior, the cautionary tale is complete. In a eugenic race war, whites will prevail.

### White Terror

The casting of a white Khan has considerably different implications, however, when we examine the film's terrorist plot. Damon Lindelof, one of the film's screenwriters, has said of the emphasis on terror in the film: "All that stuff was in the air and I think we weren't trying to make a sociopolitical statement when we wrote the story, but we just started gravitating towards those ideals because that's what was on the news" (Sacks). Here it would seem a brown actor would be the perfect vehicle to feed Western hysteria about terrorism and to demonstrate the purported interconnectedness of race and violence. However, according to Roberto Orci, the filmmakers were conscious of that association and were "uncomfortable demonizing anyone" on the basis

of race. In support of this position, one critic argues that “by choosing a white actor, the film-makers decoupled Khan’s villainy from his brownness—which was significant, especially in the light of Khan’s terrorist attack on a skyscraper in the film” (Zushi). It’s certainly the case that a white Anglo terrorist is less of a political hot potato than a brown one.

But it’s curious if the filmmakers wanted to “decouple” brownness and villainy why they borrowed so carefully and obviously from terror events perpetrated by Al Qaeda and its affiliates, and more recent attacks by ISIS. Precisely because the film depicts scenes of urban terrorism like 9/11 and more recent attacks in London and Paris, these representations are always already racialized. We don’t need a narrative about John Harrison’s radicalization by Islam to understand the film is pulling from the cultural zeitgeist of terrorism waged by Islamic militants, especially when the terrorist is a man named Khan.

Within the first twenty minutes of the film a bomb has destroyed a top-secret Starfleet research center in London. This, it turns out, is a mere prelude to his larger attack on Starfleet, where Khan uses a jump-ship (helicopter like vehicle) to target a skyscraper and kill a majority of Starship senior command. He then escapes to Kronos, the homeworld of the Federation’s greatest enemy—the Klingons—where he is in hiding. Kirk and his crew are given orders to launch missiles on Kronos and destroy Khan. In pursuing this line of action, the film is clearly drawing from and commenting upon U.S. policy regarding Osama Bin Laden, the architect of the attacks of 9/11. Before Admiral Marcus knows that Khan has escaped off world to Kronos, he makes a speech reminiscent of George W. Bush’s avowal to capture Bin Laden “dead or alive.” Marcus says, “In the name of those we lost, you will run this bastard down. This is a manhunt, pure and simple so let’s get to work” (*Into Darkness*). However, when he finds out that Khan is hiding on the remote Klingon homeworld, he orders Kirk to deploy missiles to kill, not capture, Khan.

That *Into Darkness* is both highlighting and commenting upon U.S. policy, and the ethics of kill or capture, becomes evident when Spock finds out the true nature of their mission. Spock makes clear that it is his duty to “strongly object to [the] mission parameters” because “there is no Starfleet regulation that condemns a man to die without a trial.” And then if the case wasn’t clear enough, he argues that “Regulations aside, this action is morally wrong.” “Captain, our mission could start a war with the Klingons, and it is by its very definition immoral” (*Into Darkness*). It is telling that it’s Spock, the representative of otherness, who voices the moral objection to such treatment. And because Spock is logical and can always intuit the correct path, even when not successful, the moral high ground is his, at least temporarily. Reluctantly, Kirk agrees to Spock’s demands, but as the plot unfolds, Kirk’s capitulation to Spock’s ethical qualms is shown to be wrong. Sparing Khan’s

life results in significantly more lives lost. While Roddenberry’s vision “both championed, and dissented from, [the counterculture’s] peaceful, anti-militaristic vision” (Rothstein), Abrams’s vision is jingoism at its finest. Ethical concerns about the taking of enemy life, whether Khan’s or Bin Laden’s, are shown to be soft and foolish, while the view of the military hardliners is shown as correct.<sup>3</sup> This overt support of military ops, regardless of their legal or ethical cost, is consonant with the politics of the right and the “war on terror.” Although, it was Obama’s administration that found and killed Bin Laden, his military operations were often criticized as not going far enough, as being “soft on terror,” or, in the words of Donald Trump, being “sympathetic to Islamic Terrorism” (Blatter, Stein).

### *Beyond Racism? Not Quite*

Themes of racial difference and terrorism are also on display in the third reboot in the new franchise: *Star Trek Beyond*. However, the terrorist narrative shifts in *Beyond*. Whereas *Into Darkness* uses whiteness to try to avoid making a political point about race and terrorism (even though, as I’ve explained above, it does so covertly), *Beyond* goes one step further by transposing fears of Islamic otherness to African American otherness. This is homegrown terrorism, but the cause of radicalization is different. Far from being created by an evil other, Krall/Edison is a product of the Federation. A former soldier turned captain, Balthazar Edison and his crew were abandoned by the Federation. As the defeated, resigned captain states in the last entry of his log: “All distress calls unanswered. Of the crew, only three remain.... I will do whatever it takes for me and my crew. The Federation do [sic] not care about us” (*Beyond*). This backstory of a soldier discarded and forgotten by the military finds an analog to contemporary stories about soldiers returning home from war with PTSD and inadequate veterans’ benefits. On this interpretation, his anger at the Federation (the U.S. government) is justified. But instead of following this narrative, and allowing a sympathetic reading of Krall/Edison, the film demonizes and others him, and uses his race to underscore that demonization.

It’s significant, of course, that we don’t know that Krall is Edison until near the end of the film. Our first impression of him is as a reptilian humanoid alien creature who attacks the *Enterprise* and literally sucks the life out of his prisoners. But it’s instructive to see the ways in which the narrative of the film builds and develops a theme of unity and disunity, of us and them, which resonates quite differently when we learn that Krall/Edison is not a them but an us. When questioning Uhura as to why she sacrificed herself to save Kirk, he taunts her: “You think you know what sacrifice really means. Federation

has taught you that conflict should not exist. Ha! But without struggle, you would never know who you really are." When Sulu tells him that he has "no idea who we are." Krall reveals his plan to attack Yorktown, "Millions of souls from every Federation world holding hands. It's a perfect target." Uhura challenges him: "You're wrong; there is strength in unity." To which Krall counters, "The strength of others, Lieutenant is what has kept me alive" (*Beyond*). And to demonstrate this he transfers the life out of two *Enterprise* crewmembers—one white, one black—to himself through a biotechnological machine.

When voiced by someone/something who appears so completely other to the humanity that Uhura and Sulu represent, these words support the idea of Krall's monstrosity. For here, he is othered not just in his species difference, but by his philosophical view of the world. And this incapacity to recognize their philosophy can be explained by his difference, his otherness. Why would this murderous alien subscribe to the same theory of liberal humanism, of unity, as they do? *Of course*, he has no idea who they really are! But this easy philosophical binary is troubled by the fact that he does know who they are. He *is* who they are. Or is he?

In Krall/Edison we get an unflattering reflection of the Federation. It's Edison's story, the soldier left behind who did what he was supposed to do, protect his crew, and wait for his rescue which never came, that forces us to question the shibboleths on which the Federation depends. Indeed, the mantra of not leaving anyone behind is reiterated several times in the film. Scotty, in trying to encourage Jaylah to join them on their rescue mission, pleads, "Look that's our friends out there, Lassie. We cannae just leave them behind." Bones refuses to beam back to the ship with the majority of the crew until Spock, Uhura, and Kirk are present, exclaiming, "Damn it, man, we're not leaving without them!" Scotty comments to Jaylah that "You're part of something bigger now ... we'll sure as hell never give up on you. That is what being part of a crew is all about" (*Beyond*). And he's right. They don't give up on her; in fact, Kirk, who consistently goes out of his way to save his crew, risks his own safe passage to the ship in order to secure Jaylah's return and her ultimate admission to StarFleet. This stands in stark contrast to Edison's experience, who, though "one of the first heroes of Starfleet," is never rescued.

But the possibility of reading Krall's/Edison's story as a critique of the Federation is withheld by the film as Uhura and Sulu are proved right. They will all work together to secure their rescue; Yorktown will be saved; and Krall's evil counter philosophy will be destroyed. However, what this simple resolution covers over is that it's not Krall that gets destroyed, it's Edison. For by the end of the film, the monster has devolved back to his human form and, dressed in his Starfleet uniform, facing Kirk man to man, captain to captain. Though his body is in human form, Edison's face is not the same; it

is marked by Krall, or the traces of Krall. Narratively, this suggests that the evil is still within Edison and helps explain his desire to destroy Yorktown and provides justification for Kirk's destruction of him. But as the film's disclosure of Krall as Edison demonstrates, Krall never occupied the place of other. Krall was a product of the Federation. And the scarred distorted face that he wears in the final battle with Kirk is the outward manifestation of this betrayal by his own.

However, *Beyond* holds fast to the unassimilable evil and otherness of Krall. The reason that Krall remains effectively othered in the film, and why the sympathetic abandoned soldier narrative and the pointed critique of Starfleet don't prevail is because Krall is doubly othered. He is monstrous *and* black—what monstrosity is to Krall, blackness is to Edison. Idris Elba's blackness, (almost) hidden for the majority of the movie, contributes in definitive ways to the film's reading of Krall as evil and treacherous, and takes on narrative emphasis similar to Cumberbatch's whiteness. Nama has astutely noted that in science fiction, "The black body is a representational canvas coated with signifiers of alien unsightliness, danger, fear, social inferiority, and even transgressive sexuality that evoke a wide range of racial anxieties and cultural politics circulating in American society" (72–73). Just as Edison bears the mark of Krall at the end, retroactively Krall, too, is marked by a black body, and his struggles as an outsider left behind allow for a different reading when his race is taken into account.

### *Fight the Power*

It is telling that Krall speaks only to Uhura, the ship's black communication specialist, about strength and unity. When Syl gives up the Abronath to save Sulu, Krall turns to Uhura and says, "Lieutenant, unity is not your strength, it is your weakness." She is insistent that there is strength in unity, and he is insistent that there is not. Where Uhura speaks of unity, Krall champions sacrifice and struggle. In their first encounter, he practically spits at her: "You think you know what sacrifice really means. Federation has taught you that conflict should not exist. Ha! But without struggle, you would never know who you really are." And in a later scene he reinforces this idea: "The world I was born into was very different from yours, Lieutenant. We knew pain. We knew terror. Struggle made us strong. Not peace. Not unity. These are myths the Federation would have you believe" (*Beyond*). Again, from Krall's mouth, these words highlight his difference and secure him squarely in the box of other. But, when Krall is revealed to be Edison, a black man born a century prior, the words take on a different reading. If we understand, as Roddenberry always intended, that the Federation is a representation for



the United States, it's hard not to read Krall's/Edison's words as a critique of Uhura's racial politics, of her naïve belief in inclusion and colorblindness. Krall repeatedly ties his actions against the Federation to an act of resistance, even using the language of colonized, oppressed peoples to justify his position. As he makes clear to Uhura, "The Federation has pushed the frontier for centuries. But no longer. This is where it begins, Lieutenant. This is where the Frontier pushes back" (*Beyond*).

This reading is further affirmed in the music that Jaylah finds on Edison's ship. Both Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" and Beastie Boys' "Sabotage" figure in prominent ways in the narrative action of the film. Both songs are protest hip hop anthems which challenge establishment views and positions. "Fight the Power" was written for Spike Lee's 1989 film *Do the Right Thing*, which explored racial and ethnic divisions in Brooklyn in the 80s, specifically the ways in which the interests of minorities are pitted against each other; in this case, those of Italians and African Americans. "Fight the Power" functioned as the film's anthem and reinforced the sense of simultaneous racial disenfranchisement of blacks and their strong history of resistance. *Do the Right Thing* culminates in the murder by police of a black character, Radio Raheem, who broadcast the song "Fight the Power" from his boom box wherever he went. In our current climate where black lives are routinely terrorized and taken by police, the choice of "Fight the Power" as one of the key songs in the film is significant. First, it works to "fill in" Edison, to give more weight to his backstory, to tell us something about his politics, not just his music. Public Enemy was known as a "hard-core" rap group, which used its music to comment politically about the treatment of African Americans in U.S. culture and media. That Edison as the captain of the ship brought this music with him "colors" his statements about struggle and resistance, and situates them firmly within a narrative of black power, which is anathema to Uhura's assimilationist philosophy of unity. Second, the song works to further other Edison from the crew of the Enterprise. For the only person who appreciates the song (she likes the "beats and shouting") and perhaps the sentiment, "Fight the Power," is the unconventional Jaylah, who has the audacity to ruffle Kirk by sitting in the USS *Franklin*'s captain's seat.<sup>4</sup> By tying Krall to Edison's black roots, the narrative provides a tacit justification for his betrayal of the Federation and conveniently explains the need for Kirk, the white savior to vanquish him. As Edison makes clear in his final Captain's log, "You'll probably never see me again. But if you do, be ready" (*Beyond*).

Beastie Boys' "Sabotage" is also a protest song, lending further support to Edison's political views. However, in the film Kirk and his crew use the song against Krall to disrupt the swarm pattern of his drones. Sabotage here, far from being an instrument of resistance, is appropriated by the power to quell the opposition. And because the song is already linked to Kirk and his

stealing of his stepfather's car in the first reboot, Kirk's use of the song and the recoding of the nature of sabotage is endorsed by the film.

### *Superhuman Blackness*

*Beyond*, like *Into Darkness*, links anxieties about biotechnology to race. As I've argued above, in its rewriting of the genetically enhanced brown skinned Sikh, Khan Noonien Singh, as white British John Harrison, *Into Darkness* does not simply eradicate the threat the posthuman/superhuman represents to the human, it links that threat to people of color and the fear that they, too, will take over the white race. Teeming hordes of black, brown and yellow skins are revealed to be as existential a threat as the "skin jobs" of science fiction. The representation of this fear is particularly interesting in *Beyond*, where Krall devolves from a techno monster capable of drawing energy from life forms to feed his power into a black human male. The black man, it seems, is even more monstrous than the monster, scarred as he is by his difference and his hatred of the Federation who abandoned him. Krall's biotechnological cannibalism is the epitome of white fear—a racial vampirism that strengthens the black man by weakening the rest. But both *Into Darkness* and *Beyond* eliminate the possibility that raced bodies could inhabit superhuman perfection. Unlike white Khan, whose life-prolonging power renders him beautiful and virile and recognizably human until the end, black Krall/Edison's analogous power makes him monstrous and repulsive, a deformed freakish human at the end. Indeed, "[j]ust beneath the special effects, monster makeup, and futuristic narratives churn and bubble repressed racial conflicts, mythologies, desires, sexual impulses, wishes, and fears" (Nama 72). Contemporary science fiction suggests that these historic fears of the black body take on a new urgency in the age of bioengineering. Rather than dying a forgotten death, Edison chose to fight back by adopting the life-prolonging technology of the indigenous peoples of his adopted planet. And in doing so, he demonstrated the threat that advanced biotechnology represents to whiteness when placed in the hands of people of color. One bioethicist has noted that "'Genetic engineering' is now a slogan used to rally conservative and neoconservative forces against a godless and soulless science.... [C]onservatives, pro-lifers, neoconservatives, and even an odd crew of neogreen thinkers ... see the genetic revolution as holding the seeds of the degradation and destruction of humanity" (Caplan 58). In today's science fiction, racialized biotechnology, whether in the form of AI, cloning, or genetic engineering, operates as a twenty-first century version of scientific racism.

Both *Beyond* and *Into Darkness* link fears of biotechnology to raced bod-

ies and terrorism. As Spock realizes, “Armed with this bio weapon [Krall] could rid [Yorktown] of all life and use the base’s advanced technology to attack an untold number of federation planets” (*Beyond*). Whereas *Into Darkness* consciously avoided associating terrorism with people of color, *Beyond* reaffirms the connection. Krall/Edison attacks Yorktown because he wants to destroy the Federation’s way of life. The name “Yorktown” carries double significance, here: strength by evoking the battle of the successful repulsion of the British by the Americans during the Revolutionary War, and terror by evoking the assault on “American values” represented by the terrorist attack on New York on 9/11 (particularly as Krall’s aircraft crashes into the city). Krall/Edison’s attack on Yorktown secures his position as un-American, or rather it demonstrates that his kind of Americanness, the experience of the disenfranchised minority, is dangerous and must be defeated at all costs. This is apparent in the final battle scene between Krall/Edison and Kirk where the competing philosophies of the two men are fully exposed. Kirk, obviously shocked by the morphing of Krall to Edison, asks Edison what happened to him. On hearing his name again, Edison admits that he’s “missed being me” but has found his purpose, “the means to bring the galaxy back to the struggle that made humanity strong.” When Kirk suggests that he “underestimates humanity,” Edison angrily reminds him that he “fought for humanity. Lost millions to the Xindi and Romulan wars. And for what? For the Federation to sit me in a captain’s chair and break bread with the enemy.” Like Uhura, Kirk embraces a politics of assimilation, “We change, we have to, or we spend the rest of our lives fighting the same battles” (*Beyond*). But it’s clear that to Edison such a politics fails to acknowledge the specificity of his struggle and the fact that the same battles need to be fought. However, here as before, the film pulls back from a sympathetic reading of Edison and instead connects his struggle for justice to violence. Kirk and Edison engage in a battle of good vs. evil, represented as white vs. black. When Kirk tells Edison to give up, Edison makes a pointed comparison between the two men: “What, like you did? I read your ship’s log, Captain James T. Kirk. At least I know what I am. I am a soldier.” Kirk, employing reason to Edison’s passion says “You won the war, Edison. You gave us peace.” Edison responds, “Peace, is not what I was born into” (*Beyond*). And with that, he resumes his efforts to vaporize Yorktown. Rather than explain his defection as a result of his abandonment by the Federation, the film chooses to base it in his preference for fighting over peace—and by implication, in his inherent unfitnes to captain a ship. As the Admiral regretfully makes clear to Kirk, “For decades the Federation taught that he was a hero.” When Krall transitions from the reptilian alien form to a black human form in a Starfleet uniform, the battle between Kirk and Edison takes on a Manichean dimension. When the good and noble white man fights the hateful demonic black man and wins, white superiority is affirmed. Kirk

has the last word: “Better to die saving lives than live with taking them. That is what I was born into” (*Beyond*). And so, the struggle and defeat of Edison has strengthened Kirk’s wavering purpose, demonstrating his ability not just to save his crew, but all of humanity.

While there are moments in *Beyond* where alternatives to hegemonic whiteness can be seen, the film entertains such possibilities only to rearticulate them in the service of the dominant power structure. Although such blatant racial coding would seem anathema to the long-standing philosophy of the *Star Trek* franchise, when viewed in the context of the racial politics of the Obama/Trump era, we get a better understanding of the racism expressed here. By tying racial fears to advances in biotechnology and genetic engineering, *Into Darkness* and *Beyond* engage in a new form of social Darwinism or scientific racism. These films reflect the fact that current concerns about biotechnology intersect with anxieties about race and help explain the new brand of populist conservatism underwritten by race hatred that is the “Trump phenomenon.” If bioengineering attempts to “solve biological problems through the application of technology, including engineering at the molecular and cellular level” (“What is Bioengineering”), these reboots appear to suggest that racial difference is the biological “problem” that bioengineering sets out to solve, and in exploring the ramifications of this, arrive at some frightening conclusions. Both *Into Darkness* and *Beyond* expose a conservative fear that if biotechnology is not controlled, white people will be dominated by racial “others.”

## NOTES

1. Urban Dictionary defines racial fatigue as “Tired of hearing about racial this and racial that.”
2. On August 12, 2017, neo-Nazi and alt-right groups converged on Charlottesville, Virginia, for a “Unite the Right” rally which ended in deadly violence, and prompted the Governor to call for a state of emergency.
3. The plot to kill Khan is complicated somewhat by Admiral Marcus’s subplot to sacrifice Kirk and his crew to the mission so as to avoid detection of his involvement in “weaponizing” Khan.
4. Jaylah is played by the Algerian actress, Sofia Boutella. The alien whitewashing of Boutella’s brown skin has interesting implications for the larger race issues traversing the film. Jaylah is marked as other, not by her skin, but by her identification with Edison’s protest music. However, unlike Edison, she is rescued by the crew and finds a home with them, suggesting that her form of rebelliousness will be contained.

## WORKS CITED

- Bazon, Emily. Interview with Terry Gross. *Fresh Air*, 9 Mar. 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2017/03/09/519415023/what-is-steve-bannon-and-jeff-sessions-shared-vision-for-remaking-america>.
- Beastie Boys. “Sabotage.” *Ill Communication*. Recorded 1994. Capital Records.
- Belcher, Cornell. *A Black Man in the White House: Barack Obama and the Triggering of America’s Racial-Aversion Crisis*. Uptown Professional Press, 2016.

- Blatter, Emily. "Mark Levin: Obama Is 'Soft on Terrorism.'" *CNSNews*, 20 Jun. 2016, <http://www.cnsnews.com/commentary/emily-blatter/mark-levin-obama-soft-terrorism>.
- Caplan, Arthur L. "Revulsion Is Not Enough." *American Journal of Bioethics*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2002, pp. 57–61.
- Do the Right Thing*. Directed by Spike Lee, 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks, 1989.
- Ford, Rebecca. "Hollywood's Casting Blitz: It's All About Diversity in the Wake of #Oscars soweite." *Hollywood Reporter*, 2 Mar. 2016, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/oscarssoweite-spurs-diversity-casting-boom-872005>.
- Fukuyama, Francis. *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*. Picador, 2003.
- Griggs, Brandon. "Internet Trolls Call New 'Star Wars' Movie 'Anti-White.'" *CNN*, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/10/20/entertainment/star-wars-trailer-boycott-anti-white-feat/index.html>.
- Gruttadaro, Andrew. "No POC Deserved to Be Nominated for an Oscar This Year (But That's Not the Point)." *Complex*, 15 Jan. 2016, <http://uk.complex.com/pop-culture/2016/01/oscars-so-white-2016>.
- Jagernauth, Kevin. "Academy Pledges to Double Women and Minority Members by 2020." *Indiewire*. *IndieWire*, 22 Jan. 2016, <http://www.indiewire.com/2016/01/academy-pledges-to-double-women-and-minority-members-by-2020-88234/>.
- James, Edward. "Yellow, Black, Metal, and Tentacled." *Black and Brown Planets*, edited by Isiah Lavender, III, University Press of Mississippi, 2014, pp. 199–222.
- Lavender, Isiah, III. *Race in American Science Fiction*. Indiana University Press, 2011.
- Nama, Adilifu. *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film*. University of Texas Press, 2008.
- O'Connor, Mike. "Liberals in Space: The 1960s Politics of *Star Trek*." *The sixties*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2012, pp. 185–203. Doi: 10.1080/17541328.2012.721584.
- Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States*. 3rd ed. Routledge, 2014.
- Painter, Nell Irvin. "What Whiteness Means in the Trump Era." *New York Times*, 13 Nov. 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/13/opinion/what-whiteness-means-in-the-trump-era.html>.
- Public Enemy. "Fight the Power." *Fear of a Black Planet*. Recorded 1990. Def Jam Recordings.
- Rothstein, Edward. "The U.S.S. Enterprise, in Strange New World of Museum." *New York Times*, 30 May 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/30/arts/design/30star.html>.
- Ryzik, Melena. "J.J. Abrams Takes Steps to Lift Diversity in Filmmaking." *New York Times*, 3 Mar. 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/03/movies/J.J.-abrams-takes-steps-to-lift-diversity-in-filmmaking.html>.
- Sacks, Ethan. "'Star Trek into Darkness' Political Themes Stir Up Controversy." *New York Daily News*, 22 May 2013, <http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/tv-movies/star-trek-darkness-political-themes-stir-controversy-article-1.1351740>.
- Sammy, Marisa. "Star Trek: Into Whiteness." *Racebending*, 9 May 2013, <http://www.racebending.com/v4/featured/star-trek-whiteness/>.
- Stedman, Alex. "Leaked Sony Emails Reveal Jokes About Obama and Race." *Variety*, 10 Dec. 2014, <http://variety.com/2014/biz/news/leaked-sony-emails-reveal-jokes-about-obama-and-race-1201376676/>.
- Stein, Sam. "Donald Trump Suggest Obama May Be Sympathetic to Islamic Terrorism." *Huffington Post*, 13 Jun. 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trump-obama-isis-terrorism\\_us\\_575ea346e4b00f97fba8c1d7](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trump-obama-isis-terrorism_us_575ea346e4b00f97fba8c1d7).
- Sumerau, J., and Sarah L. Jirek. "Post-Apocalyptic Inequalities: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexualities in *Firefly*." *Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Post-Apocalyptic TV and Film*, edited by Barbara Gurr, Palgrave MacMillan, 2015, pp. 71–83.
- Sussman, Dalia. "Negative View of U.S. Race Relations Grows, Poll Finds." *New York Times*, 5 May 2015, [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/05/us/negative-view-of-us-race-relations-grows-poll-finds.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/05/us/negative-view-of-us-race-relations-grows-poll-finds.html?_r=0).
- "What Is Bioengineering?" Bioengineering Department, University of California, Berkeley. 25 Mar. 2017, <http://bioeng.berkeley.edu/about-us/what-is-bioengineering>.

- Zushi, Yo. "Scarlett Johansson in *Ghost in the Shell*: Why Hollywood Whitewashing Isn't Always Racist." *NewStatesman*, 18 May 2016, <http://www.newstatesman.com/Scarlett-Johansson-ghost-shell-whitewashing-racist>.

## STAR TREK MEDIA CITED

- "Space Seed." *Star Trek*, season 1, episode 22, written by Gene L. Coon and Carey Wilber, directed by Marc Daniels, 16 Feb. 1967.
- Star Trek Beyond*. Directed by Justin Lin, Paramount Pictures, 2016.
- Star Trek into Darkness*. Directed by J.J. Abrams, Paramount Pictures, 2013.
- Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*. Directed by Nicholas Meyer, Paramount Pictures, 1982.