‘Into A Mirror Darkly’
Border Crossing and Imperial(ist) Feminism in *Star Trek: Discovery*

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> Through all the good that we are now or could produce, or the evil that we may consciously or unconsciously tolerate, humanity yearns for revelations of itself. With the curiosity of the sentient, we are always fascinated by our reflection and SF provides mirrors that stretch to either end of our existence. (Kerslake, 2007, 1–2)

In this essay, I examine the faces of imperial(ist) feminism as imagined by the CBS series *Star Trek: Discovery* (*DSC*) (2017–ongoing). *DSC* represents several different manifestations of imperial feminism, each of them embodied by one of the show’s primary female characters. In my analysis, I focus on the geographical border crossing in the series and the figurative border crossings it engenders. The most significant geographical border crossing occurs when, in the first season, the crew of the *U.S.S. Discovery* jumps to the so-called Mirror Universe, which is dominated by the fascist Terran Empire, and then returns to the Prime Universe, which in the meantime has been devastated by a war between the Federation and the Klingons. I argue that *DSC* is a feminist text, in which two very different post-feminist futures collide and eventually seep into each other, forcing the female characters to explore what they are willing to do to gain power and to ensure victory for their side. In the future represented by the Mirror Universe, the empowerment of women depends on their integration into totalitarian militaristic structures that rely on openly imperialist and racist ideologies. In the future represented by the Prime Universe, the position of every individual in the United Federation of Planets – regardless of gender or race – is determined by democratic ideals of universal liberty and equality, at least in principle. By contrasting these two possible futures and by intermingling them through instances of border crossing, *DSC* speaks to the idea, expressed by some transnational feminists, that promoting diversity without an explicitly anti-imperialist stance is not enough. What is more, through

its complex treatment of gender politics together with questions of race and imperialism, the series responds to the changed social and political climate in the United States during its production. Specifically, it responds to the return to the mainstream political and cultural arena of discourses promoting ethnic nationalism and white supremacy.

Border Crossing and the Women of *Star Trek*’s Mirror Universe

Gene Roddenberry famously based the original *Star Trek* series (1966–1969) on ideals of equality, universal liberty, and peaceful collaboration.[1] Yet, as scholars have repeatedly pointed out, the franchise – with its premise of a ‘Wagon Train to the Stars’ led by Starfleet, the Federation’s exploration and defense service – undeniably also carries imperialist undertones (cf. Inayatullah, 2003; Kanzler, 2004; Pounds, 2011; Hassler-Forrest, 2016; Cutler-Broyles, 2017). These imperialist undertones are inextricably linked to the recurring theme of geographical border crossing. Border crossing in *Star Trek* is a plot device that opens up new spheres of action for characters but also induces them to cross figurative borders, whether those drawn by official Federation regulations or by personal moral convictions. For female characters in previous *Star Trek* series border crossing has frequently constituted an ambiguous emancipatory gesture, the most famous example being Captain Janeway (Kate Mulgrew) of *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995–2001; cf. Roberts, 2000; Relke, 2006; Dove-Viehbahn, 2007). On the one hand, *U.S.S. Voyager’s* removal to the Delta frees Janeway from Starfleet structures of command and by consequence from the patriarchal logic of earlier *Star Trek* series, situating her instead in what one might call with Teresa de Lauretis ‘patriarchy’s space-off’ (Burnham, 1993, 65). At the same time, this ‘space-off’ literally and figuratively remains a space apart from the common *Star Trek* universe of the Alpha Quadrant. The Mirror Universe too constitutes such a space apart for female characters in *Star Trek*.

The function of the Mirror Universe in *Star Trek* is an ambiguous one, especially when it comes to spatialized representations of women’s emancipation. First introduced in the episode ‘Mirror, Mirror’ of *The Original Series* (*TOS*) during the 1960s, the Mirror Universe in an alternative reality that exists in a parallel dimension relative to the

1 For an examination of the ways in which DSC is connected to and influences by the founding ideals and historical context of the *Star Trek* franchise, see Torsten Kathke’s essay ‘A *Star Trek* About Being *Star Trek*: History, Liberalism, and *Discovery*’s Cold War Roots’ in this volume.

so-called Prime Universe, in which all the *Star Trek* series are set. Among all possible alternative universes, the Mirror Universe is special because references in mirror episodes such as *Deep Space Nine*’s (*DS9*) ‘Shattered Mirror’ or *DSC*’s ‘Vaulting Ambition’ to events from mirror episodes from earlier series indicate that a direct link exists between the Prime Universe and this particular alternative reality. The Mirror Universe is also unique because, as Steffen Hantke argues, ‘at least in its conception,’ it is the ‘diametrical reversal’ (2014, 562) of the Prime Universe. Whether in *TOS*’s ‘Mirror, Mirror’ or in the longer mirror storylines of *DS9* and *DSC*, this logic of reversal has not only provided writers with the opportunity to experiment with ‘dark’ versions of established Prime Universe characters (see the title of the two-part ENT episode ‘In a Mirror Darkly’ alluded to in the essay’s title), it has also allowed them to contrast different political systems and ideologies along with the racial and gender politics underpinning them.

In contrast to the Prime Universe, the Mirror Universe is ruled by the Terran Empire, an ultra-violent, hyper-nationalist and racist totalitarian regime. Ever since *TOS*, representations of the Terran Empire have been Orientalizing and replete with allusions to antiquity as well as the Third Reich (Hantke, 2014, 566), featuring scenes of decadence and violence as well as set and costume design that would be familiar to fans of classical Hollywood sword-and-sandals films. The visual rhetoric of *DSC*’s Mirror Universe, too, borrows from these older filmic traditions. At the same time, it also references more recent depictions of empires on screen. The throne room on the Terran flag ship *I.S.S. Charon*, for example, was not only inspired by the futuristic Bund Finance Center in Shanghai, as noted on *After Trek* (1x12, ‘Episode 12’), it also resembles the throne room of King’s Landing from HBO’s *Game of Thrones* (*GoT*) (2011–2019), creating a design that associates *DSC*’s Terran Empire with one of the U.S.’s greatest non-Western economic rivals as well as with pre-republican royalism. Another similarity between *DSC* and *GoT* is telling in the context of my argument about imperial(ist) feminism: in both shows powerful and outright ruthless women are at the forefront of their respective ‘empires,’ raising questions about female empowerment and the violence necessary to achieve and maintain it.[2]

2 As Dan Hassler-Forrest suggests in his reading of the Star Trek franchise based on Hardt and Negri’s notion of ‘empire’ as the dominant form of global capitalism in the post-industrial era, *TNG* especially, but also the series afterward not only have imperialist undertones, they also ‘illustrate larger tensions specific to capitalism’s transition from imperialism to Empire’ (49) by indulging in a ‘fantasy of peaceful and benevolent imperialism’ (50) that remains moored in a ‘colonialist imperative and the “racist imaginary” it

Women in *Star Trek*’s Mirror Universe have always been depicted as hyper-sexualized versions of their Prime Universe counterparts, as manifested, for example, in the revealing uniforms of female Terran officers in *TOS* and *Star Trek: Enterprise* (*ENT*) (Cutler-Broyles 42; Hantke, 2014, 567). As problematic as such production choices are, representations of female empowerment in the mirror episodes have also helped to expand the repertoire of roles available to women in franchise. While the only woman with a major role in *TOS*’s ‘Mirror Mirror’ is Marlena Moreau (Barbara Luna), Mirror Kirk’s (William Shatner) mistress whose place in the empire’s social and political hierarchy is largely determined by the logics of heteropatriarchy, the Mirror episodes of *ENT* and *DS9* depict female characters who are not merely ‘captain’s women’ but female rulers. Both Terran Empress Hoshi Sato (Linda Park) of *ENT* and Bajoran Alliance Intendant Kira Nerys (Nana Visitor) of *DS9* use sex as well as murder to secure positions of power for themselves, pointing to the possibilities but also the limits of female agency in the Mirror Universe (Kanzler, 2004, 206–07). Mirror Hoshi – presented as a mixture of captain’s woman and regular Terran officer – claims her title of empress after poisoning her lover Mirror Archer (Scott Bakula) in bed. Mirror Kira of *DS9* also attains and maintains power through a mixture of sexual(ized) manipulation and violence. Usually dressed in dominatrix-style outfits, openly bisexual, and aggressively assertive, she is representative for how non-heteronormative sexualities are deployed as signs of moral deviance in *Star Trek*’s mirror episodes (Cutler- Broyles, 2017, 42). This problematic conflation of female dominance with queerness, and of queerness with sadistic tendencies is also taken up in a brothel scene in *DSC* in which the leather-clad Terran Emperor Georgiou (Michelle Yeoh) is shown in bed with a male and a female Orion sex worker (1x15, ‘Will You Take My Hand’). While discussing payments for services rendered, Mirror Georgiou suddenly knocks the male Orion unconscious, before choking his female companion at gun point in order extort a piece of information that she is unlikely to possess. Like the other female rulers from the Mirror Universe, Emperor Georgiou not only relies on sex as a tool to advance her political goals, she mixes sex and violence in ways that cast her as a dubious role model for female empowerment. While the mirror episodes thus show independent and empowered women, these representations remain limited and limiting,

articulates’ (50, quoting Golumbia, 91). Although *DSC* engages with precisely these imperatives more critically than previous series, I would suggest, it cannot completely untangle itself from them, especially in its depictions of the Mirror Universe and the Klingons.

because they stigmatize non-heteronormative forms of sexuality (for example by conflating consensual BDSM practices with non-consensual inflictions of pain) and consistently sexualize female agency. In the case of Empress Hoshi Sato and Emperor Georgiou, two characters played by actors of Asian descent, such depictions are particularly problematic, because even though the characters’ sexual self-determination subverts Orientalist stereotypes of Asian women as passive sex objects, their hypersexualization perpetuates racist and indeed imperialist (feminist) fantasies prevalent in both science fiction and beyond.

Scholars discussing the politics of the Mirror Universe usually argue that it serves as a foil against which the defining values of the Prime Universe can be measured (Hantke, 2014, 562; Hassler-Forrest, 2016, 56; Cutler-Broyles, 2017, 42). If the Terran Empire is an ultra-violent, hyper-nationalist, militaristic, imperialist, sexist, and racist totalitarian regime, so the theory goes, the Federation should appear as non-violent, non-nationalist, non-militaristic, non-imperialist, non-sexist, non-racist, and democratic. Of course, things are more complicated in *Star Trek*, especially in the later series. In his essay on representations of militarism in selected Mirror episodes, Steffen Hantke writes: ‘If *Star Trek* disavows, denies, or rejects militarism, then these episodes offer a space in which the rules of repression are temporarily suspended’ (2014, 563). If we examine the Mirror Universe, he argues, U.S. militarism emerges as a recurring theme in the franchise at large (Hantke, 2014, 566). The same logic applies to the themes of imperialism and racism, or expansionist and ethnic nationalism, I argue. Because the Mirror Universe is overtly imperialist and racist, imperialism and racism also deserve close examination in the Prime Universe. This is especially true for *DSC*, which employs the theme of travel between the two universes as one of the main plot elements of season one and continues to examine the aftereffects of the characters’ geographical and moral border crossings well into season two. Rather than keeping Prime and Mirror Universe strictly apart by promptly restoring all inter-dimensional border crossers to their original dimension – as previous series did – *DSC* intermingles the two universes more permanently. Because of this lasting entanglement and the positions the show’s main female characters occupy in the two entangled universes, *DSC* invites investigation of the complex relationship between feminism, imperialism, and racism in the *Star Trek* universe and, by extension, in contemporary U.S. society and culture, from which the show draws and which it comments on.

Border Crossing and the Imperial(ist) Feminism(s) of *Star Trek: Discovery*

Feminist critics have long discussed social and cultural border crossing – along with theoretical and conceptual border crossing – as a means of rethinking and challenging structures of oppression and hierarchies of power. Sometimes, though not always, they have considered these figurative border crossings in relation to geographical border crossing. Chicana, post-colonial, and transnational feminists such as Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (1994), or the feminist collaborative H.J. Kim-Puri (2005) suggest that the movements of people, goods, and ideas across literal and figurative borders – as well as blockages of such movements – raise important questions about the ways in which discourses on race and gender in the United States and elsewhere are shaped by (neo-)colonialist and imperialist ideologies and practices. Scholars such as Chandra Mohanty (2003) further suggest that analyses of border crossing and how it is policed reveals the complicity of mainstream Euro-American feminism with those political, economic, social, and cultural processes that perpetuate racial inequalities on a national as well as on a global scale. If it fails to address the complex relationships between imperialism, nationalism, global inequalities, and racial injustice, this scholarship suggests, the mainstream feminism practiced by many white, liberal, first-world feminists may be understood as a present-day manifestation of what black British feminists Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar describe as ‘imperial feminism’ (53).

In their 1984 essay ‘Challenging Imperial Feminism,’ Amos and Parmar denounce ‘the ways in which a particular tradition, white Eurocentric and Western, has sought to establish itself as the only legitimate feminism’ (3). They stress that ‘[t]he “herstory” which white women use to trace the roots of women’s oppression… is an *imperial history* rooted in the prejudices of colonial and neo-colonial periods’ (5; emphasis added). Feminist analyses of imperial feminism and its legacies frequently concern the past, such as when Lora Wildenthal draws on Amos and Parmar to explicate the imperial feminism of German colonialist Frieda von Bülow, hinting at the historical continuities between the racist ideologies that fuel imperialist projects and the kind of ethnic nationalism that tends to form the basis of totalitarian and fascist regimes, whether in the past or today.[3] Referencing Grewal and

3 For a more detailed description of the historical continuities between the racial politics of German imperialism and the genocidal politics of German fascism, continuities that are also implied in *DSC*, see Fatima El Tayeb’s

Mohanty, among others, media scholar Deepa Kumar discusses the nature of ‘imperialist feminism’ in the twenty-first century. According to Kumar,

> the logic of imperialist feminism in the twenty-first century… [is] shaped by the deeply racist framework of the ‘clash of civilizations,’ which is based on the idea that the West is a superior culture because it believes in democracy, human rights, secularism, women’s rights, gay rights, freedom of speech, and a whole host of other liberal values, whereas the Global South is barbaric, misogynistic, driven by religion, and illiberal. (2006)

While the Mirror Universe storyline in *DSC* also allows for a discussion of imperial feminism in the traditional sense, the storyline surrounding the Klingon–Federation war and its aftermath evokes precisely the kind of ‘clash of civilizations’ Kumar evokes here. When she notes in her article that ‘today, empire is still a masculine and sexist enterprise, but what has changed in the twenty-first century is that there is now a “place for women”’ (2006), this is all the more true for the twenty-third century of *DSC*. More even, because the cast of the show is so racially diverse, an analysis of imperali(ist) feminism(s) in *DSC* must consider, as Kumar does, that ‘even with women and people of color at the helm of empire, racism and sexism still remain central to the imperial mission.’

When discussing the link between imperialism and feminism in *DSC*, maybe the obvious place to start is the character of Terran Emperor Philippa Georgiou, a fierce and extremely dangerous woman who has ascended to the highest positions of power in the Mirror Universe by playing by its brutal rules. Known as ‘her most Imperial Majesty, Mother of the Fatherland, Overlord of Vulcan, Dominus of Qo’noS, [and] Regina Andor’ (1x12, ‘Vaulting Ambition’), she mercilessly persecutes the enemies of the empire and grounds her right to rule in her own strength and ability to lead as well as in an ideology of Terran racial superiority. This ideology claims human supremacy over alien races, including the Vulcans, Klingons, and Andorians, whose home worlds the emperor controls. Notions of racial superiority govern everyday social relations in the Terran Empire, where all non-humans are barred from higher offices and where Kelpiens, a gentle and peaceful alien species, are either slaves or treated as animals of slaughter (1x12). Terran ideas of human supremacy and expansive nationalism also translate into direct

essay ‘Dangerous Liaisons: Race, Nation, and German Identity’ from the edited collection *Not so Plain as Black and White* (2010).

political action, as indicated by ‘Terran General Order 4’: ‘Any *exotic species* deemed a threat to the Imperial Supremacy will be extinguished without prejudice’ (1x12; emphasis added). The Terran imperialism that Emperor Georgiou promotes specifically targets ‘exotic species’ and thus openly acknowledges the racist ideologies on which it is premised and the horrendous acts of violence it uses to enforces its goals.

The Terran Empire’s expansionist ethnic nationalism is also addressed in a scene of episode 1x13 (‘What is Past is Prologue’), in which Emperor Georgiou is confronted by her most dangerous competitor, Mirror Lorca (Jason Isaacs). In the middle of staging a coup, Mirror Lorca tries to convince the imperial troops to switch sides by taunting the emperor over the ship-wide comm system:

> Hello Philippa. I’ve watched for years; you let *alien races spill over the borders*, flourish in our backyard, then have the gall to incite rebellion. The Terrans need *a leader who will preserve* our way of life, *our race*. Try as you might, it’s clearly not you. … To all, I make this offer: renounce Georgiou. The Empire is dying in her hands. But you don’t have to… [T]ogether [we] will make the Empire …[pause]… glorious again! (1x13; emphasis added)

The rhetoric Mirror Lorca uses in this scene to describe the alien species rebelling against Terran rule has a variety of historical precedents. Yet, it also specifically alludes to the rising racist and anti-immigrant sentiments in the United States during the production of seasons one and two of *DSC*.[4] The last sentence of the quoted passage for instance echoes the infamous slogan of Trump’s 2016 U.S. presidential campaign and subsequent presidency: ‘Make America great again.’ Indeed, the racist sentiment expressed by Mirror Lorca is not at all as far removed from the political rhetoric of the 45th president of the United States as one

4 Jason Isaacs, who plays Mirror Lorca on the show, has repeatedly suggested that the Mirror Universe, as it is scripted in *DSC*, is ‘an all too imaginable version of the present’ (1x12, ‘After Trek’). In an interview with *Inverse*, he elaborates on this idea, alluding specifically to his monologue in ‘What is Past is Prologue’: ‘[The Mirror Universe] is a world where some people believe in racial purity and are against immigration, and they think it’s okay to lie to get what you want, and that in the end the weak should be treated harshly. Sadly, those views are prevalent in the world today, and in fact there are people in seats of power who espouse those views every day’ (Britt, n.p.). For further analysis of Lorca and the imperialist and toxic masculinity he presents, see Sabrina Mittermeier and Jenny Volkmer’s essay on questions of masculinity in their contribution to this volume.

would hope, given that the quoted *DSC* character is a Terran sociopath from a universe in which everybody in pursuit or positions of power is manifestly evil. I will come back to *DSC*’s commentary on the larger political context of its production at the end of this essay. For now, let me emphasize that the above scene depicts a direct confrontation between the female leader of a brutal imperialist regime and her most formidable male rival. If Emperor Georgiou has failed the empire, as her opponent alleges, it is not because she did not ruthlessly enforce Terran rule and its underlying ideals of human supremacy. After all, she is responsible for the destruction of the Klingon homeworld and thus for the near extermination of the empire’s most formidable enemy. Mirror Georgiou has risen in the ranks of the Terran Empire because she has not only played by its rules but excelled in the game. The imperial feminism she represents is one in which women are willing to do whatever is necessary to gain a seat at the table. As suggested by her honorary title ‘Mother of the Fatherland,’ Emperor Georgiou’s brand of imperial feminism is one in which women assume positions of power by exhibiting an imperialist femininity that rivals or even surpasses the imperialist and racist masculinity that informs all social relations and political structures in the Terran Empire.

All would be well according to the traditional logic of *Star Trek* if Emperor Georgiou remained in the Mirror Universe, serving as a concrete yet safely distant example of everything that Starfleet is supposed to fight and stand against. Yet, Mirror Georgiou crosses over into the Prime Universe with the help of Michael Burnham (Sonequa Martin-Green), where she remains, eventually joining Section 31, a Starfleet special operations organization that does not adhere to Federation principles.[5] Specialist Michael Burnham, the tortured hero of the series, travels to the Mirror Universe onboard the science vessel *U.S.S. Discovery*, which jumps there using an experimental spore drive that was developed by Starfleet in an effort to gain the upper hand in a gruesome war between the Federation and the Klingon Empire caused by Burnham. Arriving in the Mirror Universe, Burnham realizes not only that her mirror counterpart is presumed dead, she is also the adoptive daughter of Emperor Georgiou.[6] In an attempt to find information that

5 Early in 2019, CBS announced a *DSC* spin-off focusing on Emperor Georgiou’s work for Section 31, while also indicating that the Terran character would continue to appear in future *DSC* seasons.

6 The DSC comic Succession (2018) reveals that Mirror Burnham is only in hiding, but returns to take her adoptive mother’s place as Terran emperor once Mirror Georgiou has crossed over into the Prime Universe. According to the comic, Mirror Burnham dies, along with the entire Terran population

will allow the crew of the *Discovery* to return home, Prime Burnham is forced to pose as the emperor’s lost daughter. Before she is invited to the imperial palace, however, Burnham has to go undercover on one of the flagships of the imperial Terran fleet. In a voice-over overlaying a series of scenes that show her daily routine as the captain of the *I.S.S. Shenzou*, Prime Burnham expresses concern that impersonating a high-ranking Terran officer will eventually destroy her. While the audience observes as Burnham is given a bath by the enslaved Mirror Saru (Doug Jones) or attending the execution of three crew members found ‘guilty of malicious thoughts against [their] emperor’ (Mirror Detmer (Emily Coutts), ‘The Wolf Inside’ 1x11), Burnham reflects:

> It’s been two days. But they’re already inside my head. Every moment is a test. Can you bury your heart? Can you hide your decency? Can you continue to pretend to be one of them? Even as, little by little, it kills the person you really are?…[AQ40] I’ve continued to study their ways, read all that I can. It’s getting easier to pass. Which is exactly what I feared the most. (1x11)

Forced to watch Burnham participate in the horrible yet ordinary routines of a Terran captain and seeing her follow Terran laws and societal conventions, the audience is given a sense of the danger of the kind of habitual normalization that comes with long-term exposure to an elaborate system of oppression. Only the painfully controlled voice-over reminds viewers that what they are witnessing is Burnham’s desperate struggle to maintain her identity and moral integrity. When she refuses to bomb a rebel camp against the emperor’s explicit orders risking to be executed as a traitor, a parallel to *TOS*’s ‘Mirror, Mirror,’ she demonstrates that her struggle is successful and that she really believes that it is ‘[b]etter [to be] dead than one of them’ (Burnham, 1x11). Burnam’s tragic flaw, the series reveals, is not a lack of moral conviction; it is an excess of it and the consequent overwhelming desire to right past wrongs. Because Burnham feels guilty for the death of her mentor Captain Georgiou, she falls under the influence of Mirror Georgiou and takes the emperor along when the *Discovery* returns to its own dimension. While she thus resists her own integration into Terran imperialist structures, she helps a Terran cross-over into the Prime Universe who is well versed in the practical implementation of imperialist ideologies. Although she eventually prevents Mirror Georgiou from committing

of the imperial capital, when the technologically enhanced Mirror Airiam releases a toxin targeting only human beings.

yet another act of mass murder, Burnham represents a feminism that becomes temporarily complicit with the imperialist project. It is complicit because it fails to oppose imperialism’s agents due to personal allegiances and because of a temporary overlap of goals (though not of means), here stopping the Federation’s war with the Klingons.

Cadet Sylvia Tilly (Mary Wiseman), an ambitious young science officer stationed on the *Discovery*, represents a different version of this kind of feminism that becomes temporarily complicit with imperialist ideologies. Like Burnham, she has to impersonate her alter ego from the Mirror Universe in order to help her ship escape detection from Terran forces. Mirror Tilly, Terran records show, has ‘gained the rank of captain by stabbing [her] previous superior in bed’ and is known among the anti-Terran rebels as ‘[t]he Slayer of Sorna Prime’ and ‘[t]he Witch of Wurna Minor’ (‘Despite Yourself,’ 1x10). Facing herself in a mirror after she has changed into Terran uniform, Prime Tilly is both ‘terrified’ and ‘excited’ (1x10) about the prospect of having to pose as the *Discovery*’s captain. Although Tilly ensures Burnham that she is ‘nothing like her [counterpart]’ who is ‘a twisted version of everything [she has] ever aspired to be’ (1x10), being captain is precisely what Prime Tilly has always wanted. Indeed, during one of her first conversations with Burnham she tells her new roommate: ‘Here’s a thing most people don’t know about me: I’m gonna be a captain someday’ (‘Context is for Kings’ 1x03). Likely because she has imagined herself in the captain’s chair countless times before, Tilly seems surprisingly at ease, when she first takes over command, exchanging verbal blows with the captain of the Terran starship *Cooper*. While Burnham suffers immensely during her undercover operation on the *I.S.S. Shenzou*, Tilly – in her much safer position on the disguised *U.S.S Discovery* – enjoys her temporary promotion. She enjoys the (illusion of) power that the Mirror Universe offers a young woman like herself and thrives under the recognition she receives for playing her part convincingly. Back in the Prime Universe, she continues to crave this recognition and thus agrees to accompany Mirror Georgiou on her secret mission to Qo’noS, flattered by the potential the emperor sees in her. Although she, too, turns against the emperor as soon as she learns about Georgiou’s plan to destroy Qo’noS, Tilly represents a feminism that is in constant danger of being seduced by the fantasies of individual superiority and promises of personal success that a racist system offers to those who feel presently disempowered, yet destined for greatness.

Ideas of collective rather than individual superiority and promises of collective rather than personal success are what lead Admiral Katrina Cornwell (Jayne Brook) to embrace Terran ideologies and practices.

Cornwell never crosses over into the Mirror Universe, but instead spends several weeks as a prisoner of the Klingon Empire before she is rescued by the crew of the *Discovery*. Deeply affected by this experience, she is willing to cross more and more figurative borders as the Federation- Klingon war begins to escalate. Witnessing the Klingon take-over of Federation space and devastating Klingon attacks on civilian Federation targets, the survivors of Starfleet command – represented in the series by Admiral Cornwell and Ambassador Sarek (James Frain) – consider all means appropriate to protect Earth. When the *U.S.S. Discovery* returns to the Prime Universe with Mirror Georgiou on board, they allow her to take the position of her prime counterpart, hoping that the emperor’s experience in defeating the Klingons will give the Federation an advantage in the war. Here is how Cornwell explains the situation to the crew of the *Discovery* in the tellingly entitled episode ‘The War Without, the War Within’:

> We have all mourned the enormous loss of life due to this war. The acts of violence committed against us are the acts of *a foe without reason*, without honor. And they will not stop coming after us in the hopes of *destroying everything that we hold dear*. These are *desperate times* and they call on us to do more than merely protect our people, defend our borders. (1x14; emphasis added)

Using emotionally charged language reminiscent of the rhetoric used by the Bush administration after the attacks of 9/11 to justify the War on Terror, Cornwell demonizes the Klingons and argues that the Federation must temporarily abandon its principles, eventually ordering the *Discovery* to take the fight to the ‘Klingon homeworld.’ By helping to enlist Emperor Georgiou, Cornwell allows the Federation to enter into an alliance with a fascist leader and mass murderer who, at least in theory, represents everything that is antithetical to Starfleet’s core values. Cornwell knows very well that Emperor Georgiou is not headed to Qo’noS ‘to map its surface and isolate vulnerabilities and military targets’ (1x14). In exchange for her freedom, the Terran Emperor has offered to destroy the Klingons’ home planet just like she did in her own universe. By condoning Mirror Georgiou’s integration into Starfleet (and later into Section 31), Cornwell also condones Terran ideologies and practices. If Mirror Georgiou’s belief in human supremacy comes from elsewhere, Cornwell’s brand of imperial feminism is decidedly home-grown. By making room for the emperor in the Prime Universe, rather than detaining her or returning her to the Mirror Universe,

Cornwell becomes representative of a feminism that tolerates and even embraces imperialist ideologies in a situation of crisis.

When Cornwell speaks about the Klingon–Federation war, she implies that the Klingons have been the aggressors, while the Federation has merely been trying to defend itself. Yet, *DSC* also suggests that the war may at least in part have been caused by the Federation’s unacknowledged imperialist tendencies. Such an interpretation is suggested not only by T’Kuvma’s (Chris Obi) opening monologue in 1x01 (‘The Vulcan Hello’), in which he urges the Klingons to join forces against an ever-expanding Federation, but also by the conversation between Cornwell and another strong female character: L’Rell (Mary Chieffo), a female Klingon who is captured by/ defects to the Federation. Visiting L’Rell in her holding cell on the *Discovery*, Cornwell is desperate to know why the Klingons ‘target civilians, hospitals, [and] food convoys’ and ‘slaughter innocents’ in their fight against the Federation, upon which L’Rell echoes T’Kuvma’s speech by replying scornfully that her people ‘fight to preserve Klingon identity’ (1x14). Cornwell dismisses this explanation, claiming that ‘[n]o one is looking to destroy [Klingon] culture’ because ‘[Federation] laws are founded in equality… freedom.’ L’Rell once more objects, arguing instead that ‘the Federation… seeks universal homogenization and assimilation.’ What becomes apparent in this scene is a clash of cultures. L’Rell hints at the fact that the war with the Federation is a desirable state for Klingons, while a peace treaty would be viewed as assimilation and thus as proof of the very loss of identity the Klingons try to prevent by fighting the war. For the Klingons fighting the Federation *is* preserving Klingon culture, regardless of the war’s outcome. Cornwell’s dismissal of L’Rell’s argument is valid only from a human-centric perspective that presumes that the ideal of peaceful co-existence promoted by the Federation (if necessary by war) is a universally acknowledged value. Although the admiral’s desire to end the bloodshed is understandable (from a human point of view), the assumption that Federation values are necessarily the ones by which all species in the Alpha Quadrant should live follows a logic of cultural imperialism. In the symbolic confrontations between Cornwell and L’Rell throughout season one of *DSC*, Cornwell can be said to embody a culturally imperialist power that insists on the superiority of its principles and seeks to enforce them by all means necessary. As a woman who holds one of the highest positions of power in the Federation, Cornwell represents a feminism that embraces cultural imperialism (turned imperialism), effectively discounting the values and thus to some extent the value of the racialized Other that the Klingons represent in the *Star Trek* universe.

Othering, Racialization and Imperialist Feminism in *Star Trek: Discovery*

One of the reasons why a reading of the Federation as a (culturally) imperialist power suggests itself in *DSC* is because the series uses filmic strategies of (racial) Othering when depicting the Federation’s enemies, whether in the Mirror or in the Prime Universe. Put differently, it inscribes into the show, at least initially, what film scholar E. Ann Kaplan in drawing from Laura Mulvey has famously described as an ‘imperial gaze’ (*Looking for the Other*, 1997), that is, a viewing position that reproduces a racist, colonial imagination in its depiction of the Other. Like its predecessors, *DSC* exoticizes Terrans and racializes Klingons, while at the same time using *Star Trek*’s potential for multilayered representations of cultural identity and race to call racial hierarchies and racialized notions of cultural difference into question. The highly diverse cast together with the Mirror Universe plot of *DSC* complicates the representation of female characters of color, exploring their place in the different imperialist projects depicted in the series, whether that of the Terran Empire, the Klingon Empire, or indeed that of the Federation.

Whether in the Prime Universe or the Mirror Universe, the word ‘race’ is only used in *DSC* to distinguish the human ‘race’ from other alien species, not in order to differentiate between and discriminate against certain individuals or groups based on skin color. Yet, the show’s producers and writers also play with the fact that this second sense of the word ‘race’ has always operated as a subtext in conversations about different alien ‘races’ in *Star Trek* (cf. Bernardi, 1998; Roberts, 2000; Kanzler, 2004; Pounds, 2011; Scodari, 2012). In a notable exchange between Michael Burnham and Admiral Brett Anderson (Terry Serpico) during *DSC*’s first episode, the admiral admonishes Burnham for suggesting that the Klingons are ‘relentlessly hostile’ because it is ‘in their nature’ (1x01), suggesting that she should be ‘the last person to make assumptions based on race’ given her own ‘background.’[7] Since humanity in the twenty-third century has abandoned the idea of multiple human ‘races,’ Anderson here refers to Burnham’s adoption by a mixed Vulcan–Human couple. Yet, because Michael Burnham is played by black actress Sonequa Martin-Green and because Admiral Anderson’s whiteness is particularly emphasized in this scene – he appears in it as a pale projection of light – their exchange does more than to insist that

7 Whit Frazier Peterson also addresses this exchange in his essay ‘The Cotton-Gin Effect: An Afrofuturist Reading of Star Trek: Discovery’ published in this volume.

‘it would be unwise to confuse race and culture’ (1x01) when trying to understand the behavioral differences between humans and Klingons. The scene also reminds the audience that ‘race’ as a social category defined by skin color is not a matter of biology, but a cultural construct used to enforce power hierarchies and to legitimate oppression. As the series shows, racialized notions of cultural difference can be used to fuel imperialist ideologies. The concrete effects of such ideologies include both the extermination campaign the Terran Empire conducts against the non-human rebels in the Mirror Universe and the war the Federation wages against the Klingons in the Prime Universe.

Othering and racialization are most obviously at play in *DSC*’s depiction of the Klingons. From the moment the Klingons appear in the series, they are marked as ‘racial others’ who subscribe to utterly different values than the Federation. As indicated earlier, the audience first encounters the Klingons when T’Kuvma urges his fellow Klingons to take up arms against the Federation in the very first scene of the show. As the camera gradually zooms out from T’Kuvma’s eye to his face and upper body, the viewers’ attention is directed first at a fiery, yet human- looking eye, then at the Klingon’s oily black skin, thick lips, and pointed teeth, and finally at his elongated, hairless head covered in bone-ridges. Like the other Klingon warriors surrounding him, T’Kuvma appears both monstrously human and exaggeratedly inhuman, a depiction that harks back to the racist representations of Klingons in earlier *Stark Trek* series. Due to this history and the even longer Euro-American tradition of racializing enemies on screen, filmic clues such as dark skin, aggressive- sounding foreign speech, or scenes like the one later in the first episode, in which the Klingons gather around the open sarcophagus of a fallen warrior wrapped in cloth like an Egyptian mummy, remain powerful signifiers of racialized difference. Despite their changed design, then, the Klingons in *DSC* are still cast as racial Others.[8]

However, the Klingons are not only racialized; the show also relies on strategies of Othering and on a racialization of *cultural* difference to define Klingon identity and their relationship to the Federation. Indeed, T’Kuvma claims that the Federation does not merely endanger Klingon sovereignty and identity, but that ‘[Klingon] purity is a threat to them,’ which is why ‘[t]hey wish to drag [the Klingon Empire] into the muck, where humans, Vulcans, Tellarites, and filthy Andorians mix’ (1x02, ‘Battle at the Binary Stars’). T’Kuvma’s explicitly racist rhetoric of ‘purity’ in this speech betrays a biological understanding of ‘race’

8 Diana A. Mafe also makes this point in an interview published in this volume.

linked to the expansive ‘Klingon supremacy’ (1x02) he promotes. This is also why it is significant that L’Rell’s comments about Klingon identity in her conversation with Cornwell refer primarily to an incompatibility of cultures (1x14). Distancing herself from T’Kuvma as well as from his successor, General Kol (Kenneth Mitchell), who – like the former – insists on expansive ‘Klingon Supremacy’ (T’Kuvma, 1x02, ‘Battle at the Binary Stars’; Kol, 1x08, ‘Si Vis Pacem, Para Bellum’), L’Rell demonstrates why she becomes the Klingon leader who manages to unite the warring houses *and* make peace with the Federation in season two of the series. One could even go so far as to suggest that she succeeds because she abandons the racist ideologies of the Klingon Empire and becomes, by Klingon standards at least, a representative of anti-imperialist feminism.

Because of the narrative structure of the first season of *DSC*, the representation of the Klingon Empire shares certain similarities with that of the Terran Empire. Like the Klingons of the Prime Universe, Terrans are almost exclusively depicted infighting, torturing prisoners, attacking civilian settlements and rebel camps, preparing for war, or engaging in battle. Only a few Klingon and Terran characters, such as L’Rell, Voq, Emperor Georgiou, and Mirror Lorca, are shown in other social settings, allowing them to become more fully rounded, complex characters. While costume and set designs for the Mirror Universe have included Orientalist elements, Terrans have never been racialized in the same ways as the Klingons. Still, the Terran Empire’s brutal enforcement of human supremacy points to white supremacy as one of the pillars of Terran imperialist ideology. Its function as the Federation’s mirror image consequently raises questions about *Star Trek*’s tendency to depict Starfleet as a predominantly (though never exclusively) human organization and human Starfleet officers as predominantly (though never exclusively) white. The fact that *DSC* features the most diverse cast as well as the most elaborate Mirror Universe plot in *Star Trek* history complicates its engagement with issues of race, gender, and imperialism. When the *Discovery* crosses over into Mirror Universe, the show not only places several characters played by actors of color in an utterly xenophobic and racist society, it imagines some of them as very productive members of that society. For the purpose of this article, I will suggest what this means for the negotiation of the imperial(ist) feminisms of the three main female characters who cross from one universe into the other and end up impersonating their respective alter egos: Sylvia Tilly, Michael Burnham, and Emperor Georgiou.

From what the audience learns about her, Tilly arrives at her post on the *Discovery* armed with a nearly indestructible faith in the inherent goodness of people and the conviction that she will rise in the ranks of

Starfleet once she gets a chance to prove herself. The chance presents itself to her first when she has to impersonate ‘Captain Killy’ to protect her crew from the Terran forces and later when she joins Emperor Georgiou’s secret mission to Qo’noS. While Tilly is certainly incredibly smart and works hard for her goals, she is also not burdened by the obstacles Burnham has had to confront since childhood. Put differently, Tilly begins her career in Starfleet from a position of privilege that is the result of her unquestionable (one might argue excessive) humanness/humanity, a humanness/humanity that is coded as whiteness in the *Star Trek* franchise. Although she critically reflects on the dangerous appeal of Terran (read human/white) supremacy, suggesting that ‘the only way we can stop ourselves from becoming them is to understand the darkness within us and fight it’ (1x14), she nonetheless profits from the possibilities the Terran Empire opens for her. Indeed, Tilly’s flirtation with the imperial(ist) feminism of her Mirror Universe counterpart is only possible, I would argue, because of her humanness (whiteness). I do not mean to deny that Tilly is compassionate and brilliant. But, ultimately, the fact that she resists the temptation of becoming ‘Killy’ and rejects Emperor Georgiou as a role model after she uncovers her genocidal plans is enough to proof that she deserves a place in Starfleet’s command training program and thus the chance of one day occupying one of the most powerful positions in the Federation. For other characters on the show, most notably Michael Burnham, the bar is set much higher.

In contrast to Tilly’s experiences on the *Discovery*, Burnham’s time in Starfleet is marked by an ongoing struggle to be(come) fully human. At first, she is an outsider because of her Vulcan upbringing, which keeps her from integrating into the primarily human crew of the *Shenzhou*. Then she loses her position, because her Vulcan upbringing together with the trauma of having been orphaned by a Klingon attack cause her to mutiny, a moment’s decision with catastrophic longterm consequences. In order to be successful, Burnham must survive a series of harrowing trials, proving that she is human and can be, despite her Vulcan mindset and very human flaws, a worthy member of Starfleet. After her return from the Mirror Universe, her devotion to Starfleet’s core principles is tested yet again, when she must oppose Starfleet command’s plan to sacrifice Qo’noS to end the war with the Klingons. She even suggests a collaboration with L’Rell, effectively installing her as the new leader of the Klingons. Tilly learns from her time in the Mirror Universe that she can be what she has always hoped to be, but that rising in the ranks of Starfleet is only desirable if the organization and each officer in it, but especially the most privileged ones, continually work to resist the pull of a supremacist logic. Burnham learns that she can succeed

to do so by embracing both her Vulcan upbringing and her humanity. Their brush with Terran racist ideologies and their ultimate rejection of these ideologies teaches both women valuable lessons. However, their very different learning processes also illustrate that some people have to work much harder to achieve what others are granted primarily by virtue of their birth. Anti-imperialist (and anti-racist) feminism has to account for these differences.

Because Emperor Georgiou is played by Chinese-Malaysian actress Michelle Yeoh, her role in *DSC* most drastically expresses the particular paradox of twenty-first century imperali(ist) feminism as Deepa Kumar describes it. Like Empress Sato before her, Mirror Georgiou is both an exoticized (human) Other and the ruler of a fascist empire that strives for complete domination of all racialized (alien) Others: she is literally a woman of color ‘at the helm of empire’ (Kumar, 2006). More than that, because she crosses over into the Prime Universe and remains there, she embodies the very real danger of a return of imperialist and racist ideologies to a society like the Federation that claims to reject imperialism and discrimination of all kinds and instead prides itself on defending individual freedom, liberty, and equality at all costs. This danger is further underlined by the fact that Mirror Georgiou becomes a leading figure in Section 31 precisely at the moment when this autonomous intelligence agency is increasingly at odds with Starfleet regulations and Federation values, eventually turning into an independent secret police that uses assassination, torture, and mass murder to protect the Federation (*DS9* 6x19, ‘Inquisition’), tactics suspiciously similar to those employed in the Mirror Universe. Read as a comment on current political developments and debates, the figure of Emperor Georgiou, like that of Mirror Lorca who lives undetected in the Prime Universe for several months, is suggestive of the resurgence of racist, nationalist, and imperialist views in the United States before and during *DSC*’s production. Unlike Lorca, who, despite his Hispanic name, represents the kind of white masculinity commonly associated with imperialism, the figure of Emperor Georgiou draws attention to the active role of women in imperialist projects of the past and present. What is more, her character points to the fact that even women of color (in positions of power or privilege) can become complicit in the very structures of oppression that marginalize them. While *DSC* suggests that imperialism and the ideologies of imperial(ist) feminism will always be more seductive and immediately rewarding for white women like Tilly and Cornwell, it implies that women of color can become agents of empire, too. In the end, Michael Burnham is the show’s hero because she challenges imperialist ideologies and the racist logic that accompanies

them from within a system that puts her as a woman of color/human raised in a mixed-species household at considerable disadvantage. Even in a time of uttermost political and personal crisis, she resists the imperialist (feminist) worldview according to which the ‘alien’ Other is an enemy whose very nature justifies domination and destruction. Burnham resists this logic and so must we.

Conclusion

The Cold War *Star Trek* series presented Terran imperialism, hypernationalism, and racism as ideologies that could easily be contained and resisted as long as the crew members who crossed over into the Mirror Universe followed the example of the all-American hero Captain Kirk and as long as the crew members who remained in the Prime Universe could be trusted to recognize and neutralize the Terran intruders quickly. Fifty years later, *DSC* suggests that Terran ideologies can easily remain undetected (as with Mirror Lorca) or unopposed (as with Emperor Georgiou), if those in power and those following orders unquestioningly fail to speak up, because a temporary alliance with the enemy ‘within’ seems justified in order to defeat the enemy ‘without.’ In the end, the show can be read as a comment on contemporary (American) society at large, in which sexist, racist, nationalist, and imperialist tendencies have never been a matter of the past and have only ever, if at all, been pushed closer to the margins of political discourse. More specifically, *DSC* represents one feminist future in which racism and imperialism are an integral part of social and political structures (the Mirror Universe), and one feminist future in which racism and imperialism seem a relic of the past but make a forceful return as the story unfolds (the Prime Universe). Because it represents such a return, *DSC* can be read as a cautionary tale about what can happen if feminists think they can compromise about their anti-racist and anti-imperialist politics. When I speak of ‘feminists’ here, I mean to include everyone who considers themselves feminists, but I primarily mean white European and American feminists; and when I suggest that feminists may think that they can compromise about their anti-racist and anti-imperialist politics, I mean to say that they should not.

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