

“They Are Coming”: Klingon Subjectivity and Critique of the Federation in *Star Trek: Discovery*

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(Translation: They are coming)

T’Kuvma: [in Klingon] They are coming. Atom by atom...they will coil around us. And take all that we are... There is one way to confront this threat. By reuniting the twenty-four warring houses of our own empire. We have forgotten the unforgettable. The last to unify our tribes. – Kahless – Together under one creed, remain Klingon. [...] That is why we light our beacon this day. To assemble our people. To lock arms against those whose fatal greeting is... [in English] “We come in peace.” (ellipsis points *sic*; “The Vulcan Hello” S1E1, 00:00:16-00:01:27)

In this fascinating cold open for the entire *Star Trek: Discovery* series, before the credits begin running, T’Kuvma speaks in Klingon and switches for the last phrase – “We come in peace” – into English. While T’Kuvma makes this speech, the camera circles around him until we are looking over his shoulder. Thus, the series begins not only in the Klingon language (the Klingon conlang¹) but with what T’Kuvma sees – with what Laura Mulvey might call the Klingon gaze rather than the perspective of Starfleet, the heroes, models, and protagonists of the franchise (Mulvey 19). This bold framing positions the audience either as insiders or outsiders, depending on whether they know the Klingon language, one of the most popular and successful conlangs in all of popular culture. Its use here decenters

¹ A conlang (or con-lang) is a constructed language, to suggest J.R.R. Tolkien’s description of Elvish and the other languages he “constructed” (Tolkien 218).

standard American English² and its speakers. Framing “We come in peace” as fatal also sets the stage for *Discovery*’s interrogation and revision of Federation ideologies, already going much further than *Deep Space Nine* (1993-1999) did into self-critical territory. It is, in short, an opening offering to situate us with Klingons, seeing from their vantage point, and against the assimilation and colonization by Starfleet, which is maintained by the United Federation of Planets.

Constructed languages add realism and depth to fictional worlds, in large part by giving the characters from those worlds an existence outside the moments dramatized in the series’ episodes. Long gone are the days when grunts and bleeps were sufficient to represent the languages of new civilizations. Science fiction and fantasy production companies now regularly hire linguists to write the conlangs needed for new works. According to David J. Peterson, creator of Dothraki and about 50 other conlangs, “In order to meet the heightened expectations of audiences everywhere, we have to raise the bar for languages created for any purpose. After all, if we don’t, we’ll hear about it” (7). According to Peterson, even people who are not language experts are able to detect inconsistencies and implausibilities in fictional languages. In the nonfictional world, language planning is resource development (Kaplan & Baldauf 4); by constructing a language for Klingons, Marc Okrand was developing the Klingon-species resource into a larger and more important part of the story and the franchise. Because of the assumption that people who speak languages that the audience cannot understand are not speaking gibberish, conlangs can affect people’s attitudes, especially about social-justice issues, perhaps engendering greater respect for real linguistic diversity (Schreyer 2). Language is intimately related to personal and group identity, so audiences assume that a character speaking a conlang has a personal identity as well as a sense of belonging to a socially and culturally distinct group.

Discovery has been both castigated and hailed as the “wakest” *Star Trek* yet: “they might as well call it *Star Trek: The Woke Generation*” (Pollack). More progressive critics of *Discovery* are naturally attracted to the series’ engagement with race, gender, sexuality, and family, as well as its steady critiques of Federation hegemony. However, the show’s radical revisions to Klingon culture, its people,

² While linguists regard a “standard” variety of a language as a dialect like any other, “standard English” reflects socio-political centrality and dominance. The *Star Trek* franchise accommodates its audience by having most of its characters use this dialect. Federation Standard is actually a dialect of English that includes “standard American English” as well as a few prestigious English accents like that of Picard (Patrick Stewart). That is, characters who do not use “Federation Standard” are characters being othered.

and its language – specifically the use of the Klingon conlang – deserve special attention. Despite a two-steps-forward, one-step-back kind of progress in the series, the depiction of Klingons has changed in meaningful ways for people concerned about social justice on and beyond the screen. And while it is important to analyze the ways power works in popular-culture artifacts like *Discovery*, we must go beyond a power analysis for its own sake – our attention must go beyond the artifact into the progressive restructuring of power in our society. Critiquing the problems of society is the first step. But we also need to imagine what society could look like and most importantly to think about the ways to get there.

Star Trek Multiculturalism vs Real Antiracism

Popular culture can help us focus on and analyze power – especially a series like *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017-present), where power differentials are revealed by race, gender, sexuality, “girlness,” and “alienness.” The inequities based on these social positions define organizational structures and relationships. *Discovery*’s representations of these characteristics critique racism, sexism, colonialism, and hegemony in our current world, and they envision a just society, showing their viewers what social justice might look like. A key contribution of science fiction like *Star Trek* is that it creates space for depictions and discussions of alienness with subjectivity, rather than from a perspective that others and objectifies the “alien” species. In *Discovery* a strong emphasis on the Klingon language points to the diversity and power differentials within Klingon culture as well as their resistance to Federation ideology. The show also incorporates some critiques of Federation hegemony from characters inside and outside Starfleet, including an extended story arc about the “Mirror Universe,” where Federation and Klingon values are (supposedly) reversed. Taken together, these criticisms allow us to orient “to the world that prioritizes self-improvement and living to do right by others” (Whiteout 67), even if it means confronting some ugly truths.

Star Trek has always had as its mission to imagine a world beyond the limitations of human rights in our current world, to go beyond mere escapism. Even in its earliest incarnation in the 1960s, *Star Trek* had a utopian vision of a diverse crew working happily together, including contemporary enemies of the United States: in the middle of the Cold War, for example, Russian Pavel Chekov is on the bridge. Creator Gene Roddenberry shows that in the future the racism, sexism, and international strife of the 1960s magically ceases to exist. As Roddenberry puts it,

“*Star Trek* was an attempt to say that humanity will reach maturity and wisdom on the day that it begins not just to tolerate, but take a special delight in differences in ideas and differences in life forms” (Roddenberry). For him, *Star Trek*’s ideology was “light-years ahead of [current] petty governments and their visionless leaders” (Roddenberry).

Despite these laudable efforts, as many have pointed out, the results have been at best naive and at worst counterproductive – actually reinforcing the hateful and dominating forces Roddenberry suggests *Star Trek* was intended to fight. In his history of “race normativity” in the *Star Trek* franchise, Allen Kwan nails *Star Trek*’s tendency toward a multicultural rather than antiracist vision when he says, of *Enterprise*, as well as “several previous episodes in the *Star Trek* franchise,” that the way characters talk about 20th-century racism “promote[s] a message of racial tolerance” and

emphasizes the homogeneous nature of humanity in *Enterprise*’s projected future, a future that suggests that minoritized groups have adopted the norms of a privileged majority, seemingly believing that racism should be footnoted in history. [...] Unfortunately, the means by which this message is delivered simply perpetuate the racism that the producers are trying to eliminate. (Kwan 69)

The type of multiculturalism celebrated by Roddenberry ignores the power differentials between dominant and subordinate groups.³ Emphasizing the problems of capitalism and post-racialism, Hassler-Forest writes, “What appears superficially as a post-racial, post-capitalist worldview amounts in fact to a displacement of racism from ethnicity onto forms of cultural difference” (377).

Starfleet and its benevolent inclusivity is portrayed as a *fait accompli*, ignoring the way power structures maintain inequality and glossing over the difficult process of creating an equitable society. In her analysis of *Star Trek*, Davidson addresses “Hegemony, specifically a hegemony of western liberal ideas (democracy, self-determination, individualism, free-market capitalism) [that] provides a continual

³ The dominant group is the group that has more and the subordinate group is the one that has less access to power and resources. In the *Star Trek* universe, the dominant group is Starfleet, and subordinate groups are species that do not belong in Starfleet or the Federation. In the real world, the United States is the dominant group and within the US, the dominant group is white Americans and the subordinate groups are people of color, women, LGBTQ folks, etc.

sub-textual theme” throughout the franchise (9).⁴ The ideological limitations of *Trek* are painfully evident in *The Original Series’ (TOS)* Klingons, who are monolithic, generic villains racialized to be dark with Fu Manchu-like eyebrows and mustaches. Their makeup was designed for actors of color (e.g., Negro #1 and Mexican #1) but still used in the series on white actors for Blackface (Nazzaro 59).

Both the Klingon conlang and Klingons themselves have evolved since early *Trek* series and films. The Klingon Conlang began as gibberish created by James Doohan, who played Montgomery Scott in the original series. Doohan’s goal “was to make a language that would not sound like any on Earth,” and taped himself performing a few lines that were transcribed and used by actors in the first feature film (Adams 112). Later, linguist Marc Okrand was consulted and eventually developed Klingon into a full conlang for the film *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (dir. Lenoard Nimoy, 1984), again with the goal of making it sound “alien” to English speakers. Before he began work Klingon sounded “strange, otherworldly and noisy” and “choppy, grunty” and lacked a grammar and vocabulary. He was left to his own devices in developing the language, his only instructions were that it needed to sound “guttural” (Okrand “Meet”). The conlang got a major boost when Okrand published *The Klingon Dictionary* in 1985, which he followed up with audio courses and supplementary material about Klingon culture.⁵ Though the Klingon language was meant to sound unusual to American ears, Adams notes that “phonological or grammatical features of some Native American languages or Southeast Asian languages – the languages with which Okrand was most familiar – worked their way into Klingon, but, for the most part, not by design” (118).

Along with the language, Klingons’ appearance was redesigned significantly in the films, which had larger budgets to lavish on such refinements. In *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (dir. Robert Wise, 1979), the Klingons are shown for the first time with ridged foreheads, banded armor, and flashy, bladed weaponry. Later movies and series made more subtle modifications to their appearance. Using a “makeup approach” in *Star Trek into Darkness* (dir. J. J. Abrams, 2013), rather than thick

⁴ Between the plots in which the *Enterprise* is literally trapped (e.g., by a tractor beam) and the plots that end with the ship soaring away or going into warp drive and disappearing, having finished its mission, the story arc of nearly every episode and series of *Star Trek* is the freeing of the *Enterprise* (or *Defiant*, *Voyager*, or other ships).

⁵ In the wake of the success of the first season of *Discovery*, Felix Malmenbeck led the development in Duolingo of the Klingon curriculum, added in 2019, after Esperanto and High Valyrian were already established (Krishna).

prosthetics, afforded actors a wider range of facial expressions for conveying more emotional responses, allowing Klingons to seem more sympathetic (Nazzaro 63). The earlier Klingons – othered and depicted as brutish and usually villainous – serve mostly as a foil to Federation virtues. We see them through the gaze of Starfleet and the Federation, as enemies, “Others,” or hybrid and token⁶ characters like Worf and B’Elanna Torres.

No doubt partly in response to apt critiques like Davidson’s (of “a hegemony of western liberal ideas”) as well as changes in the society we live in, the producers of *Discovery* self-consciously wished to offer a more sophisticated and sensitive take on contemporary social-justice issues, including the way the show deals with alien cultures. *Discovery*’s characters challenge the binary constructions and expand the range of possibilities of gender, sexuality, and race – human races rather than extraterrestrial species – in Starfleet and the Federation. *Star Trek* has always had bi-species and bi-cultural characters like Spock (and later Deanna Troi and Torres), who are hybrid in the sense that they represent a mixing of species and cultures but are not hybrid in the sense of having a “double consciousness,” as W.E.B. Du Bois puts it (1989, 3ff.). They are accepted because they are part human and have assimilated into Starfleet – their full selves would threaten the organization’s hegemony. *Discovery* disrupts this color-blind multiculturalism with characters who do not merely inflect but reject assimilation. Most notably, *Discovery* brings new kinds of characters into *Star Trek* and puts them at the center of the story. For example, protagonist Michael Burnham is a human raised by Vulcans; she is played by Sonequa Martin-Green, a Black woman. Also extremely important, Phillipa Georgiou (portrayed by Michelle Yeoh, a Chinese-Malaysian actor) is a warrior and one of Michael’s three mother figures. Besides race, *Discovery* addresses other crucial elements of social position like gender and sexuality. Characters who challenge traditional female roles and broaden *Star Trek*’s spectrum of acceptable female conduct include Commander Jett Reno,

⁶ Conceptually, hybridity has a long history (W.E.B. Du Bois, Bhabha, Hall, Gilroy, Spivak, Smith) and has been used in oppressive as well as progressive ways (Hutnyk, Young). Rather than using it to flatten the differences between people or cultural objects, especially the differences in power, we prefer to see hybridity, as Lisa Lowe does, as a means of “disrupt[ing] the current hegemonic relationship between ‘dominant’ and ‘minority’ positions” (28). Typically, she says, “difference” and “sameness” (31) are “exclusively structured by a binary opposition,” like cultural hybridity and identity (essentialized “ethnic ‘essence’”) (33). Tokenism is a form of racism in which a select few are accepted by the dominant group to keep others in line and maintain the status quo; its function is “to show that colorblindness, gender-neutrality, and economic opportunities are available to all” (Collins 15).

Cadet (later Ensign) Sylvia Tilly, Admiral Katrina Cornwell, and Lieutenant Commander Airiam, a cyborg whose memories of her fiancé and relationships with the crew humanize her. Dr. Hugh Culber, Lt. Commander Paul Stamets, Commander Saru, and Captain Pike expand acceptable notions of masculinities, and Culber, Stamets, and Reno normalize non-cis-het sexuality, as does Adira Tal, a non-binary young Starfleet officer joined with a Trill.

However progressive the other changes in Starfleet are in this series, the real revolution *Discovery* offers is in Klingon subjectivity, especially through the strategic use of the Klingon conlang and conscript (the orthographical version of a conlang). According to *Discovery* co-creator Alex Kurtzman, “To use a word that may seem ironic, [the producers’] approach was to *humanize* the Klingons, meaning we [the audience] know a lot about them. In a moment when we are living in a world where ideologies are so polarized and polarizing, what I did not want to do was just make them the bad guys” (emphasis ours; qtd. in Miller). In a review of *Discovery* for *BuzzFeed News*, Adam Vary writes, “*Discovery*’s Klingons are deliberately more complex, reconceived as aesthetes with stunningly ornate armor, a complex political system, and a unifying leader, T’Kuvma (Chris Obi), driven by a philosophy that is outwardly xenophobic, and yet inwardly broad-minded.” In this same article, Vary quotes *Discovery*’s showrunner Aaron Harberts as saying, “You start to understand that [Klingons] themselves have their own issues of unity [and] discrimination. [...] It was important for us that we didn’t view them as the enemy as much as a group that we are in conflict with – because we don’t know enough about each other” (Vary). The “issues of unity [and] discrimination” among Klingons have far-reaching consequences in the plot of the series. The extensive use of the conlang is one of the ways Klingons are “humanized” in this series. Including the very prominent cold open for the series itself, the first two seasons of *Discovery* feature 27 scenes with Klingons speaking to each other in Klingon, sometimes at length – and not always about Starfleet – for the importance of which see, for example, the Bechdel or Bechdel-Wallace test (Gross).⁷

Building on its creation and expansion in earlier times and used extensively in *Discovery*, the Klingon conlang recognizes and legitimizes the Klingons. The *Star Trek* universe is now explorable through an alien language. Suddenly, those who speak it – the Others – are, as Kurtzman says, “humanized,” struggling to survive,

⁷ For a development of the Bechdel-Wallace test to account for race and otherness in the context of science fiction and fantasy, see our “Conlanger Test” in the “Introduction” to this issue.

just like every other being, human or not. We see the Klingon world through their own language; we hear them speak it, even if we have to understand it in subtitles. The effect, essentially, is that we begin to see a previously monolithically represented group as a far more complex people composed of beings who have individual identities and who also belong to a collective that has distinct values. With a fully-fledged conlang spoken extensively and repeatedly in every episode, we observe the disruption of a “United” Federation narrative and the presentation of a far more complex Klingon people than has been available to the audience before.

Conlangs in a work foreground the way a multilingual world can be threatening, particularly to a mainstream constructed by hegemonic socio-politico-economic powers. In world-building contexts, multilingualism is a threat to the “unity” that these powers claim in abstract constructs such as “national unity” or, in the case of *Star Trek*, the unity represented by the United Federation of Planets. In a simplistically conceived “united” or monolithic world, we all pretend to speak the same language, with the same accent.⁸ This same thinking applies to the Klingons, a point Okrand depends on in his book on Klingon culture: “Introductory works on Klingon usually ignore the diversity within the Klingon Empire. This oversight is not surprising, since even the most well-informed members of the Federation often think of Klingons as a rather homogeneous group” (Okrand 3). The expansion of the use of Klingon in *Discovery* builds the Klingon world and recognizes the diversity of its people. For example, the series opening introduces a new Klingon word (and concept): *qangtlhIn*, meaning ideology, principles, or creed (“The Vulcan Hello” S1E1, 00:00:56-00:01:00). The phrase *wa’ qangtlhIn wIpab, tlhIngan maH taHjaj* (“Together under one creed, remain Klingon”) draws back the curtain on a world previously almost entirely closed to fans peering into the galaxies using the Federation gaze. We no longer see Klingons only as violent warriors. We find out that they are rational beings, and their ideology of “remaining Klingon” looks different now – rather than expressing loyalty to the Klingon Empire, it expresses resistance to Starfleet assimilation and hegemony.

⁸ However, Roddenberry did include characters with accents (Chekov and Scotty) as major characters and crew members. Their accents mark them as other but highlight the inclusiveness of *Enterprise*. At the same time, the audience could conveniently listen to English without making the effort to understand Russian or Scots Gaelic. Nevertheless, the Klingons are depicted as monolithic despite this awareness of cultural diversity in the real world.

According to Okrand, “The first step toward understanding the people of another culture is learning their language” (2). The dominant group customarily does not have to learn the languages of subordinate groups. Asking the audience to hear and read Klingon requires the mainstream American audience to accommodate the subordinate group. This insight is best articulated by Gloria Anzaldúa: “[A]s long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate” (Anzaldúa 59). Incorporating a conlang in a fictional work helps to center the language of the subordinate groups – challenging hegemony. Having Klingon characters speak English when it makes no logical sense accommodates the audience at the expense of Klingon subjectivity. Hearing and seeing the language of the subordinate group is important; when producers dub or indicate in the captions that what is spoken is a “foreign language,” they are accommodating viewers in the dominant group.

The uncomfortable switch the audience must make when reading the subtitles⁹ rather than hearing English reveals the unequal power relations and accommodations that subordinate groups have to always make for the dominant group. The producers of *Discovery* were willing to ask the audiences to read subtitles, however, so that passages of dialogue could be written in Klingon and acted without the logical lapse of having Klingons talk to each other in English. As Kurtzman says about *Discovery*, *Trek* fans have been learning and speaking the Klingon conlang “for over 50 years. People are married in Klingon. They speak Klingon to each other. Which means we can’t get it wrong. [...] We’re going to write long scenes in Klingon, and we’re going to ask the audience to read the subtitles” (Kurtzman qtd in Miller). Going so far as to ask the audience to read subtitles points out how important the extensive passages of Klingon dialogue are in *Discovery*: it suggests that Klingons have a valid and even central perspective and its effect is to remind the audience again and again that Klingons have subject

⁹ The Trajan or Trajan-like typeface used for the Klingon subtitles (translations of the Klingon dialogue into English) suggests, at least in its original use in film posters, a Hollywood tradition of sweeping historical films about the Roman empire (Peters). Untranslated Klingon is represented textually in a conscript. The producers understand that some fans know Klingon well enough that they can in fact read a transliteration of Klingon, and outside the US providers offer it as one of the options for subtitles (Hamilton, Stolworthy); this transliteration renders the Klingon pronunciation of words in the Latin-based alphabet. The Trajan subtitles are easy to distinguish from the typefaces typically offered for closed captioning, which are Helvetica or Helvetica-like – modernist, corporate, and psychologically unobtrusive (Hustwit).

positions. Presenting the Other in their own language is exactly how subjectivity gets represented.¹⁰

Besides the cold open in “The Vulcan Hello” (S1E1), a vividly interesting use of the conlang occurs when L’Rell’s voice says – in Klingon – “Previously on *Star Trek: Discovery*” (“Point of Light” S2E3). Clearly, this introduction into the recap means that, at least for *Star Trek: Discovery*, the frame is part of the picture. To put this framing into Klingon normalizes Klingon, making it so natural, so seamless, that this narration is easy to miss. Klingon subjectivity extends to the introductory narration, suggesting that the primary audience includes Klingons, or those sympathetic to them. This episode, “Point of Light” (S2E3), extends our understanding of Klingon subjectivity into the domain of L’Rell, a female, a mother, and chancellor of the united Klingon Empire.

Most of the time, we hear the Klingons speaking Klingon to each other, but in the instances in which the Klingons speak English, they do so rhetorically.¹¹ In “Point of Light” (S2E3, 00:08:19-00:08:29), the Klingons switch to English when a disgruntled Klingon shows his disapproval of Ash’s presence and role in L’Rell’s administration: “Will you make this human our new fleet captain, too, Chancellor? Perhaps we should speak in the[ir] standard tongue, too.” From then on the dialogue is in English.¹²

In another instance, the Klingon subject position is preserved by a deft use of the conlang and subtitles (similar to the way the film *The Hunt for Red October*

¹⁰ If they were heard speaking only English, they would seem more objectified, as though their language is unimportant and by extension they, as a people, are unimportant. In destroying a culture, one of the first steps a dominating group takes is to ban their language.

¹¹ In the single instance in this series in which the audience hears Klingon but does not understand it, the characters who hear it are Michael and her parents just before her father Mike is killed and Gabrielle dons the “Red Angel” suit and travels 950 years into the future, hoping to have gone back one hour (“Perpetual Infinity” S2E1). In this case, Klingon is not translated because the characters don’t understand it, so neither do we. In every other instance in the series in which Klingons speak their language we understand them – they are not opaque to us, a notable departure from earlier series in the franchise.

¹² The actor says “*the* standard tongue,” which would imply he is referring to (Modern) Standard Klingon, but this could be a difference between the actor’s performance and the script. The closed caption and episode transcript says, “*their* standard tongue,” implying English – which makes more sense in this context.

[dir. John McTiernan, 1990] handles the shift from Russian to English¹³). In “Point of Light” (S2E3), the audience hears L’Rell as Chancellor address members of the Klingon High Council, initially in Klingon and then in English. The subtitles change from the translation of Klingon to the Klingon conscript just as actor Mary Chieffo switches from Klingon to English intra-sententially; that is, the Klingon conscript signals that L’Rell is continuing in Klingon even though the actor is speaking in English. The difference is in the rhetorical and political choice made by the producers of *Discovery*: to use Klingon conscript for the subtitles when the actors speak English in this scene. Using the Klingon conscript for the transition from speaking Klingon to speaking English helps maintain the Klingon subject position.

Klingon Subjectivity

In *Discovery* Klingons make the *Star Trek* universe more diverse because their subject position makes us take characters seriously who are opposed to the Federation with its supposed inclusivity.¹⁴ The entire narrative arc of Klingon resistance is almost completely presented from the perspective of Klingons. Even when other species are present, Klingon points of view determine what we see and how we feel about it. When Klingons differ from each other, these round Klingon characters offer a wide range of perspectives. The Klingon High Council may consist entirely of Klingons, but the Klingons themselves are diverse, and not monolithic, in several ways, including skin tones, insider and outsider status (especially in the character Voq), leadership styles, and more. Unlike previous incarnations of *Star Trek* with their monolithic Klingons, this series represents significantly different types of Klingons and Klingon leaders – T’Kuvma fights for unification in order to resist Starfleet, L’Rell works to continue that goal; Kol-Sha and others are not interested in unification and try to take away the leadership position from L’Rell; Mirror Voq unifies various species and heads the resistance

¹³ The producer mentioned he didn’t want to imitate *The Hunt for Red October* (Miller) in which a few sentences in Russian (in *The Hunt for Red October*) are followed by a permanent switch on a word shared by both Russian and English to language that centers the audience’s convenience for the rest of the film.

¹⁴ This inclusivity is challenged by another Klingon, Aztbur (daughter of Klingon Chancellor Gorkon) in the film *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*: “Human rights – the very name is racist. The Federation is no more than a homosapiens-only club” (Jaffe).

against the Terran Empire; and Ash/Voq uses his hybridity to help the Klingons as well as Starfleet.

T’Kuvma’s role in the series is to unify a fractured Klingon Empire, whose twenty-four houses on the Klingon High Council have been at war with each other for many generations and have therefore been unable to resist the encroachments of Starfleet and the Federation. As we see in the very first seconds of this series, T’Kuvma, a self-appointed messiah of the Klingons, invokes Kahless and calls the Klingon High Council together to meet to oppose the Federation with war. From his point of view, the Federation is imperialist; their claim that they “come in peace” is false; if left unopposed Starfleet will assimilate the Klingon culture, depriving them of their rituals, customs, and language – which is exactly what the human Terrans in the mirror universe do. T’Kuvma values the traditions of the Klingons, especially the veneration of Kahless and preserving “Klingon purity,” which to him is resisting assimilation by Starfleet.

Voq is T’Kuvma’s childhood friend, an outcast “son-of-none” – because of his “translucent white” skin (“Will You Take My Hand?” S1E15) – who is accepted by T’Kuvma to be the second torchbearer. Immediately after the scene in which Michael grieves for the death of her mentor Philippa Georgiou, who has been slain by T’Kuvma, Voq is shown leaning closely over T’Kuvma’s face as he dies. The parallel invokes sympathy toward not just Georgiou but also T’Kuvma, who says to Voq, in Klingon, of course, “I recognize you as one who has lived his life on the outside and yearns to be part of something bigger than himself. Some may see the color of your skin as nature’s mistake. I call it a mirror ... [sic] for I see myself in you” (“The Vulcan Hello” S1E1, 00:00:16-00:01:27). This poignant moment is an important one for the construction of the Klingon subject position because it adds a new depth of personal history. Voq and T’Kuvma talk about their childhood as a flashback shows T’Kuvma standing up to some Klingon bullies beating Voq. When other Klingons ostracize Voq, T’Kuvma includes him for his difference and even sees potential for Voq to use that outsider perspective for “something bigger.” T’Kuvma sees himself in Voq as in a mirror, as an opposite self he identifies with. In the mirror universe, Voq literally takes on the role of leader – uniting not just the Klingon houses but all the other species at war with the Terrans.

We see many events in the series from Voq’s perspective, who also represents one of the important forms of Klingon diversity. Voq agrees to have his mind and physicality implanted into Starfleet officer Ash Tyler to infiltrate Starfleet, discover the secret of the spore drive, and take revenge on Michael for killing T’Kuvma.

Mo’Kai, L’Rell’s mother’s house, conducts this species reassignment surgery, *choH’a’*. L’Rell attempts to activate Voq and his Klingon memory when Ash comes to see her on the *Discovery*, but the process goes awry – is incomplete – leaving Ash and Voq both inhabiting Ash’s body and alternating in his consciousness, a new kind of hybridity for *Star Trek*.¹⁵ What prevents Voq from being able to take over completely is Ash’s love for Michael, the target of Voq’s revenge; Ash tells Michael, “you are my tether” (“The Wolf Inside” S1E11, 00:34:37-00:34:38). His body is human, but Ash/Voq still has Voq’s memories as well as his own. His body carries the subjectivity of both Voq and Ash. Ash is treated as an outsider by both Klingons and members of Starfleet, but he becomes the bridge between the two worlds by using his hybrid experience and “outsider within” status (Collins, 2009). Klingon subjectivity is foregrounded by centering Voq’s and Ash’s gazes and perspectives as well as the events they witness and take part in.

Besides the diversities of skin tone, status as insider and outsider, and hybridity, the Klingons also look more diverse because of L’Rell’s part in the series. We see her strategically advancing herself politically as the conditions that would let her work more from the background change, eventually causing her to take the chancellorship. The character L’Rell is also associated with other kinds of Klingon diversity: she and Voq have a son, whose character arc the series follows; her relationship with Voq connects her with one whose family rejected him because his skin was too light and then with the human/Klingon hybrid Ash/Voq. In “Point of Light” (S2E3), the same scene in which she switches from Klingon to English intrasententially, with Klingon subtitles, L’Rell stands in front of representatives of the twenty-four Klingon houses and speaks as the Klingon Chancellor. She says that “the human” (Ash) has betrayed her, throwing what appears to be his decapitated head into the fire and symbolically severing her ties with him or anything to do with him. Holding what she wants them to believe is the baby’s head, she says, “I, too, have sacrificed. I will bear a child but once. Now...you are my children, as I raise this family to greatness! Do not refer to me as Chancellor, for I deserve a fiercer title. From this point forth, you may call me...Mother” (ellipsis points *sic*; “Point of Light” S2E3, 00:45:07-00:45:42). That is, the Klingon empire is her family, and as head of that family, she is their mother. L’Rell uses her sacrifices, makes Kol-Sha into a martyr, and defines herself as leader to unify the

¹⁵ A very interesting analysis of Voq/Ash’s hybridity could be done using the framework of strategic multiplicity developed by Kishimoto et al. (2021).

families. Klingon motherhood and womanhood are presented as strengths, as positive: her claim is that they make her more fit to be leader – deserving of “a fiercer title” than Chancellor.

Diversity in Klingons is important for the construction of Klingons’ subject positions. Building a more complex culture and presenting them as not monolithic “humanizes” them. That is, the ways in which Klingon culture and characterization are developed in *Discovery* are structural, as are the many instances of parallel characters and scenes. The parallel scenes help the audience develop emotional connections with the Klingons and people who have other truths and perspectives. Parallel plot, character, and thematic elements are perhaps the central structuring mechanism of this entire series. In the case of Klingon subjectivity, the parallels suggest that the Klingons have full selves. The almost constant use of parallels in the series undermines the familiar binarities: as L’Rell says, “two truths are possible” (“Through the Valley of Shadows” S2E12, 00:23:29-00:23:32). L’Rell can be both chancellor and mother; Voq/Ash are both Klingon and human; Spock is both Vulcan and human. These characters can be seen as hybrid in the sense that they represent another example of Du Bois’ double consciousness. They face an internal conflict as they wrestle with the dominant group’s attempts to assimilate their identities, feeling they are “being torn asunder” (Du Bois 3). However, rather than deny their dualities or hybridity, or choose one identity over the other, these hybrid characters learn to accept their doubleness. While the series establishes the Federation and the Klingon Empire as parallels, Klingons have less power: the fact that the worlds are parallel does not mean that their inhabitants are equal.

The parallels in the mirror universe also disrupt the othering process. In the mirror universe, the Terran Empire – with its imperialistic, xenophobic, and racist values – seems to be the complete opposite of Starfleet. However, from the Klingon perspective, Starfleet looks very much like the Terrans in the mirror universe. Starfleet thinks they are living in harmony with all the different species, but from the Klingon perspective they are not and can learn from Mirror Voq. The other non-Terran species share this perspective and with the Klingons create an alliance to resist the Terrans. Authentically wanting to understand, Michael asks Mirror Voq how they can overcome their differences and come together. Seeing the world with Klingon subjectivity leads to a critique of the Federation, showing the audience what it looks from the outside.

Discovery is not the first time a Mirror Universe appears in *Trek* – the first one is back in *The Original Series* – but earlier uses do not lead to a critique of the way

Starfleet wields its power. In *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994), for example, the mirror universe is dystopian, validating Starfleet values. Hassler-Forest writes, “Offering a dystopian imaginary instead of the franchise’s usual utopianism, the episode’s alternate timeline strengthens the sense of inevitability and lack of viable alternatives to its post-historical present – while simultaneously highlighting the narrowness of the line dividing the ‘good’ future from the ‘bad’ one” (379). We see a more nuanced treatment in *Discovery*’s mirror universe: rather than present the two possibilities as a binary of one versus another or good versus evil, *Discovery* offers a spectrum of alternatives that situates Starfleet in a universe that has reasons for seeing it less sympathetically.

Critique of Federation/Starfleet Values

Discovery steadily critiques the Federation and Starfleet, the proverbial “good guys” of the franchise.¹⁶ Not only does it portray Klingons in a more nuanced and sympathetic fashion, we also get several astute criticisms from characters outside and inside Starfleet. For example, when Captain Gabriel Lorca denies that Starfleet started the war with the Klingons, Harry Mudd says, “Of course you did. The moment you decided to boldly go where no one had gone before. What happens when you bump into someone who didn’t want you in their yard?” (“Choose Your Pain” S1E5, 00:19:17-00:19:26). The humor of this self-referential quip, of course, invokes the original *Star Trek*’s title sequence and seems intended as a commentary on the earlier incarnations.

We also see criticism of Starfleet in the antics during “An Obol for Charon” (S2E4), in which the Universal Translator (UT) malfunctions and outputs the crew’s speech in a variety of random human and non-human languages. In fact, the first mistranslated language spoken comes out of Michael Burham’s mouth, in Klingon. This scene demonstrates how dependent even the best and brightest members of Starfleet are on the UT for language; without it, they are helpless to understand.¹⁷ Among the bridge officers, only Saru can restore order – because he

¹⁶ Indeed, this shift is evident in the name of the ship. Rather than *Enterprise*, which has connotations of capitalism and business (see fn. 4, above), *Discovery* could mean making discoveries or, more importantly, being discovered by others – one of the themes of this series.

¹⁷ The Starfleet crew is like much of the American audience (about 82%), who speak only English (U.S. Census Bureau). (These kinds of statistics – especially from the U.S. Census – are all made

has learned 94 languages. He asks, “Am I the only one who bothered to learn a foreign language?,” exasperated about how dependent the other members of the *Discovery* bridge are on the ship-based UT (“An Obol for Charon” S2E4, 00:12:21-00:12:23).

Perhaps learning languages is not prioritized in the Starfleet Academy because of the existence of the UT, but, putting the contrivance of the UT aside, belonging to the dominant group would absolve many Starfleet officers from the need to learn other languages. Just as those in dominant groups tend to be fluent in only their language, those in the subordinate groups must also learn the dominant language, which often results in the erosion of their own language and identity. They rightly see the dominant group’s monolingualism as domination. Thus, the facility that Kelpien Saru has with languages is not just a matter of talent and doing the right thing: as a refugee, he has never felt completely at home in Starfleet; he is still marginalized and othered. He says, “Well, to my shame...hiding is my nature. I have learned multiple languages, yet never shared my own, fearful of revealing my own...alienness” (ellipsis points *sic*; “An Obol for Charon” S2E4, 00:24:05-00:24:24). Saru’s subject position is that of an outsider in Starfleet, revealed here in the context of the languages he speaks.

The following dialogue between Michael and Kol reveals the importance of the Klingon language to Klingon identity:

Michael: General Kol, I wish to talk.

Kol: Who is that? You speak Klingon? Show yourself.

Michael: This device is a universal translator. An example of human ingenuity.

Kol: All I see is another attempt by humanity to rob us of our identity. (“Into the Forest I Go” S1E9, 00:25:41-00:26:10)

Kol correctly sees the UT as another attempt at assimilation or erasing Klingon identity by Starfleet. The Klingons do not have a UT, either because they have not invented it yet (one does show up in a cruder form in *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* [dir. Nicholas Meyer, 1991]) or they do not need one. The fact that they are speaking English to each other means that the Klingons already know how to speak English without the aid of the UT.¹⁸ Klingons are aware of the

problematic by the fact that the information is self-reported and we have not defined *speaking* or, in fact, *English*.)

¹⁸ Because of the way language contact works in the real world, the fact that Klingons as a group appear to speak English suggests societal bilingualism exists, signaling long-term contact

threat that Starfleet poses and have studied their language and culture: T’Kuvma makes his awareness of their threat explicit when he says, “Members of the Federation. What you call your most remote borders, I call too close to Klingon territory” (“Battle at the Binary Stars” S1E2, 00:23:34-00:23:47). In the series’ cold open, T’Kuvma utters the Starfleet slogan “We come in peace” in English without any of Michael Burnham’s earnest faith in Starfleet. Like subordinate groups having to know the language and culture of the dominant group for survival everywhere, the Klingons have learned English. Typically, however, members of the privileged dominant group (in this case Starfleet) expect the subordinate group to accommodate and translate; not having learned the language of the Klingons, they rely on the Universal Translator – just as in the real world, the dominant group pays or coerces others to translate for them.

Further critique of the Federation is revealed when Michael and Ash visit the mirror universe and confront Mirror Voq, who is the leader of the resistance (“The Wolf Inside”). Michael is shocked to see so many different cultures gathered at the table working together and asks Mirror Voq how they were able to achieve this unity and “compromise and embrace each other”:

Mirror Voq: The light of Kahless guides me in all things.

Michael: But the light of Kahless demands that you honor the ways of your race. Yet here you are, speaking in a foreign language, placing your faith in the cultural customs of others.

Mirror Voq: I am here. I have survived only on the shoulders of my comrades. The humans seek Klingon extinction. They have denied us our rituals, our language. That is why I fight. (S1E11, 00:27:03-00:27:43)

Unlike T’Kuvma in the prime¹⁹ universe (who seeks Klingon “purity” in the face of a threat from the Federation), in the mirror universe, Mirror Voq has united not only the Klingons themselves, but also Andorians, Vulcans, and Tellarites as endangered cultures against their common enemy, the Terran Empire, which tries to enforce human purity and domination. In Michael’s words, the Terran Empire is “a fascistic, human-only organization”: “They’re an oppressive, racist, xenophobic

between the two cultures. Once again, a deeper history of the Klingon people is subtly suggested, supporting a sense of their complexity and subjectivity outside of the presence or idea of Starfleet.

¹⁹ “Prime” as in the *primary* or original universe is how the characters use the term in this series; in other Star Trek series, it is used more typically, to mean the alternate universe. We will use the term the way *Star Trek: Discovery* does for this paper.

culture that dominates all known space. [...] The Terran culture appears to be predicated upon an unconditional hatred and rejection of anything and everything ‘other’” (“Despite Yourself” S1E10, 00:20:09-00:20:59). Rather than working together – on the shoulders of comrades – Terrans exploit others. To them, for example, Kelpiens are not only slaves, they are also a source of food. Terrans have forced Klingons to lose their language: when Voq/Ash speaks Klingon, Mirror Voq is surprised and says, “how do you speak the forgotten tongue?” (“The Wolf Inside” S1E11, 00:28:22-00:28:25). Klingons are concerned about this very erasure in the prime universe as well.

At first it may be tempting to equate the Klingon Empire in the primary universe with the Terran Empire in the mirror universe, but a closer look reveals the parallel between the Terran Empire and Starfleet, which also perpetuates its hegemony by assimilating or annihilating other species. Michael describes the mirror-world Terrans as hating anything other, but their imperialism, fascism, and racism are really just exaggerated forms of the characteristics we see in the primary universe Starfleet. Starfleet aspires to have the cooperative, respectful, and self-aware behavior we see in the mirror resistance group but has yet to figure out how – as we can see in its tense relationship with the Klingons. Michael’s series-long struggle to define what exactly in Starfleet she is loyal to is resolved in the mirror universe, but by Klingons.

In previous *Star Trek* series, Starfleet was represented as progressive, as if it had achieved social justice and equity. A work in progress, Starfleet in *Discovery* has not achieved perfection. By making Klingon subjectivity central and having characters both within and without critique Starfleet, the series levels the moral status – but not the power difference – of Starfleet and the Klingons without idealizing or demonizing them. Far from perfect, Starfleet in *Discovery*’s primary universe is very much like it has always been.²⁰ It is totalizing, imperialistic and aggressive – traits made worse by the secret intelligence organization Section 31 – and yet not the overtly fascist organization the Terrans are. It is as if the Terrans represent a warning to primary-universe Starfleet: this is what it could become. To do right by others, the Federation must, as Mirror Voq says, get its own houses in order before it can “begin to invite others in” (“The Wolf Inside” S1E11, 0:28:03-00:28:04), much less invading other people’s backyards.

²⁰ How Starfleet has been to us is how it will be in the fictional universe, because the events in *Discovery* take place just before the events in *TOS*.

Discovery and the Real World

Social change requires more than a critical analysis of a work in the popular culture. What is necessary is to step outside the theoretical and into the world, outside of the intellectual and into action. Part of the difficulty of stepping from analysis and critique to action is imagining what socially just processes and what a socially just world would look like. *Star Trek: Discovery* imagines a world in which difference is not assimilated or annihilated but accepted and made use of, including in leadership. A world in which we turn to the subjectivity of the members of subordinate groups to see ourselves, to reverse the gaze and reveal the unequal power relations. A world in which the languages spoken by others mark them as valid and important, even if those others seem to be a threat. A world in which hierarchical structures are replaced with structures that do not invoke hegemony and domination. A world in which, to point to the theme in the series of the dangers of AI, nobody uses technology to replace the learning of languages.

Audre Lorde’s “*For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change*” is one of the most important assertions ever made about how we can arrive at social justice and equity, but the sentences immediately before it are equally important (27). In the terms used by Mirror Voq to describe the process by which he came to peace, getting our house in order means, as Lorde says, making “common cause with those others identified as outside the structures to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths” (26-7). We must, as L’Rell and Mirror Voq learn, dismantle the house and build a new one. For the Klingons in the primary universe, getting their house in order means uniting all the warring houses – who have been warring, presumably, because they have been run under the old Klingon model we see in earlier series. Part of that process is the uniting of the houses under one Mother and the establishment of Klingons as a unified family that is inclusive, healing, and willing to sacrifice for the good of the whole. One version of the end of the process of getting the houses in order is L’Rell’s. The other is the Mirror Voq’s, an inclusive organization – making common cause with others outside Klingon structures.

The optimism inherent in *Star Trek: Discovery* leads us to hope that Starfleet will have learned from the encounters with Klingons that they are not brutish and

brutal, but thoughtful and principled – however different – and forced into a position of defending themselves against Starfleet expansionism. Taking the *Discovery* into the future is a clever way for the writers and producers to justify why *Star Trek* series written and produced after TOS do not know about the spore drive or the larger perspective on the universe preserved by the Sphere data. Most significant for us, however, is that when Burham and the crew of the *Discovery* leave the 10-years-before-TOS time to take the ship's knowledge from the Sphere data into the future, they take their hard-won knowledge of Klingon subjectivity with them.

The analysis of *Discovery* reveals power differentials and oppression behind languages, assimilation, and multiculturalism and helps us understand these issues in our real world. Science fiction has always experimented with the possibilities of imagining futures that are better and worse than the contemporary world. *Discovery* can enable the step to the real world and to action by showing not only what a socially just world might look like but also some of what it might sound like: less monolingual to be sure. It invites audiences to engage ideas they might normally be afraid of and to talk about ideas they might be afraid to talk about. The Klingon gaze – the gaze of “others identified as outside [our] structures” – gives us the starting point for the journey of becoming socially just in our world and the means “to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish” (Lorde 26). Both for members of subordinate groups and especially for members of the dominant group, self-reflecting and challenging their internalized racism and internalized racial superiority are essential. They must work to dismantle the master's house – dismantle the structural racism and hegemony so subordinate groups do not have to face domination, colonization, assimilation, and threat in the words and actions of the dominant group. When they really have gotten their house in order, then maybe those in the dominant group can really say “We come in peace” without dishonesty or naive earnestness – and perhaps in the Klingon language.

In the series the phrase parallel to “we come in peace” is “they are coming,” which sounds very different when spoken by a Klingon than when spoken by Starfleet. They are the very first words in the series, and they are spoken by T'Kuvma in Klingon. In the series and spoken by Starfleet, “they are coming” means the Klingons are coming and they are a threat; said this way, “they are coming” echoes anti-immigrant sentiment and policies. Said by T'Kuvma, “they are coming” cements Klingon subjectivity, showing us what it looks like to be seen as invaders but to face erasure and assimilation at the hands of Starfleet

imperialism. T’Kuvma’s resistance to that erasure and assimilation is to protect Klingon culture, identity, and subjectivity, to, as their slogan has it, “Remain Klingon!”

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