



DRONES, CLONES AND ALPHA BABES: RETROFITTING *STAR TREK'S* HUMANISM, POST- 9/11

by Diana M.A. Relke

ISBN 978-1-55238-667-5

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2: Regendering Command

It is perhaps too much to expect popular art which, in its commodity form, is produced and distributed by capitalist institutions to be directly radical or subversive. But its indirect subversiveness may be greater than most theorists have given it credit for. – John Fiske, “TV: Re-situating the Popular in the People.”

The family is a moving target and an evolving, ever-changing institution.
– Chris Hables Gray, *Cyborg Citizen*, 144.

JULIA HOUSTON'S POSITION on the Borg Queen is a view expressed by many less articulate female fans who maintain personal web sites devoted to *Star Trek* – especially to *Voyager*, the series women viewers almost certainly played a part in saving from premature cancellation. *Voyager's* maiden voyage took place in January of 1995. Its first three seasons were a near disaster for the new United Paramount Network. Not only had the market been over-saturated with multiplying *Star Trek* series; they were also up against an explosion of competing science fiction series – *The X-files*; *Odyssey*; *Babylon 5*. In addition, *Voyager*, with its female captain and its multi-racial crew, had been launched in a climate of political correctness backlash. It probably didn't help that this crew was constructed as less “international” than the crew of *TNG's Enterprise*. In addition to the American ideology implicit in *Star Trek* philosophy, Americocentrism was written right into the characters and their dialogue. This hadn't been the original intention of *Voyager's* creators. The Québécoise Geneviève Bujold had been engaged to play the Captain, who, like Picard before her, was envisioned as French. Had Bujold not quit the set during the first rehearsal, story arcs focussing on her character's non-American difference from the other human characters would likely have been developed, much as they had been for Patrick Stewart's Picard. With the last-minute recruitment of Kate Mulgrew, the Captain was rewritten as hailing from Indiana, and her

oft-repeated command to “set a course for home” seemed to evoke images of the American heartland. Perhaps this was part of what made it so easy for *Star Trek* newsgroup participants to project upon *Voyager* some of the ugliness of the American culture wars.

It wasn't a case of Mulgrew's being a poor substitute, for she possesses physical characteristics that are easily read as signifying the androgyny that the several female admirals of *TNG* had taught us to expect: unglamorous but attractive, Mulgrew has a strong profile and an authoritative voice. But these advantages didn't amount to much because the producers and writers hadn't a clue how to write for a female captain, and Mulgrew hadn't a clue how to play one. “Let's get one thing straight up front,” wrote Michael Logan in *TV Guide* at the onset of Season Two: “Kate Mulgrew is *not* a feminist.”

“I just don't buy into it,” shrugs the first actress ever to captain a *Trek* series. “I'm sure this is politically incorrect for me to say – but the history of the world will bear me out: *Any* time has been the right time for women. I've read too much to believe otherwise. If we'd just stop all this absolutely endless, nonsensical banter about sexual superiority, we'd realize that it just doesn't exist.” (Logan 23)

While Mulgrew's brand of postfeminism was hardly uncommon among Americans in the mid-1990s, *Voyager* might have benefited had she possessed at least a basic gender analysis. Mercifully for the series and the female fans loyal to it (despite its problems), she did eventually acquire one. By the end of the series, she still had regrets about its bias in favour of the female characters, and about not having had a chance fully to explore the Captain's “femininity” (by which she means “sexuality”), but she had developed some gender insight. For starters, she had grown acutely aware of the importance of singling out Captain Janeway's female fans for special thanks whenever she had the opportunity to express her gratitude to *Voyager*'s fan-base. More to the point is a response she gave to a BBC One interviewer's question about Janeway's frequent changes in hairstyle: “I watched this with great curiosity because I love to see how men deal with their deepest anxieties ... about will this franchise succeed or will it not, with this woman at the helm.... They changed it [her hairstyle] five times in the first season, two, three times in the second. You know, my message to Patrick Stewart is, ‘You lucky devil.’ I mean, it was just constantly a

source of anxiety for them, and of course it had nothing to do with the reality” (BBC Online). Whatever the reason behind the decisive Captain’s indecisiveness about her hair, at least Mulgrew came to learn that it had something to do with gender and male anxiety about female authority.

If Mulgrew is not television’s most intelligent actor, she is certainly a disciplined one. In those first three years she bravely grappled with the contradictory scripts she was handed and her contradictory responsibilities, which included captain, mother, and sex object. These may not be unlike the array of subjectivities characteristic of countless women in everyday life, but when the task is to create a coherent television character – the first female captain in *Star Trek* history, no less – one has to wonder about the wisdom of scripts that have her killing the enemy in one scene, soothing a homesick crewmember in the next, and looking alluring in pink lingerie in a third. Making her a hardheaded scientist overcompensated for her femaleness, which then had to be counter-compensated by giving her a feminine hobby: melting in the arms of her Victorian master in a holodeck novel, she gave the series something of the character of the afternoon soaps. These multiple contradictions, which oscillated wildly between the poles of stereotypical femininity and masculinity made for much confusion about the source of the Captain’s power: was it sexual, was it maternal, or did it – like Captain Picard’s – draw upon the rationalism of liberal humanist ideology?

“In America, slaying the enemy is *the* ritual that defines our identity,” wrote Janice Rushing and Thomas Frentz in 1995, “for there has been as yet no feminine myth of equal longevity or power, no story that compels our fascination so many different times with so many variations” (2). It’s hardly surprising, then, that the *Voyager* team experienced such a steep learning curve during those first three years. *Trek* writers and producers are famous for their consultations with practising scientists, who provide advice on how to make the science of *Star Trek* sound credible, and how to extrapolate convincingly from contemporary technologies to the technology of the twenty-fourth century. Given the explosion of feminist science fiction during the 1980s and 1990s, there was no shortage of potential consultants to assist in the development of a feminine mythos tailored to the *Star Trek* saga, but if one of these was also on retainer, her influence was nowhere to be seen. Executive Producer Jeri Taylor, who had written for *The Next Generation* and managed to leave her feminine fingerprint on a few episodes, already had her first *Voyager* novel in print by 1996 – a “biography”

of Janeway upon which the television character was apparently based (Poe 315). Offspring of a shotgun marriage between a popular boy's adventure story and a feminine romantic fiction, Taylor's Janeway was an interesting experiment but not much more convincing than Mulgrew's (Taylor 1996). *Mosaic* did, however, make quite clear just how fiendishly difficult it is to combine a pro-American myth and female authority in a period of evangelical revivalism and angry white men. Like Hillary Rodham, who had to change her name to Clinton and apologize to America for choosing a career over "staying at home and baking cookies," Kathryn Janeway would have to find a way of surviving the opinion polls.

By the end of Season Three, the Network was desperate to rescue *Voyager's* plummeting ratings, so they reached for two tried and true *Star Trek* solutions: a highly sexualized woman and an asexual drone. Brilliantly, they brought these two solutions together in one female character: Seven of Nine. Not only did actor Jeri Ryan's portrayal of this glamorous cyborg boost ratings by an astonishing 67 percent ("Space Heater"), her character also took the pressure off the Captain to satisfy the sexual voyeurism of which male science fiction audiences are widely suspected. This left the writers and Mulgrew with a more manageable task: how to focus the Captain's uniqueness in her ability to integrate her military authority and her maternalism. As an equally unique kind of surrogate daughter, the character of Seven simplified the task. Physically overdeveloped (thanks to the wonders of foam rubber technology) but emotionally underdeveloped, Seven enables the emergence of Janeway's maternalism without the Captain having to deal with real children. Finally, in Season Four, a hairstyle for the Captain was agreed upon, and she was given a new holodeck hobby, one more in keeping with her role as the inheritor of Captain Picard's humanism: interacting with a holographic Leonardo da Vinci. Gradually, Mulgrew dropped the irritating body language that supposedly signifies authority. She relaxed in the role, and Captain Janeway began to wear her authority like a glove. While it's doubtful she could have slaughtered most of Starfleet and returned the next week to reassume command of her ship – as Picard did in "Best of Both Worlds" – Janeway's authority could nevertheless sustain a degree of complexity and survive some highly unethical command decisions.

But the thing that no starship captain's authority can sustain is a long-term heterosexual relationship, yet each captain appears to desire one. Indeed, *Star Trek: Generations*, the feature-length film that brings together

the crews of Captain Kirk's and Captain Picard's ships, explores this theme. Through SF wizardry, each captain is given the chance to realize his most cherished fantasy – a stable relationship with a woman – but neither man finds in it the masculine challenge of adventure he seems to need. But so perfectly realized is each captain's fantasy that separating himself from it becomes a heroic act in itself. For several reasons, this film is not judged to be one of *Star Trek's* big-screen successes. Perhaps one of those reasons is the representation of Picard's family fantasy. The Picard character is a harmonious blend of Renaissance Man and Enlightenment humanist, whose great loves are Shakespeare and Bach, yet he is represented as desiring a Victorian style family life, complete with an Angel-in-the-House domesticated wife and a flock of overdressed children. The television series did somewhat better, giving him a relationship style more in keeping with the other aspects of his character. In "Lessons," Picard falls in love with the *Enterprise's* new Head of Stellar Cartography, Lt. Commander Nella Darren, every bit as much the career officer as Picard himself – and an accomplished musician as well. The depth of their feeling for each other and their sexual compatibility are conveyed through the beautiful music they create together, she on the piano and he on the flute. But as her commanding officer, Picard cannot juggle the professional and the personal without one risking the other, and neither officer can give up a Starfleet career for love. Nella applies for a transfer, and as they say their goodbyes, they make plans to carry on their love affair on an intermittent basis as best they can. But it's clear from the tone of their voices that they both know they are seeing each other for the last time.

Patriarchal gender norms make it impossible to represent Janeway's sexuality in a similarly straightforward way. As Wagner and Lundeen summarize it,

... a woman who holds legitimate authority is in a bind: if she is "responsively" sexual, she compromises her image of authority; if she is autonomously sexual, she casts doubt on the benevolence of her power; if she is asexual, she casts doubt on her "womanhood." Captain Janeway, whose authority and benevolence must remain beyond question, is constrained to take this last path; and as a consequence, she is seldom able to "let her hair down." "I'm the Captain," [Commentator John] Hiscock quotes Janeway as saying: "There's no time to jump in the sack." Time, however, probably has little do with it. (Wagner and Lundeen 96)

However, twenty-fourth-century technology does fulfil some of Kate Mulgrew's desire to explore Janeway's "femininity" – although it's not exactly the Captain's she gets to explore in "Work Force." In this episode, as a solution to a severe labour shortage on a planet whose culture is a hyper-advanced form of industrialism, most of the *Voyager* crew are abducted. The crew's individual identities are erased and new identities implanted. They are then put to work in the power plant of a vast industrial complex that bears an eerie resemblance to the interior of a Borg cube – so much so that Julia Houston could easily cite this episode to give added weight to her interpretation of Borg assimilation as an analogy for corporate culture's assault on the individuality of employees. On her first day on the job, Janeway meets a fellow worker with whom she quickly develops a sexual relationship. She moves out of her company-owned apartment and down the hall to his. When Chakotay, who has escaped abduction and identity erasure, tries to convince her she's not who she thinks she is, Janeway resists and betrays him to the plant authorities. But the identity transplant has not erased her humanist belief in the authenticity of individual identity, and when the evidence for Chakotay's story begins to mount, she feels compelled to check it out, despite the danger to herself and her lover, and even if it means the end of their blissful relationship. The Doctor is able to restore the Captain's authentic memories, and she bids her lover a tearful goodbye. "I'd offer you a position," she tells him, "I could always use another skilled engineer, but as Captain it wouldn't really be appropriate for me to –" "Fraternize with a member of your crew," he says, finishing her sentence. The restoration of Janeway's authentic – and celibate – authority is signified by a Starfleet protocol that is otherwise rarely invoked. As she emerges from her Ready Room following this heart-wrenching farewell scene, Ensign Kim snaps to attention: "Captain on the bridge!" he announces. The bridge crew spring to their feet in proper deference to her rank. "It may not have been real," Janeway says to Chakotay, as she resumes her place in the Captain's chair, "but it felt like home. If you hadn't come after me I never would've known that I had another life." "Are you sorry I showed up?" he asks. In a voice of utter conviction she replies: "Not for a second."

Janeway's invocation of the real/unreal binary allows her to escape the compromising of her authority which her female sexual responsiveness implies within the patriarchal paradigm. This is not the first time she has used this binary logic to protect her authority from the threat her sexuality poses.

In “Fair Haven,” she abandons a love affair she has started with a hologram in one of Tom Paris’s elaborate holodeck simulations. “He’s not real,” she tells the Doctor. “He’s as real as I am,” counters the holographic Doctor. But rather than deconstruct the real/unreal binary that helps keep her authority free of sexual taint, he points out that it’s not a question of whether or not her holographic lover is real: her *feelings* for him are – and, besides, she can’t have a relationship with a member of the crew, since they are all her subordinates. He also rules out the possibility of an occasional dalliance with a passing alien. In other words, the freedoms both Picard and Kirk have enjoyed with impunity are denied to her. “A hologram may be the only logical solution,” the Doctor advises. Thus, protected from sexual contact with “real” male flesh, Janeway can assert her “femininity” without impeaching her authority.

Logical or not, on one level Janeway’s ambivalence about holographic love interests is understandable, given how popular the notion of disposable women is among her male compatriots. *The Next Generation* alone features numerous examples of how popular made-to-order sex partners are. In this regard, it is worth quoting a passage from Wagner and Lundeen in which they summarize a feminist perspective on this issue:

Rhonda Wilcox draws attention to the use of computer holographics to create “synthetic women” who suit the fancies of TNG’s men. Although women seldom if ever show an interest in creating synthetic males, she points out, the men have a “fascination with synthetic women as opposed to real ones – in particular, with holographic, computer-created women.” Wilcox touches on several examples, including the holographic image of the late Lieutenant Natasha Yar that Data keeps in a drawer, Barclay’s secret holodeck fantasy of Troi as his “Goddess of Empathy,” and Geordi La Forge’s infatuation with a hologram of scientist Leah Brahms whom he initially summoned up for technical advice. The centerpiece of Wilcox’s discussion, however, is “the beautiful Minuet,” who appears to Riker in a holodeck nightclub.... Riker says admiringly of Minuet, “She already knows what I want her to say before I’m aware of it myself.” When Riker asks Minuet how real she is, she replies, “As real as you need me to be.” But Minuet’s face goes blank when she is not being addressed by men; her very existence is a function of male needs. She is, as Wilcox observes, “the ultimate convenience female.” (Wagner and Lundeen 101)

Perhaps it's not merely Janeway's binary notions of what constitutes the "real" as opposed to the "unreal" that accounts for her hesitation in getting sexually involved with a hologram. Perhaps it can also be read as a function of her feminine scruples about sex with a virtual gigolo – the ultimate convenience male. With regard to her sexuality at least, there's not much to stop female fans from reading what they want in Janeway, who obliged by developing into a sufficiently ambiguous character.

Time constrictions, binary notions of the real, and feminine scruples are only three of the excuses used to cover for the conditions patriarchy sets on female authority. Janeway's character is given a fiancé back on Earth, and for the first two seasons of the series this justifies her resisting the sexual tension that's building between herself and her first officer. But in Season Three, *Voyager* briefly establishes contact with Earth, and before the communications network that makes this possible is destroyed, Starfleet is able to transmit to the *Voyager* crew a batch of letters from home. Janeway receives a "Dear John" letter from her old suitor advising her that he had given up hope of *Voyager's* return, moved on with his life, and is now happily married. "It wasn't really a surprise," says Janeway to Chakotay, "I guess I didn't really expect him to wait for me, considering the circumstances. It made me realize that I was using him as a safety net – you know, as a way to avoid becoming involved with someone else." Stating the obvious, Chakotay notes that she doesn't have that excuse any longer. But patriarchy allows her one final way to prove her "womanhood" and still keep her authority intact: rechanneling her libidinal resources into her maternalism.

The foregrounding of Captain Janeway's maternalism is related to a major recurring theme in *Voyager* that challenges what Lauren Berlant describes as "the moralizing hostility of Republican 'family values' rhetoric" that marked the 1992 presidential election. The "family values" theme echoed across America, as the pro-family movement and the Christian Right claimed authority on the question of "the best interests of the child" and repudiated the legitimacy of alternative family constellations, such as single-parent families, female-headed households, gay and lesbian partnerships, and the adoption of children by gay couples. Jumping aboard this reactionary bandwagon, organizations such as the Promise Keepers and the Nation of Islam argued for the return of men to their traditional place at the head of the patriarchal nuclear family. The Democratic response to this

trend took the form of what Berlant calls “an optimistic liberalism about privatization” such as that issued by Hillary Rodham Clinton in 1996:

Clinton’s book *It Takes a Village* argues in chapters such as “Children Are Citizens Too” that the most powerful motive for an expanded context of social justice in the United States is the world adults will bring into being for their children. In [the] 1996 [presidential campaign], the Republicans argued that it takes a “family,” not a “village,” to raise a child; the Democrats responded by claiming that raising nontraumatized citizens requires the beneficent service of a much more broadly defined population of trusted guardians that includes families, communities, teachers, childcare workers, police, social service agencies, and so on. Despite their differences, each of these positions locates the nation’s virtue and value in its intimate zones, in personal acts of pedagogy and sustenance. (Berlant 262)

This “family values versus village values” theme was *Voyager’s* biggest concession to an increasingly conservative American television audience. It was perhaps the only theme that made sense to a largely male team of writers grappling with the idea of female authority, but it had to be played out in the context of a starship with no families aboard – a major difference from the *Enterprise* of *TNG*. The periodic introduction of alien societies featuring nuclear families virtually identical to those of middle America made something of a mockery of the *Star Trek* premise that there are “strange new worlds” to be sought out, for those in the Delta Quadrant seemed blandly familiar.

Constructing alien worlds and civilizations along lines familiar to Western audiences is a big part of what keeps *Star Trek* at some distance from the kind of science fiction that impresses academic critics. As Scott Bukatman notes, science fiction has always “served as a vehicle for satire, social criticism and aesthetic estrangement. In its most radical aspect, science fiction narrates the dissolution of the most fundamental structures of human existence. By positing a world that behaves differently – whether physically or socially – from this one, our world is denaturalised” (8). *Star Trek* falls short of denaturalizing our world because, whether as a television series or a feature-length film, it shares with Hollywood movies “its mainstream positioning and big-budget commodity status”:

Science fiction novels or comics need to sell only a few thousand copies to recoup their costs, so experimentalism is not discouraged, but the Hollywood blockbuster must find (or forge) a mass audience. Science fiction cinema's mode of production has committed it to proven, profitable structures, and so it is also more conservative. (Bukatman 9)

Radical experimentalism is out of the question for *Star Trek*, whose rumoured production costs are between one and two million dollars an episode. Recouping that kind of money requires a lot of corporate sponsorship. A female captain is a risky experiment, and the family values theme is a way of neutralizing the risk. In this regard, it's not just *Star Trek's* alien families of high-heeled wives, breadwinner husbands, and all-American kids that fail the defamiliarization test, but Federation families as well – including the families of origin of *Voyager's* bridge crew. Tom Paris's unresolved oedipal complex has resulted in estrangement from his authoritarian father. As a result, Paris is in a state of arrested development; his adolescent acting-out makes him an excellent project for Janeway's "tough-love" style of maternal care. A troubled child of divorced parents, B'Elanna Torres bears the scars into adulthood, and thus is equally in need of a nurturing mother. Kes is essentially a teenage runaway, and her boyfriend Nelix is an orphan. Although Harry Kim is the product of a functional nuclear family, he is barely out of his teens and thus too young to be so cruelly separated from it. Mother Janeway has her work cut out for her. Audiences who look to *Voyager* to denaturalize our world will have to begin elsewhere. That Janeway's assistants in this parenting project – Commanders Chakotay and Tuvok – are at once men and under her command is about as defamiliarized as the *Voyager* family gets. Yet in this ultra-conservative postfeminist era, perhaps we should be grateful for the message that the answer to dysfunction in the American family is not necessarily a return to the patriarchal kind.

There is a second way in which the family values theme can be read as a concession to conservatism – even a copout. For despite the way in which *Voyager* tries to recapture some of the spirit of the original *Trek* by setting the action seventy thousand light-years away from home and families, it substitutes maternalism for the kind of intense friendship that sustains Janeway's counterpart, Captain Kirk. Thus it prompts the question asked by Wagner and Lundeen:

Why has *Star Trek* failed to exploit the possibility of enhancing the mythos of friendship/*Philia* by developing deep friendships among women? After thirty years, there are still no female friendships that carry anything like the emotional depth or the elements of self-transcendence that one sees in male friendships. It is hard to offer any explanation other than the most painful one: that *Trek* has remained so wedded to patriarchal notions of the “otherness” of women and their sexual (as opposed to social) nature that it has proven unable to take its own central mythos as far as it might. At least, not yet. (115)

Wagner and Lundeen published their study during *Voyager*'s fourth season, and if they were waiting for the series to cross the final frontier of patriarchal gender norms by representing female friendship as a bond equally “sacred” and egalitarian as the one between Kirk and Spock, they waited in vain. Federation family values forbid it. The bond that eventually develops between Janeway and Seven has its moments, but it is always carefully characterized as hierarchical: theirs is a relationship between superior and subordinate on both the professional and the interpersonal levels. Janeway's most intimate friendship is with Chakotay, and Seven's is with the Doctor – and both these relationships are complicated by heterosexual tensions that never let us forget “patriarchal notions of the ‘otherness’ of women and their sexual (as opposed to social) nature.”

Gradually, the idea of Janeway and her crew as a family in every respect but the biological – a family at home on a ship where the gendered distinctions between public and private are destabilized (Barrett and Barrett 181) – came into sharper focus. While this destabilization can certainly be read in terms of what Berlant calls the collapse of “the political and the personal into a world of public intimacy, a nation made for adult citizens” (1), the fact that this microcosm of American nationhood is presided over by a female figure of authority gives *Voyager* a slightly progressive edge. The issue of family versus village is debated vis-à-vis the Borg, who undergo a final phase in their gender transformation across several key episodes, in which we see the Queen and her collective as a mirror held up to reflect American family values as Janeway and her crew (re)define them.

