



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

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**Alpha Babes IN THE Delta Quad:
Postfeminism and the Gendering of the Borg**

1: Modernism/Postmodernism

You will be assimilated.

We will add your political and military distinctiveness to our own.

Your armies will adapt to service US.

NATO is irrelevant.

The UN is irrelevant.

Anti-war protest is irrelevant.

Hell, even Saddam's compliance is irrelevant!

Resistance is futile.

Have a nice day.

George W. Borg.

THIS ITEM OF women's washroom graffiti appeared during the anxious winter of 2003, when Bush and Blair were marshalling their "coalition of the willing." It belongs to the same genre of counterpropaganda that produced hilarious critiques of the war based upon visuals from other science fiction classics – "Start Wars," featuring Bush and Blair as war-obsessed Jedi knights; Bush as "The Turbanator"; and *Mad Magazine's* depiction of the Bush administration as the cast of "Gulf Wars, Episode II: The Clone of the Attack." In addition, as a form of textual poaching, this reworking of the Borg mandate brings to mind the underground fanzines, originally inspired by women's wilful misreadings of the original *Star Trek*: reworking *Trek's* stories forced it to deliver on its promise of gender equality on the final frontier. But, for me, George W. Borg mostly recalls Lynette Russell and Nathan Wolski's "Beyond the Final Frontier: *Star Trek*, the Borg and the Post-colonial." Published in the first issue of *Intensities: The Journal of Cult Media*, this article challenges the dominant critical view of *Star Trek: The Next Generation (TNG)* as "a thinly disguised metaphor for colonialism." "Exploration, colonisation and assimilation are never far from the surface of the STNG text," they concede. "Less apparent, however, are aspects of the series which challenge the hegemonic view of this

narrative and which present a post-colonial critique” (Russell and Wolski). Challenges to the hegemonic view of *Star Trek* are also the topic of the present essay, although postfeminism rather than post-colonialism is its primary focus.

To my knowledge, no feminist reading of *Voyager*’s “Endgame,” which features the Federation’s final encounter with the Borg, has been attempted. Feminist critics have been somewhat dismissive of the *Voyager* series on the basis of its liberal (post)feminist vision of the future – a critique which is relatively easy to support because of liberal feminism’s humanist assumptions. But I see plenty of space for resistant readings in “Endgame” and related episodes when considered together with *The Next Generation*’s encounters with the Borg, most importantly the feature-length film, *First Contact*. Moreover, viewed in the context of our post-9/11 world – a world characterized by a triumphant patriarchal revival that echoes the end of the first wave of political feminism during the Great War – *Star Trek* begins to look like a celebration of the good old days of the second wave. Indeed, when one looks back at *Voyager* from the perspective of *Star Trek*’s current series, *Enterprise*, with its two traditional female stereotypes – the compliant Asian beauty and the frigid bitch (see Minkowitz) – one is apt to long for those good old days, when Captain Kathryn Janeway, flanked by two other outspoken, science-savvy Alpha females, often left the male members of her crew gaping at her prodigious intelligence and appetite for risk.

“We are sometimes said to be living in a postfeminist era,” wrote Susan Moller Okin in 1991. “Whether this is supposed to mean that feminism has been vanquished, or that it has lost its point or its urgency because its aims have been largely fulfilled, the claim is false” (Okin 309). Whether late twentieth-century women viewers of *TNG* were disappointed or heartened by the series’ representation of gender, it was obvious that the twenty-fourth-century setting was postfeminist – although it wasn’t always entirely clear just which of Okin’s two possible definitions its writers subscribed to. Personally, I find that the best approach to *Star Trek*, as to all mainstream popular culture, is to begin with the simple observation that if popular culture told us things about ourselves we didn’t want to know, popular culture wouldn’t be popular for long. As Joseph Campbell famously noted, we must live by some myth or other; thus, if *Star Trek* were to overturn all the myths of gender by which we live our lives, we would not tune in to it, and corporate sponsors would withdraw their support. In other words,

even had Gene Roddenberry been the most radical of feminist television writers, he would still have been obliged to remain within the severe limits placed upon television by both its audience and its sponsors.

Still, the pilot episode of the original *Trek* in 1966 featured a highly rational woman as second in command on the *Enterprise*. Roddenberry created her to balance out his passionate and impulsive starship Captain. But he was coerced by the network into scrapping that pilot and creating a new one, in which the logical Mr. Spock of the planet Vulcan replaced the Earth-woman as Executive Officer. The network's excuse was that acceptance of a woman of intelligence and authority was too much to ask of the American public; an extraterrestrial was supposedly more believable. What Roddenberry did succeed in retaining in his second pilot was a communications officer who was not only female but also Black. Back then, in those pre-feminist days, I was no fan of television, and had even less interest in the silly genre of science fiction, yet I can distinctly remember sitting up and taking notice. This was an important first for television in an era when we had little in the way of an understanding of the relationship between racism and representation, and had not yet invented the word "sexism." The point I'm trying to make here is that, no matter how limited Roddenberry's depiction of gender equality was in the original *Trek* and continued to be in *The Next Generation*, it was his instincts about the inevitability of women's professionalism and authority that earned *Star Trek* a substantial female following.

At the risk of binarizing the critical conversation, I would say that feminist academic critique of *Star Trek* has tended to fall into two schools. The dominant approach – or, more accurately, array of approaches – is framed within a critique of the liberal humanism at the heart of Western thought. The critics within this school focus on the way in which *Star Trek*, grounded as it is within the humanist paradigm, can hardly avoid reinforcing the Enlightenment project, including its racist, sexist, and elitist constructions of Otherness. While not entirely ignoring the opportunities offered by the text for resistant readings, these critics differ from each other in the degree of emphasis they place upon these opportunities. With respect to some of the issues I want to pursue here, this approach is exemplified by Anne Cranny-Francis's "The Erotics of the (cy)Borg: Authority and Gender in the Sociocultural Imaginary." This brilliant article draws on the techno-theory of Donna Haraway to construct a feminist reading of how the use of the cyborg figure in *Star Trek* makes visible the crisis of

authority in Western culture. Noting that the Borg articulate social anxieties about the technological invasion of the human body, Cranny-Francis reveals how the crisis is always resolved in favour of the “white male body” as the locus of authority: “Unlike the cyborg conceptualized by Haraway,” she concludes, “the *Star Trek* cyborgs do not enact a deconstructive narrative about origins, though their deconstructive potential is available to the resistant reader” (161).

It’s this deconstructive potential that links the dominant critical approach to a school of feminist criticism that tries to account for *Star Trek*’s popularity among casual women viewers and more enthusiastic female fans by searching out the ways in which women may be reading – or willfully misreading – the text. The work of Robin Roberts exemplifies this approach. She is less concerned about *Star Trek* as hopelessly entrapped by its liberal humanist bias than she is with major feminist issues and the ways in which female (and “feminized”) characters challenge entrenched attitudes about gender and women’s roles. Her *Sexual Generations* (1999), a thematic study of gender issues in *The Next Generation*, and her article on women as scientists in *Voyager* (2000) give some credit to *Star Trek*’s creators and writers for repeatedly testing the constraints which Roddenberry’s humanist vision places upon them. Roberts’ take on Captain Janeway is essentially positive, especially as the character evolves over the early seasons of *Voyager* and comes to epitomize “a more feminist version of science” (2000 281). As might be expected, Cranny-Francis’s view is negative: Janeway’s “female authority seems mostly to be represented by being tight-lipped and motherly by turn” (158). If taken together, these views reveal a character more complicated and interesting than each reading on its own suggests. Unlike the female characters of *TNG*, Janeway can hardly be read as marginalized. Indeed, by setting the action of *Voyager* in the Delta Quadrant, far beyond the borders that define the locus of patriarchal power and the white males who embody it, the margin is quite literally transformed into the centre.

* * *

“Speaking as a hierarchical, essentialistic, teleological, metahistorical, universalist humanist, I imagine I have some explaining to do,” writes Terry Eagleton in *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996 93). This statement illustrates the defensive posture forced upon virtually all humanist projects by their postmodernist critics. But until postmodernist theorizing can

translate into something more substantial than unrelenting scepticism – something more than market solutions, that is – we are pretty much stuck with modernism and the humanist ethos that underpins it. Feminist theorists Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway have attempted to circumvent this modernist/postmodernist binary by offering the political fictions of the nomad and the cyborg, each of which represents a subject both multiple and situated, both inside and outside postmodernism. But while the nomad and the cyborg are seductive invitations of escape from the universal subject of liberal humanism, the jury is still out on just how effective these alternative political fictions are as substitutes for narratives of liberation directed at change in the real world. On the other hand, as the premise of *TNG* demonstrates, acquiescing to the modernist/postmodernist binary can reproduce the caricatures of the humanist and postmodernist subjects that are the product of the debate itself.

In 1987, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* was launched into the teeth of a storm. The biggest intellectual revolution since the Enlightenment had provoked a crisis in Western knowledge that was beginning to trickle down from the academy. The insights of postmodernist and postcolonial theory, which had remained largely confined to academic discourse throughout the earlier years of the decade, were starting to creep into the work of a more widely read community of critics of popular culture – and of American culture more generally. Over against this was a resurgence of cultural and political conservatism that had swept the Reagan-Bush team to power and threatened to undo the achievements of the multiple liberation movements of the sixties and seventies. The uniquely American brand of liberal humanism that had made Roddenberry's vision so popular among the hardcore fans of the original *Trek* would have to renegotiate a space for itself between these two cultural currents. What made this so tricky was the not-infrequent difficulty in telling them apart. Wise enough not to try, Roddenberry and his team of writers decided to actively engage criticisms from both/all sides by embodying them in the character of Q, a member of an omnipotent species with seemingly unlimited powers. To Captain Picard and his crew, Q's motives and methods are as obfuscating as any postmodern text, while his arrogance and indifference to the plight of "inferior species" echo the elitism of ultra-conservatism's spiritual ancestors, the privileged classes of pre-Enlightenment Western culture. Pitted against Picard, the signifier of everything Roddenberry admired in the liberal humanism of the Enlightenment – not only its ideology of

individualism, rationalism, and secularism, but perhaps also its whiteness, its maleness, and its paternalist notions of the “civilized” – Q came to represent the challenges confronted by an America embroiled in “culture wars,” while the struggle between these two archetypal figures established the binary terms within which *The Next Generation* was framed.

In *Star Trek: The Human Frontier* (2001), Michèle and Duncan Barrett look back on *TNG* as having dramatized the underlying issue around which *Star Trek*, in all its manifestations, revolves – namely, its “high-minded utopian humanism” and “the qualities and morality of humanity.” And while it’s precisely the dislocation between “humanism” and “humanity” that guarantees anti-Enlightenment scholars a limitless field of opportunities for critique, there is also no question that this gap is precisely what *TNG* set out to negotiate. In this regard, “there is a particular framing of the series in which the basic question is posed: can humanity be defended when charged with its manifest crimes?” (Barrett and Barrett 57). This question opened the series; it’s also what closed it:

Q then convenes a court scene, reminiscent of a surreal Spanish Inquisition, in which the characters in the dock are the captain and crew of the *Enterprise*. “Before this gracious court now appear these humans to answer for the multiple and grievous savageries of their species.” Seven years later, as the final episode (“All Good Things ...”) concludes, Captain Picard finds himself back in the same courtroom, he hopes for the last time, he says. Q’s reply sums up the series, and the whole of *Star Trek*’s interrogation of human morality: “You just don’t get it, do you, Jean-Luc? The trial never ends.”

Star Trek is itself this trial. In the main, what we get is the defence: humanity’s attempts to put wrongs right, to improve society and prevent war. According to *Star Trek*, the world of the twenty-fourth century has eliminated poverty, famine, social class and money. These are all seen as primitive problems that have been solved by an enlightened galactic democracy. The story is told from the viewpoint that the human race is more than morally credible; its crimes are all in the distant past. (Barrett and Barrett 57–58)

Q has a point: the trial never ends because history never ends. Indeed, it’s Q himself who initiates the story arc that will take *Star Trek* history seventy thousand light-years into Borg space and to the Federation’s encounter

with absolute difference – a collective consciousness utterly unlike the collection of individual minds that defines the humanist model. In Season Two of *TNG*, Q instantly transports the *Enterprise* to a region of the galaxy yet uncharted by the Federation. The ship is boarded by the Borg, one of which scans the *Enterprise* as the crew looks on in fear and wonder. “Interesting isn’t it?” Q remarks: “Not a he, not a she, not like anything you’ve ever seen before” (“Q Who?”). That the Otherness of the Borg would be introduced in terms of the absence of gender is significant, for gender is one of the “primitive problems” that still remains to be “solved by an enlightened galactic democracy.” It raises the question of how women are positioned within *Star Trek’s* vast constellation of Others.

Roddenberry and his co-creators took a lot of flak for the female caretakers of *TNG*. The characters of Tasha Yar, Chief Security Officer; Deanna Troi, ship’s counsellor; Beverley Crusher, ship’s doctor; and Guinan, bartender and confidante, constitute what Jon Wagner and Jan Lundeen call a “female matrix” that provides an “umbrella of safety, health, and psychological security” that “echoes the functions once associated with home and hearth and, especially since the nineteenth century, with women of the middle class.” Even the ship’s computer, they note, speaks in the voice of *Star Trek’s* matriarch, Majel Barrett, wife of Gene Roddenberry (91–92). This female matrix is reflected in the design of the *Enterprise*, described by Daniel Bernardi as “markedly feminine – smooth, circular, ... fetishizable, ... bright clean and comfortable” (quoted in Russell and Wolski). Not only does this maternal environment provide “the frame within which the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the men stand for the human drama, the drama of everyman as everyperson” – in short, a drama in keeping with the humanist ideal (Wagner and Lundeen 92). It also stands in striking contrast to the vessels of the Borg, described by Russell and Wolski as “dark, cold, metallic cubes, ... functional rather than aesthetic objects,” which, like their virtually identical crewmembers, “lack any form of differentiation” – including gender difference. In the context of gendered life aboard the *Enterprise*, where sharp distinctions are made between the private sphere of family, romance, gossip, and leisure activity and the public sphere of exploration, diplomacy, technobabble, and military defence (Barrett and Barrett 181), the absence of these distinctions among the Borg is a big part of what makes them so terrifying.

Significantly, the point at which the boundary between Borg and human begins to break down is precisely the point in the saga where the

Borg become gendered. In Season Five, a year after “Best of Both Worlds,” the episode in which Picard is assimilated by the Borg and turned into a weapon against the Federation, an Away Team discovers an injured drone on a deserted moon. It has been left for dead following a Borg assimilation raid. The drone is an adolescent – and male. Dr. Crusher persuades Captain Picard to transport the Borg to the *Enterprise* for medical treatment. While waiting for the drone to regain consciousness following surgery, the senior officers meet to decide its fate. They feel perfectly justified in their plan to reconfigure the Borg’s biochips by introducing an “invasive program” – in essence, infecting it with a computer virus. Upon the Borg’s rejoining the hive mind, the virus would act as a weapon of mass destruction against the Borg collective. The Doctor balks: “We’re talking about annihilating an entire race.” “We’re at war!” insists Riker. Picard concurs: “They’ve declared war on our way of life: we’re to be assimilated.” Beverly is unmoved. “Think of them as a single collective being,” the Captain implores, “There is no one Borg who is more of an individual than your arm or your leg.” “How convenient!” the doctor shoots back: “When I look at my patient, I don’t see a collective consciousness, I don’t see a hive. I see a living, breathing boy who’s been hurt and who needs our help.” By the end of the episode, the drone with the “designation” Two-of-Five, is become a fully individuated teenager with the decidedly masculine name of Hugh (“I, Borg”).

How the crew and the young drone settle upon “Hugh” as an appropriate name is an interesting play on the binary language around which this episode turns – namely, the self/other and I/thou constructions so central to humanist individualism. The drone’s individuation requires that he learn the language of “self and other” in the context of one-on-one relationships, but it gives him some difficulty because he knows nothing of the distinction between “I” and “thou.” He knows only the “we” of the Borg, and the plural “you” with which the collective addresses its Others. Exactly who gets to be a “you” in a personal relationship is something the drone can’t get quite straight. Dr. Crusher coaches him: “I’m Beverly, and *you* ...?” “I am *you!*” says the drone. La Forge stops Crusher before she can offer a correction because he hears the name *Hugh* echoed in the word *you* – and appears to find it appropriate for the drone to name himself. “I am Hugh,” says the drone to the subversive delight of La Forge and Crusher. Indeed, on one level the drone has succeeded in becoming a single, individuated, humanist male with the freedom to name himself “Hugh,” but on the other he remains identified with the Federation’s Other – or perhaps the plurality

of *you's* that constitutes the Borg collective. Hugh's choice of name may be read as a subtle prefiguring of his choice to return to the collective, even though Picard has offered him refugee status aboard the *Enterprise*. As we later learn, in "Descent," Hugh manages to infect the Borg with a virus after all – the virus "I, Borg" which, in Borg language, is a non-computable paradox not so different from the one ordered up by Picard in the first place.

Despite having come a long way from not even registering as a life form on the ship's sensors ("Q Who?") to becoming "a living, breathing boy," the Borg in masculine form represents the most logical phase of their gender transformation, for it is entirely consistent with the masculine coding of both technology and cuboidal forms. But by gendering the Borg and making them capable of individuation, the writers took some of the terrifying edge off their otherness. Hence, when it came time to deliver a feature-length film that would capitalize on the enormous popularity of "Best of Both Worlds," producer Rick Berman and screenwriters Brannon Braga and Ronald Moore were faced with the challenge of upping the ante. For these men, it would seem that the only thing more terrifying than a genderless horde with a group mind is a female with a mind of her own. Enter the Borg Queen. Her gender identity is prefigured in the opening scenes of *First Contact*. A Borg cube approaching Earth orbit is attacked by a fleet of Federation ships under the command of Captain Picard, who knows from personal experience just where to aim a coordinated volley of quantum torpedoes for best effect. As the cube begins to explode in a shower of green flame, a hatch on one of its faces opens and a vessel emerges which, in its spherical shape, echoes the contours of the *Enterprise*. The Queen is poised to rendezvous with human history.

In the conclusion to their article, Russell and Wolski note that "*Star Trek* has become increasingly self-reflexive," and that this "self-reflection is apparent in those episodes [of *TNG*] which focus on the Borg and on Federation citizens who reject Starfleet's colonial ideology." In other words, *Star Trek* is moving in the direction of postcolonialism. Barrett and Barrett would agree, but sum up their observations in more general terms:

Star Trek is moving in a direction beyond the characteristic assumptions of what is called "modern" culture. In this sense, *Star Trek* is becoming "post-modern." But it is important to register that it is

post-modern in terms of its *substance*. All too often post-modernism is reduced to the question of *style*, and for this reason we wanted to emphasize the ways in which the post-modernization of *Star Trek* is to be found in its rejection of some of the key *ideas* of western modernity. (Barrett and Barrett 194)

The postmodernization of *Star Trek* is apparent in *First Contact* – most notably in its questioning of the humanist assumption that equates white Western masculinity with rationality. Picard’s grip on reason is revealed as fragile – a theme that had been prefigured in several *TNG* episodes subsequent to “Best of Both Worlds,” which left the impression that the Captain suffers something akin to post-traumatic stress disorder. The self-reflexivity noted by Russell and Wolski with respect to colonial ideology is, with respect to gender ideology, also apparent in *First Contact*. This may be inferred in the postmodern irony that undermines traditional gender norms, even as it reinforces them. The Borg Queen, sexual temptress and signifier of Western patriarchy’s most fearful sexual nightmares, is hilariously exaggerated in her threat to heroic masculinity. In the meticulous attention paid to the phallic details of Zefram Cochrane’s ship, the *Phoenix* is similarly exaggerated. Fetishized by Picard and Data, they caress its hull and murmur intimately to each other until they are interrupted by Deanna Troi: “Do you three want to be alone?” she mocks. These and other puncturings of the masculine mystique suggest a level of self-reflexive irony one doesn’t normally associate with the high-minded humanism of *The Next Generation*.

The shift from a weekly television series to a feature-length film requires a change of cinematic convention. Seven seasons’ worth of *TNG* episodes had provided room to develop all of the main characters – including the women. For example, Deanna Troi was slowly transformed from the emotive “Counsellor Cleavage,” with a talent for stating the obvious, into a competent and properly uniformed bridge officer with some intelligent lines to deliver. Similarly, Beverly Crusher, initially the nervously over-protective mother of a teenager, became a valued and respected scientist in her own right and a crucial member of important Away Team missions. But the shift to the big screen and the action-adventure mode often means that female characters get shifted to the periphery so as not to distract from the male stars. Indeed, stereotypically feminine women are often employed as a cinematic device for showcasing masculine heroics and superior intelligence.

For example, in the opening few scenes of *First Contact*, the most often repeated dialogue issuing from the lips of Dr. Crusher and Counsellor Troi are the monosyllabic lines: “Who?” “How?” “What?” “Why?” – to which the men respond by providing well-informed and often highly technical answers. Indeed, after the third time this occurs in an obvious way, one has to wonder if it isn’t a send-up of the convention. At any rate, it does have the effect of shifting aside these two friendly and familiar females to make room for two unfamiliar ones – Lily Sloan and the Borg Queen – who are in many ways their diametrical opposites.

The African-American Lily Sloan, assistant engineer to Zefram Cochran, has not known the comforts and privileges enjoyed by twenty-fourth-century women like Counsellor Troi and Dr. Crusher. As citizens of a devastated mid-twenty-first-century Earth, she and Cochran have survived the nuclear Third World War and divide their time between fighting off the remaining hostile factions, perfecting warp drive, and building the *Phoenix* out of whatever leftover military equipment and materials they have managed to scrounge. Lily is a tough, outspoken, battle-hardened realist, who is perfectly capable of taking care of herself – and Cochran too, who drinks to excess and needs her help in keeping him dedicated to their joint project. Unlike Beverly, who is fully prepared to carry out Picard’s suicidal order to defend the *Enterprise* against the overwhelming technology of the Borg “because he’s the Captain,” Lily is quick to see through Picard’s fortress of psychological defences and into his tortured soul where, for six years, he has subconsciously nursed an irrational obsession with revenge against the Borg. In desperation to get him to agree to evacuate the crew and destroy the Borg infested *Enterprise*, she storms into his Ready Room and engages him in an angry exchange: “Oh, hey, I’m sorry,” she spits out in a potent mix of sarcasm and rage, “I didn’t mean to interrupt your little quest. Captain Ahab has to go hunt his whale.” This shot comes very close to hitting the mark, and she presses harder. “Jean-Luc, blow up the damn ship!” “No!” screams Picard, as he swings out with his phaser rifle and smashes an adjacent display case of model starships.

Quickly sensing that she has penetrated his defences, Lily provokes him again – quietly, this time. “See you around, Ahab,” she shrugs, and turns as if to leave. Stunned into self-insight, Picard begins to quote to himself the relevant passage from *Moby Dick*: “. . . and he piled upon the whale’s white hump the sum of all the rage and hate felt by his whole race. If his chest had been a cannon, he’d have shot his heart upon it.” “What?” says Lily,

echoing the feminine one-liners from the opening scenes. “*Moby Dick*,” he replies. “Actually, I never read it,” she answers coyly, thus giving Picard a stereotypical female invitation to show off his superior literary knowledge – thereby also nudging him into completing the working through of his madness. He proudly straightens into the manly pose so characteristic of the elegant and normally rational Jean-Luc Picard: “Ahab spent years hunting the white whale that crippled him – a quest for vengeance. But, in the end, it destroyed him and his ship,” he lectures. “I guess he didn’t know when to quit,” says Lily in her best college freshman voice. Restored to himself at long last, Picard heads for the bridge to belay his last order.

Lily, the petite Black female “Other” from the “primitive” twenty-first century, is the voice of reason in this scene. Not only does she win in her confrontation with *Star Trek*’s signifier of Enlightenment rationalism, she also kick-starts a stalled plot-line. Picard has another fearsome female to confront before he can claim his redemption. Not yet conscious of the existence of the Borg Queen, he enters main engineering, where the phallic shaft of the warp engine throbs out in sympathy with the newly awakened sexuality of Data, who appears to have fallen under the Queen’s spell. Astonished as he watches her slink into the open, Picard instantly recognizes her as the truth he has been repressing since his assimilation as Locutus of Borg. “What’s wrong, Locutus,” she asks, “Have you forgotten me so quickly? We were very close, you and I. You can still hear our song,” she says, referring to Picard’s lingering ability to detect the Borg telepathically – evidence of what Russell and Wolski would call “the enemy within.” “Yes,” he breathes, “I remember you – *you* were there all the time!” Split-second flashbacks to Picard’s assimilation are cut into the scene. Picard now has to confront the truth of what was really involved in that terrifying assault.

Cranny-Francis relates Picard’s assimilation to “the social crisis over authority, which characterizes late twentieth-century Western society” – the same crisis which, as I have argued, Roddenberry’s team introduced into *TNG* through the character of Q. In “Best of Both Worlds,” Picard’s “white male body is actually blanched to bone-white as part of his assimilation by the Borg. Whereas the most literal reading of this transformation is that the loss of pigmentation signifies the elimination of humanity, another reading is that it is an overdetermined reference to the ‘white male body’ of liberal humanism – the site of ultimate authority” (Cranny-Francis 149). Picard is transformed from the autonomous subject

of liberal humanism into Picard/Locutus, a cyborg with “third term” status: “Like the transvestite or transsexual, or like the bisexual, he/it represents a breaking down of boundaries; familiar polarities are destroyed by a ‘third term,’ which is both and neither of the polar terms. In the case of transvestites, transsexuals, and bisexuals, those polarities are male/female and heterosexual/homosexual” (148–49). In addition to this reading, there is one whose analogues are more consistent with the exclusive heteronormativity that continues to inform the *Star Trek* text, despite its increasing postmodernization.

As Picard struggles to reintegrate his memories of assimilation, he orders the Queen to release Data, to which she replies: “Are you offering yourself to us?” “Offering myself?” he asks, momentarily puzzled. “That’s it! I remember now. It wasn’t enough to assimilate me. I had to give myself *freely* to the Borg – to *you*. You wanted more than just another Borg drone.” In addition to illuminating the dominatrix aspect of the Borg Queen, these words recall John Stuart Mill’s nineteenth-century insight into patriarchy:

Men do not want solely the obedience of women, they want their sentiments. All men, except the most brutish, desire to have, in the woman most nearly connected with them, not a forced slave but a willing one, not a slave merely, but a favourite. They have therefore put everything in practice to enslave their minds. The masters of all other slaves rely, for maintaining obedience, on fear; either fear of themselves, or religious fears. The masters of women wanted more than simple obedience.... (201–2)

Picard’s fear of himself, fear of his possible collusion in his seduction by the Queen, is not unlike women’s traditional fear of themselves – as, for example, in cases of sexual assault when women internalize the accusation of having “asked for it.” Within the heterosexual imaginary of *Star Trek*, successful (cy)Borgification is not only like acquiring “third term” status but also like becoming a feminized Other. Clearly, the two overlap. However, resistance is not necessarily futile: “But I resisted, I fought you,” says Picard to the Queen. “It’s not too late, let Data go, and I will take my place at your side.” But the Borg Queen cannot be taken in by one of her own seductive tricks. Significantly, it’s Data – the android Other – who initiates the action sequence that deposes the Queen. And when she is finally

destroyed, he says: “Strange: part of me is sorry she is dead. For a time I was tempted by her offer.” “How long a time?” Picard insists upon knowing. “Zero point six-eight seconds,” Data replies. Thus a more intimate bond is formed across the divide between human and android. Within Roddenberry’s original humanist vision, this kind of bond between man and machine is the preferred one.

* * *

Cranny-Francis reads the defeat of the Borg Queen as “written in a complex of narratives that confirm the most conservative evaluations of the feminine”:

Rather than being a powerful female deity, she is Medusa, the Gorgon, a female monster (or monstrous woman) who renders men powerless (mythically, turning them into stone; metaphorically, turning them into slaves to her will). She is the succubus figure who tempts men from the path of righteousness and true (masculine) authority into being her slaves. She is the polluting temptress who turns men away from their authoritative roles as mind/authority/power by offering them (the pleasures of) the flesh. So although she does articulate a few good lines, the Borg Queen is constituted within some very conservative narratives (in which the role of the powerful feminine is unequivocally evil). (157–58)

All true, of course. Although her prey is Picard, she is nevertheless the perfect counterpart to Zefram Cochran, who in many ways is a send-up of early nineteen-sixties masculinity. High on bad booze and energized by hard rock-'n-roll, he hits on Counsellor Troi, who spends the whole of her first interview with him trying to keep his hands off her. His *Phoenix* is the Harley-Davidson of the early space age, right down to the shimmy it exhibits at impulse speed. Cochran’s motives for building this phallic hotrod have nothing to do with ushering in a new era for humankind, and everything to do with making money so he can retire to some tropical island full of naked women. But this all adds up to the endearing quality of failing to live up to the whitewashed legend he will become in the twenty-fourth century. In short, for those more attuned to the playfulness of the *Star Trek* text – its ludic postmodernism – there are alternative ways of entering it.

For example, “since *First Contact*,” writes Julia Houston, guide to the Sci-Fi/Fantasy site at About.com, “the Borg have offered us more than simple assimilating sameness”:

The Borg Queen is a perfect adversary for the turn of the millennium. I mean, she’s fabulous. She’s so evil and so powerful and so ... pleased with herself. And her power, modeled directly on the natural order of the hive queen, is easy to perceive and easy to admire. She makes order of chaos, and she completely believes in what she’s doing. Since her physical body can be destroyed without destroying her essence, she seems more an ideal than a person.

So one way to look at her, especially if you’re in a somewhat detached frame of mind, is as a creature of feminism. She exudes authority, feminine authority: absolute yet highly manipulative. The society over which she reigns is completely different from the patriarchal societies which oppose her ... and which she conquers. Of course, since she’s incredibly evil, I wouldn’t want to elect her to Congress or anything, but she sure beats the crap out of the Wicked Witch of the West as a symbol of female power. (Houston 1999a)

An academic by profession, Houston speaks primarily in the voice of a *Star Trek* fan when writing for the Sci-Fi/Fantasy web site – although evidence of her erudition is seldom far from the surface. She also reads the Borg as reflective of changes in the political economy of Western society. “It’s almost impossible to look at the inside of a Borg ship and see all those cubicles and drones and not think of the inside of a corporation,” writes Houston. “Working for a corporation that does not value your individuality is all too easy these days. Standardized efficiency, compliance with company policy, business attire ... and those horrid office cubicle partitions all conspire to assimilate you. Turning into an office drone is often the only way to survive until 5 PM” (Houston 1999). Houston goes on to enumerate examples of the horrors of cultural homogenization and its assimilating effects as it spreads around the world through globalization. But there is also an important sense in which the Borg are not merely a pangalactic corporation that reduces its workforce to automatons with no minds of their own. More tellingly, they are a reflection of postmodern culture. The Borg as described by Q are “the ultimate user,” a technologically determined species interested primarily in Federation technology,

which they identify as “something they can consume” (“Q-Who?”). The Borg are the ultimate consumer society, obsessed with consumption for its own sake and embodying what Fredric Jameson calls “the cultural logic of late capitalism.”