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# **Black Women and Motherhood in Contemporary Cinematic Science Fiction**

Since the introduction of Lieutenant Uhura (Nichelle Nichols), the communications officer in the original *Star Trek* TV series in the 1960s, black female characters have been included, increasingly, in contemporary television and cinematic science fiction. Characters such as Guinan<sup>1</sup> in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, represent an incursion into the usually male, and almost exclusively white, world of contemporary science fiction. This paper will explore the emergence and significance of images of black women and motherhood in contemporary apocalyptic science fiction film paying particular attention to gendered and raced social relations. My analysis suggests that black female characters in these films are usually represented as “heroic mothers” whose portrayal draws on the long-standing mammy stereotype and occasionally as hypersexualized victims. I will focus on images of black women in a sub genre of science fiction, apocalyptic science fiction, which has become popularized in recent Hollywood movies such as *X-Men* (2000), *Strange Days* (1999), *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996) and *The Matrix* (1999). I have selected these films because they represent points of contrast in their portrayal of black women as mothers who are pivotal to development of the apocalyptic storylines. I suggest that the popularity of these films, in particular, like other contemporary science fiction, is linked to their speculation on the nature of contemporary reality and their mirroring of the fears, joys and aspirations expressed in contemporary popular culture about gender, “race,” sexuality, consciousness, religion and identity.

## **Black women in science fiction films**

As a genre associated primarily with a white adolescent male audience in its development in North America, science fiction along with other s/f

(speculative fact and fiction) narratives has undergone a noticeable transformation both in terms of the kinds of stories that are told, as well as authorship, in recent decades. Stories by and about women and people of colour have become a part of the terrain of contemporary s/f. Toronto-based Caribbean writer Nalo Hopkinson and African-American Octavia E. Butler are examples of black women science fiction writers whose works have been critically well-received and whose stories emerge from specifically black, female, Caribbean and African-American historical experiences and perspectives.<sup>2</sup> My primary concern in this paper is the way in which black women are portrayed in mainstream s/f. In this regard, in mainstream contemporary s/f films and novels, black women characters are usually portrayed as “mothers,” in particular, what I call, “heroic mothers.” These are women whose embodiment of the “hero myth” as discussed by Joseph Campbell<sup>3</sup> in the development of the story is refracted through stereotypic cinematic images of black motherhood. As heroes, they go out into the world, usually reluctantly, to face a foe (whether physical or ideological), do battle (using an assortment of techniques on physical and psychological terrains), and although they do not necessarily “return,” to either a physical, geographical or psychological place, they themselves and others with whom they interact are transformed by their actions. As mothers, they nurture the male hero as sage, confidant and rescuer. Their portrayal as lover of the male hero is very rare. As Helford (2002) notes, black women in science fiction movies are usually portrayed as “mystic mammies” or the hypersexualized and usually victimized “mocha-chocolata-ya-ya” objects of male desire .

The films *Star Trek: First Contact*, *Strange Days* and *The Matrix* provide a view of black women as ethical and moral compasses whose wisdom mediates their relationships to white, male protagonists. In these Hollywood science fiction films, the audience is presented with black women whose visual representation is largely in stark contrast to the long-established, Hollywood depiction of black mothers as mammies. However, the emotional and affective characteristics of mammy remain, in many instances, firmly in place. In *Strange Days*, for instance, Mace (Angela Basset) is a black leather-clad, muscular, athletic, driver and bodyguard. She provides counsel to Lenny Nero, an amoral ex-cop who traffics a type of cerebral narcotic based on illegal tapes of other people’s experiences directly from their cerebral cortex which is then “downloaded” into the user’s brain via a mechanism that fits over the top of the head that is referred to as a “squid” in the film. She not only repeatedly rescues the male anti-hero, Lenny Nero, played by British actor, Ralph Fiennes, she also uncharacteristically “gets the guy” in the film’s conclusion when they share a lingering kiss thereby making the transition from mother to lover.

Echoing Guinan, the centuries’ old bartender in the Ten Forward lounge who provides sage advice to Captain Jean-Luc Picard and the other denizens of the Enterprise in the *Star Trek: The New Generation* television series, these women frequently act as confidants who either directly or indirectly sort out morally ambiguous predicaments for other characters. Along with ethical,

spiritual and philosophical nurturance and advice, they sometimes offer physical protection which serves to further the (usually) white, male protagonist on his heroic quest. For example, Mace, the bodyguard in *Strange Days*, saves the anti-hero Lenny Nero numerous times throughout the film, supposedly on the basis of her love for him. It is not until the final scene of the film that the nature of this love is fully revealed as “romantic.” Another example which more closely conforms to the mammy stereotype is the figure of The Oracle (Gloria Foster) in *The Matrix*. She is a cigarette-smoking, middle-aged, light-skinned black woman who serves up esoteric, metaphysical wisdom that helps the hero, Neo/Thomas Anderson (Keanu Reeves) understand his destiny as the saviour, “The One.” Significantly, Neo meets the Oracle baking cookies in the kitchen of her inner city apartment. This scene provides an obvious parallel to the historic cinematic mammy’s physical and metaphorical location firmly rooted in the kitchen and in the performance of mothering work.

One of the most blatant examples of the portrayal of black women as sage, confidant and rescuer in contemporary science fiction film is the character of Lily Sloane (Alfre Woodard) in *Star Trek: First Contact*. Lily becomes the first twenty-first century earth person to see outer space from the deck of a twenty-fourth century space ship. The plot of this film involves saving twenty-first century earth from an invasion by the Borg, who in the *Star Trek* universe are the ultimate villains. A civilization based on privileging a collective rather than individualized consciousness, the Borg are a composite of organic and computer-based technology whose existence is sustained through systematic conquest of other civilizations and “assimilation” through implanting computer technology directly into the body and the absorption of the individual into the consciousness of the collective. Highly successful as signalled by their motto, “resistance is futile,” the Borg represent a dystopian vision of human/technological interaction.

In *First Contact*, the Borg plan to conquer earth by intercepting the first communication in the year 2063 between humans and other worldly beings. In this way, the course of human history would be irrevocably altered thereby making the twenty-fourth century Enterprise and the technology that created it null and void. Violating the “prime directive,” an ethical principle of non-interference with the development of less-technologically advanced societies, the Enterprise crew “beams” itself down to 2063 Iowa where they meet Zephram Cochrane (James Cromwell), the pioneer of “warp” space travel on the eve of his historic April 4th rocket launch. Significantly, Lily is this man’s partner. When she becomes hurt and needs medical attention, she is transported aboard the twenty-fourth century Enterprise with Dr. Crusher (Gates McFadden). She regains consciousness unexpectedly while onboard and is subsequently drawn into the action that unfolds aboard the Enterprise in the twenty-fourth century.

In a critical sequence in which Captain Jean-Luc Picard (Patrick Stewart) must make a decision of whether or not to abandon the Enterprise in the face

of a Borg invasion of the ship, Lily does what neither Mr. Worf (Michael Dorn), Picard's trusty Klingon strategic military advisor, nor Dr. Crusher, the medical officer, could persuade him to do: change his mind and abandon the ship. In sequences reminiscent of Mace in relationship to Lenny Nero, she clearly articulates the moral dilemma with which Picard is faced, outlines his choices and convinces him in no uncertain terms about the moral right of abandoning ship. What Lily offers Picard is "common sense" served up using verbal and communicative performance styles of late twentieth-century African-American females. In doing so, she literally serves as the gut for Picard's head. Picard ultimately changes his mind and issues the order to abandon ship; however, he himself stays behind and has a show down with the ultimate symbol of evil in this film, the Borg Queen (Alice Krige), the bad mother of them all. Making her entrance, memorably, as a human-machine hybrid head and torso with a writhing, twitching spine which is dropped into an awaiting lower body, the Borg Queen is Lily's good mother antithesis. Her insatiable quest for power symbolized as galactic domination is underlined with a not-so-subtle subtext of bad mothering. This bad mothering is underscored by the Borg Queen's orders for death on a grand scale and her subversion of the will of the individual as the Queen of Borg who are symbolically her children in the bee hive-like organization of Borg society complete with "drones" who act as soldier-protector-children of the Queen. Acting supposedly for the good of the Collective, it becomes apparent that the Borg Queen's actions may, in fact, be ultimately self-serving and self-aggrandizing. The Borg Queen is Lily's contrast and a representation of an iconic science fiction bad mother. The creature with whom Ellen Ripley (Signourney Weaver) does battle in the *Alien* movie series, represented in the second film, *Aliens* (1986), as a monstrous queen/mother, represents the quintessential bad mother. She is parasitical, manipulative, destructive and ultimately self-serving. The film's climax features Ripley, now a surrogate mother to a young girl, Newt (Carrie Henn), in a dramatic show down with the alien queen.

Noticeable in these apocalyptic science fiction films is the absence of sexuality in black female characters in the presence of the white, male protagonist if playing supportive mother. Unless the female characters are victimized in their relationships with the white, male, characters they remain asexual. For example, in *X-Men* (2000), Storm (Halle Berry) is the single black, female mutant who is a member of Dr. Charles Xavier's (Patrick Stewart) inner group of mutants. The character is dressed in brief, revealing outfits in keeping with the comic-book tradition of sexualized female superhero characterization. Unlike the white female heroic characters, Dr. Jean Grey (Famke Janssen) and Rogue (Anna Paquin), she is not romantically partnered with any male character. She is however victimized sexually in her interactions with the character, Sabre Tooth. Storm also plays mother in one scene when she appears, almost magically, to comfort a dying white man, a previously anti-mutant United States senator who has been turned into a mutant.

Mace in *Strange Days* appears exceptional in that the character forges a relationship with the white male lead. However, this does not take place until after what appears to be years of unrequited love on Mace's part for Lenny. Mace is involved in an emotional triangle with Lenny and his former lover, Faith. Lenny's real-time relationship with Faith is long over but he relives their relationship through "play-backs" which are the taped memories from his cerebral cortex. It is only by the end of the movie, after Lenny has released his relationship with Faith, that Mace's and Nero's love for one another is eroticized and revealed in the final frames of the movie through a kiss on the streets of Los Angeles on New Year's Eve.

In these films, it is apparent that the emotional-affective characteristics of the mammy have been melded with the physical characteristics of the hypersexualized stereotype of black womanhood to yield a hybrid creation. Black women who are nurturers of white males (even if that nurturing is portrayed as a gun that is trained on those who threaten him as in the case of the bodyguard Mace) are almost always cast in the role of protective mother. Mainstream science fiction as a genre is particularly notorious for the hypersexualized, vacuous "babe" roles to which female characters are often confined. Black women in science fiction when they have escaped the "babe" role have been relegated to that of "mom" (or is that "mammy"?).

### **Considering "race" and gender**

In the *Star Trek* universe, human beings have supposedly resolved racism, sexism and classism. *Star Trek* creator, Gene Roddenberry, set out to create multi-cultural, multi-racial crews in his series to reflect his vision of a united humanity. Nevertheless, race is implicitly coded in the alien bodies of the *Star Trek* crew and the different civilizations with whom they interact. *First Contact* presents a late twenty-first century America in which inter-racial marriage is a taken-for-granted occurrence. Lily is, in fact, the partner of a white male who is destined to become the first inter-galactic traveller whose voyage precipitates human beings' first contact with another off-world humanoid species. As the audience we know that "race" is insignificant by the fact that it is never mentioned in the storyline.

In *Strange Days*, set during the last two days of 1999, "race" is significant even though Lenny Nero and Mace never discuss their relationship in terms of their own racialized identities nor is it implicit in the way the story unfolds. Relationships between black men and white women are problematized but between white men (represented by Lenny) and black women (represented by Mace), the narrative of a de-racialized romantic love predominates. Race seemingly never enters the picture in the characters' dialogue with each other save for their visual representation on screen.

*Strange Days* is an apocalyptic film in which the revelation is the possibility of resolving racial inequality in a race-torn Los Angeles through the disclosure of police brutality caught on a "play back" tape depicting the murder of a

prophetic rapper named Jericho One. The final cataclysm heralding the dawning of a new age in the year 2000 is not an external event controlled by an other-worldly god, but like other contemporary apocalyptic films, the threat and its avoidance rests largely in the decision-making and actions of ordinary people (Ostwalt, Jr., 1995). In *Strange Days*, armageddon is envisioned as an all-out race war that would transform Los Angeles on the eve of the second millennium should the disclosure of the murder of Jericho One by two Los Angeles Police Department officers be made public. The naming of the rapper Jericho One symbolizes the pivotal role of this character as a kind of biblical Joshua figure of. The representation of Jericho One as a black American man strongly resonates with the spiritual “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho” from the sacred music tradition of the Black Church. Jericho One’s ability to effect change is greatest after his death as Lenny Nero’s moral dilemma revolves around the disclosure of murder caught on “playback” by a friend of his, Iris, a young woman who works the streets as a prostitute.

One way of accounting for the portrayals of black women in contemporary science fiction, in ways which draw on cinematic tropes of both mammy and the ass-kicking, hypersexualized, avenging 1970s blaxploitation “sheroes” embodied by Pam Grier in *Foxy Brown* (1974) and *Coffy* (1973) and Tamara Dobson in *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), is to place these films within a wider trend of images of feminine rebellion in contemporary science fiction. In an article of the same name, Joel Martin points to what he sees as a disturbing trend of “anti-feminism in recent apocalyptic film” (Martin, 2000). Martin notes that “[a]ccording to the politics of these films, to avoid the apocalypse, women must be re-subordinated” (Martin, 2000: paragraph 2). In the films that Martin analyzes, which feature white female leads, he notes that there are scenes which function to “return a single, professional, and in this case romance-resistant woman to a traditional role” (Martin, 2000: paragraph 41).

Black women in contemporary apocalyptic science fiction films both conform to, and challenge, the trend outlined by Martin. While they never ultimately escape the bonds of conservative gender definitions as mammy/nurturers, they nevertheless challenge them in their roles as confidant, rescuer and sage, and, though rare, as in the case of Lenny and Mace in *Strange Days*, in relationships that move from mother-protector to lover. These definitions of womanhood are rooted in one of the oldest cinematic tropes<sup>4</sup> in which black women as mammies provide care and nurturing for individual white men and women and their extended families. This mothering support has been interpreted as mammy’s allegiance with the *status quo* while her own black family is neglected. These women both conform to and subvert the stereotype in that they care about their own families while their alliance with the hero is an extension of this caring. Even in brave new worlds with intergalactic travel old tropes reveal themselves.

The science fiction novels of Octavia E. Butler present an alternative view of black women in apocalyptic science fiction. In Butler’s novels a view of black

motherhood is presented through a reflexive reference to African-American historical as well as contemporary post Second World War religious, cultural and political experiences. In *Parable of the Sower* (1993), Butler presents a critique of contemporary America through the journey of female protagonist, Lauren. In her northward quest, after the destruction of her walled community in a post-apocalyptic 2020s United States, teenaged Lauren Oya Olamina develops a new religion, Earthseed, based on the notion of “God as Change.” In this way, Butler’s novels offer a vantage point on black American historical and contemporary experiences of migration, community development and mothering as well an important critique of black, specifically African-American, Christian theology.

In the novel, Lauren becomes the leader of a group of people who escape this post-apocalyptic nightmare of rampant drug addiction, poverty and environmentally unsafe food and water in the early twenty-first century by making their way north to found a new society based on the principles of Earthseed, Lauren’s religious philosophy revealed in her journal writings. Matriarch? Semi-divine Prophet? Messenger of the apocalypse? Womanist theologian? revisiting Christian sacred text from the historical and contemporary experiences of black women? Hero? Lauren is all of these in Butler’s overtly feminist critique of late twentieth century American society which holds an eschatological vision of hope firmly in place with that of violent cataclysm. Like other novels and short-stories in Butler’s *oeuvre*, the destiny of humanity lies in the choices made by wise women characters who literally or figuratively play the role of mother (see, for example, Butler, 1980). What remains to be seen is whether characterizations like that offered by Butler can be translated into cinematic storylines that both challenge and engage black female subjectivity.

<sup>1</sup>Though characterized as alien, “non-human,” and one of the only surviving members of a “species” destroyed by the intergalactic villains, the Borg, Guinan’s portrayal by actor Whoopi Goldberg and her feature in an episode about travel to the United States in the 1890s where she was identified as a black woman, position her as black and female. She works as a bartender on the U.S.S. Enterprise where she dispenses advice along with aperitifs to crew members.

<sup>2</sup>Hopkinson has coined the term “fabulist fiction” to describe Caribbean s/f which draws on the tradition of fables in constructions of the fabulous. Both Hopkinson and Butler are included in Sheree Thomas’ edited collection representing twentieth century s/f from the African Diaspora, *Dark Matter*.

<sup>3</sup>The hero myth, as outlined in the work of mythology scholar Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and developed in Hollywood cinema by filmmakers such *Star Wars* (1977) creator George Lucas, is an essential element of most science fiction movies. The contours of the hero myth include a quest for a desired object by a reluctant hero, the struggle for its obtaining, and the return

of the hero. It could be argued that the hero myth is one of the dominant narratives of Hollywood cinema since as it is essential to plot and characterization in westerns, war movies and even musicals.

<sup>4</sup>Black women actors were largely restricted to mammy and servant roles in Hollywood cinema. Hattie McDaniel (1895-1952) won the first Oscar presented to an African-American for her role of Mammy in the 1939 film production of *Gone With the Wind*.

<sup>5</sup>Womanist theology is explicitly concerned with articulating a hermeneutical approach to biblical literatures and Christian thought and ethics within the historical and contemporary experiences of African-American women. Womanist approaches include not only theology but also frameworks in social sciences and humanities.

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