

Exploring Picard's Galaxy: Essays on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*



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Peter W. Lee, editor. *Exploring Picard's Galaxy: Essays on Star Trek: The Next Generation*. McFarland, 2018. Paperback. 262 pp. \$39.95. ISBN 9781476666617.

WHILE I don't recall much about an essay I read in the 1990s on *Gilligan's Island*, I do recall one line: "linguistically speaking, Gilligan owns the island." So when I came across the title *Exploring Picard's Galaxy*, ownership of the galaxy sprang to mind. In a way, the 15 essays in this book have something to do with ownership, not of the galaxy, of course, but of interpreting that unique SF state of being: humanity's historical future. According to P.W. Lee's Introduction, this volume commemorates the 30th anniversary of *The Next Generation* (TNG) and is the first book to "solely" employ TNG as a "lens" (2) on issues ranging from government to multiculturalism (Part I), identity to gender (Part II), and martial arts to music and history itself (Part III). Since SF is a comparative argument on human progress, each essay considers the historical future as baseline, assessing whether both the real present and the TNG galaxy live up to ideals 24th century human progress.

As comparative argument, the essays tacitly grant that TNG represents the progress a "fantasized humanity has made" (64, Achouche. Also see the chapters by Olaf Meuther and by Justin Ream and Alexander Lee), but the authors most often see a lack of advancement, with the culprit being the imposition of 20th century values upon the 24th century; hence, all three parts of the book, to varying extents, consider the Federation and its enlightened values as a starting point for comparisons with recent history, including the Cold War (Anh T. Tran), the Reagan Era (Simon Ledder *et al*; Bruce E. Drushel), and the economics of network TV (Katharina Thalmann).

The essays, especially in Part I, find that the socio-political climate of the 1980's and early 1990's is reflected in the narrative and characters but also highlight differences. Alex Burston-Chorowicz points out Picard's inconsistency when responding to other cultures, sometimes by non-involvement and other times with a more colonial attitude, perhaps informed by U.S. foreign policy during the Reagan Era. The episode "The Neutral Zone," on the other hand, "reinvent[s]" (16) the Cold War, contrary

to real world events. Alexander Simmeth shows “the future is not always ‘better’ than the past” (241) when focusing on “Journey’s End.” Here, the Federation orders Picard to resettle Native American descendants. Larry A. Grant’s essay on the Prime Directive (PD) questions its “unenlightened form of sovereignty” (29) that has a close association between real world concepts of national sovereignty and unlawful intervention, mentioning the delayed response to the genocide in Rwanda. While no direct connection is made between Rwanda and TNG, Grant judges that blind adherence to the PD is not the solution. Tran focuses on a single topic—the policing of civil society by the FBI, noting similarities to the Tal Shiar and Deep Space Nine’s Section 31. In three separate essays, Erin C. Callahan, P.W. Lee, and Jared Miracle discuss changes made to Yar’s character leading to her “unnecessary feminization” (173). Citing interviews with Denise Crosby and others as primary evidence, these essays in general describe the transformation of Yar as due to interference by the network, imposing conservative Reagan Era values in the hopes of higher ratings.

In Part II, a few authors begin their comparative analysis with a theoretical approach. Ledder *et al.* examine “biopolitics” *via* Foucault, noting that TNG allows for heterogeneity in race and abilities, contrasting to more culturally homogeneous, and therefore, restrictive, societies such as Klingons, but concluding that “TNG produces an ambivalent position” (109). Ream and A. Lee cite Hegel to make the case of TNG accepting Others by subsuming them under the rubric of a “utopia of bureaucracy” (75). Joul Smith considers previous interpretations of Troi as stereotypes and reinterprets the “Troi Effect” as a positive sign of mental health awareness in comparison to other media depictions of mental health. Thalmann contrasts Kirk and Picard, noting the latter’s heroism as multi-dimensional, more vulnerable, cut from a more fatherly, diplomatic cloth than Kirk’s. This essay then questions the growth of the “Action Picard” in the ST movies. Technological advance is taken up by Meuther in relation to rights and the definition of life within the patriarchal federation and matriarchal Borg. Drushel uses the historical association between villainy and gender to examine the behavior of particular characters, concluding there is insufficient evidence to make this connection and stating, “[t]o be fair, one must acknowledge that the failure of the producers of [TNG] to populate the cast with identifiable lesbian or gay characters has many plausible justifications” (162). I was left with the impression of a scientific paper acknowledging the lack of statistical significance to reject the null hypothesis.

Part III of the book differs from I and II in that it attempts to trace the 24th century's use of 20th and 21st century's humanities and history. Miracle's martial arts essay emphasizes the bat'leth developed by Dan Curry and the coinciding rise in mixed martial arts in Ultimate Fighting Championships in relation to TNG's extended portrayal of Klingon martial arts. Tom Zlabinger's chapter highlights the personal growth of Picard and Data as explorers of the physical and the ephemeral through music making. Simmeth analyzes the "appropriation of history" (245) in TNG, including a critique of capitalism as narrative technique for exploring human progress.

While the essays raise interesting questions about science fiction and society, I have two concerns that distract from the book: 1) the promise of wide-ranging scholarship is sometimes unfulfilled, primarily due to the use of broad historical periods and nominally mentioning philosophical concepts without adequate critical attention; 2) some essays are slow to get to their main point, listing peripheral details and summarizing characters or incidents without leading to insightful analysis. Overall, however, the essays interestingly teeter on a fulcrum of inferential history that swings between humanity's conjectural future and ownership of our flawed, recent past. When the inferred future is unrealized in the show, it is due to contemporary norms and values being imposed upon it. These essays highlight our imperfect selves in TNG, revealing the present values we must struggle with to come closer to the ideal.