

AVANT GARDE

A Journal of Artful Candor

ISSUE 2022

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Lieutenant Nyota Uhura: A Brief Remembrance

Nichelle Nichols, our freedom star transitioned July 31, 2022. While I would only consider myself a semi-Trekkie, I am a whole entire Black nerd. More specifically, I am, in the naming tradition of Audre Lorde, a Black, Womanist, Geek, Scholar. These descriptors shape my emotions about the loss of Nichols, the woman many of know as Communication Officer, Lieutenant Nyota Uhura from the 1966-1969 television series *Star Trek*, and subsequent *Star Trek* cinematic productions. I grieve the loss of this brilliant, intentional, Sci-Fi auntie, who I now call ancestor. Nichols's role as Uhura represented an assurance that Black people, including Black women, including even me, would exist and thrive in the future -- *and* also help influence intergalactic politics (to say nothing of national and international politics). Uhura's name derives from the Swahili word Uhuru, which means freedom. The character's first name, Nyota is Swahili for star (Nichols 25:00-30:00). This freedom star appeared on screen weekly, on the captain's bridge of the spaceship *Enterprise*, *in space*. Her visage on American screens contested the long-spun, invalid narratives from White supremacists and, later, segregationists that questioned Black people's humanity and viability *on earth*. Her impact pervades American culture.

For instance, at one point during her tenure on *Star Trek*, Nichols considered leaving the show. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. implored her to remain saying to her, "You cannot and you must not... Don't you realize how important your presence, your character is? ... Don't you see? This is not a Black role, and this is not a female role. You have the first non stereotypical role on television, male or female. You have broken ground... For the first time," he continued, "the world sees us as we should be seen, as equals, as intelligent people — as we should be" (Kass "A conversation with MLK Jr. kept Nichelle Nichols from exiting *Star Trek*"). Decades later, Dr. King's words manifested through people who many in the late 1960s would have viewed as characters in science fiction stories. For example, Mae Jemison, the first Black woman astronaut to travel to space (1992), names Nichelle Nichols's representation as Uhura as one of her inspirations for wanting to travel to the stars. Nichols even presented the Vulcan salute in a 2012 photograph with the first Black President of the United States, Barak Obama, who is also a fan of the original *Star Trek* series. Using the figurative time travel capabilities granted by history, I am excited that 50 years since *Star Trek* first aired, we can witness how Nichelle Nichols's role as Lt. Uhura symbolizes the harvests we yield when we plant seeds of futurity through radical imagination. I am also able to reaffirm my belief in the power of radical imagination as a Black liberation strategy.

Works Cited

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