

Space Hitler and saint: *Star Trek's* Emperor Georgiou and the slippage between postfeminism and fourth wave feminism

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ABSTRACT

One of the most recent *Star Trek* series, *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017-present) (*DSC*), seems self-aware regarding the contradictions inherent in what *Star Trek* claims to be and what it actually is. In an attempt to realise Gene Roddenberry's vision, *DSC* includes a far more diverse cast than any *Star Trek* series before it. As Judith Rauscher (2020:256) suggests, *DSC's* 'highly diverse cast' combined with its extended Mirror Universe plot 'complicates the representation of female characters of color'. At the same historical moment, a new wave of feminism—the fourth wave—that claims to be acutely aware of diversity, inclusivity, and intersectionality is entering the mainstream. While both Rosalind Gill (2016, 2017) and Nicola Rivers (2017) make convincing cases that we still live within a postfeminist "sensibility", one cannot deny that recently, audiences and producers of popular cultural texts seem to have become aware of the overarching white, heterosexual narrative of postfeminism, and radical changes in terms of representation are taking place. In this paper, I explore how the slippage between postfeminism and fourth wave feminism manifests itself in contemporary representations of women in sci-fi—specifically women of colour in *Star Trek*. One character from *DSC*—the Terran Emperor, Phillipa Georgiou—exemplifies the tensions between postfeminist and fourth wave empowerment in terms of her representation and character arc over three seasons.

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Original research

Introduction

One of the most recent series in the popular sci-fi franchise, *Star Trek*, namely *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017-present) (*DSC*), seems to be self-aware in terms of the contradictions inherent in what *Star Trek* claims to be and what it actually is. In an attempt to realise creator Gene Roddenberry's vision, *DSC* includes a far more diverse cast than any previous *Star Trek* series. Although this is a point I return to in this paper, simply including a more diverse cast does not necessarily eliminate sexual and cultural stereotypes—as Judith Rauscher (2020:256) points out, *DSC*'s 'highly diverse cast' combined with its extended Mirror Universe plot 'complicates [especially] the representation of female characters of color'.

At the same historical moment, a new wave of feminism—the fourth wave—that claims to be acutely aware of diversity, inclusivity and intersectionality is entering the mainstream. Although the fourth wave remains 'ill defined' (Rivers 2017:31) and many, such as Rosalind Gill (2016:609), are not convinced that feminism has entered its fourth wave at all, there is currently a notable shift taking place in both feminist thought and representations of women in popular visual culture (see, for example, Engelbrecht (2020) and Frankel (2020)). Gill (2016:609), however, contends that we still live in an age of postfeminism and that 'Like neoliberalism, it seems to [her] that postfeminism has [in fact] tightened its hold in contemporary culture and has made itself virtually hegemonic'. As Nicola Rivers (2017) also establishes, much of fourth wave feminist praxis suspiciously employs postfeminist rhetoric, and there is a slippage between what some claim to be the fourth wave and what has been established as postfeminism over the past two decades.

Despite its contentious status, scholars such as Ruxandra Looft (2017:894) proclaim that the fourth wave *has* arrived and dates from 2008 onwards. Although Gill (2016, 2017) and Rivers (2017) would disagree, an overarching sentiment of the fourth wave is, in fact, a growing *disillusionment* with postfeminism. While both Gill (2016, 2017) and Rivers (2017) make convincing cases that we still live within the postfeminist "sensibility",¹ one cannot deny that recently, the audiences and producers of popular cultural texts seem to have become aware of the overarching white, heterosexual narrative of postfeminism, and radical changes in terms of the representations of women in all spheres of the media have been taking place. As with previous waves of feminism, the boundary lines demarcating where one ends and the next begins are unclear, and, as Rivers (2017) indicates, there are many instances where postfeminism and fourth wave feminism overlap.

In this article, I explore how this slippage manifests itself in contemporary representations of women in science-fiction (sci-fi)—specifically women of colour in *Star Trek*. In the past five years, seemingly in time with the emergence of the fourth wave of feminism, more iterations of *Star Trek* have been released than ever before. In 2023 alone, five different *Star Trek* series were running, at times, concurrently. Despite its long history, *Star Trek* seems more relevant than ever, perhaps *because* of its unique ability to address social and cultural issues in a form accessible (and acceptable) to both young and older generations of fans from various socio-cultural backgrounds.

One character from *DSC*—the Terran Emperor, Phillipa Georgiou (played by Malaysian Chinese actress Michelle Yeoh)—exemplifies the tensions between postfeminist and fourth wave empowerment in terms of her representation and character arc over three seasons. Owing to the limited scope of this article, I focus solely on Emperor Georgiou, but I hope to initiate further discussion and research on women of colour, not only in *Star Trek* but also in other sci-fi television and films of the 2010s and 2020s, as well as contribute to the growing literature on the novel fourth wave of feminism. Judith Rauscher's (2020) analysis of Emperor Georgiou identifies her as a problematic manifestation of imperialist (post)feminism that perpetuates Orientalist fantasies. However, I propose that femininity and feminism manifest in Georgiou in far more nuanced ways. I first briefly explore postfeminism's key premises as context for the discussion of fourth wave feminism that follows. Here, I indicate how *Star Trek*'s Mirror Universe is rife with postfeminist representations of women and how Emperor Georgiou can be read as a postfeminist action heroine. I then explore specific aspects of fourth wave feminism and conduct a detailed analysis of Emperor Georgiou.

Postfeminism and the Mirror Universe

Modern feminist theory has undergone various transitions since its genesis over a century ago. Feminism has generally (although not unproblematically) been categorised according to four waves thus far. There are only a few academic texts that emerged from the first wave, and these publications were largely responses to the difficulties some individual women experienced in eighteenth-century Victorian society (Sanders 2001 [1999]:16). After feminism's hiatus from the 1920s to the 1960s, Betty Friedan's founding of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966 and the Women's Liberation Movement in America in the 1960s reignited feminism (Thornham 2001 [1999]:29-30). A larger body of feminist literature thus

started surfacing during the 1960s. These texts by theorists from America and Europe, such as Betty Friedan, Simone De Beauvoir, Shulamith Firestone and Kate Millet, amongst many others, comprise the second wave. During the 1980s and 1990s, a new generation of feminists who wanted to 'signal a break from [the] earlier [second wave] feminist generation' started to theorise what is now widely regarded as feminism's third wave (Gillis, Howie & Munford 2007:xxiv). True to its postmodern zeitgeist, third wave feminism encompasses various (and often contradicting) strands, such as postfeminism, cyberfeminism and ecofeminism, to name only three. I turn in more detail to postfeminism for my arguments in this article.

A key premise of postfeminism is that it is considered a phenomenon specific to 'cultural, academic and political contexts' within the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in Europe and America (Genz & Brabon 2009:1), and postfeminist "free choice" emphasises white, consumer, middle-class aspirations as a means of female emancipation (Genz 2006; McRobbie 2004). Further, owing to its active engagement with popular culture, postfeminism has therefore often been termed a 'commodity feminism', 'popular feminism', or 'media-friendly' feminism in some academic circles (Genz & Brabon 2009:6,19), and even as antifeminist in others (see McRobbie 2004). Because they fail to break free from neoliberal market relations and they emphasise 'free choice' and sexual agency as feminist strategies, postfeminism and postfeminist representations of women on television and in film, therefore, run the risk of simply reinforcing the dominant patriarchal ideologies that they claim to dismantle.

In an attempt to reinvent femininity, for example, the sexual objectification of women that theorists such as Laura Mulvey (1975) deemed highly problematic is reinterpreted as 'sexual subjectification' for postfeminists (Gill 2007:100), and women's sexuality is declared not to oppress them, but instead becomes 'a means to attain freedom and power' (Genz & Brabon 2009:92). In this way, postfeminism claims that women are now 'active subjects', and provocative imagery of women is no longer interpreted as '[enacted] sexism' where women are the object of the gaze (McRobbie 2004:258-59). Further, owing to its emphasis on consumerism and individualism, postfeminism is often viewed as an exclusionary middle-class, white and heterosexual movement (Genz 2009:343).

Regarding representation more specifically, what Stephanie Genz (2009) has termed the postfeminist Supergirl (also described as the postfeminist action heroine) offers a useful framework for analysing a character like Emperor Georgiou. The Supergirl is 'both beautiful and strong', and she claims her femininity as a source of strength (Genz 2009:157). Subversively, the Supergirl thus problematises 'passive femininity and active masculinity in terms of diametrical opposition and mutual exclusivity'

and uses the combination of her 'feminine body' and her 'masculine assertiveness and power' to infuse 'old signifiers of...helpless femininity with new meanings of strength and agency' (Genz 2009:152,155). In terms of postfeminist logic, then, by combining femininity and strength, both concepts are revised, and ideally, 'the traditional gender images and codes...become dissociated from their previous significations and correlations to physical sex, so that they interrogate rather than support gender norms' (Genz 2009:158). However, as Genz (2009:159) accurately articulates, 'the signifiers of strength and power that have traditionally been associated with masculinity cannot simply be written over onto the female/feminine body', and the Supergirl ultimately 'remains garbed in the signifiers of stereotypical feminine attractiveness'. In other words, instead of interrogating and revising the established notions of masculinity and femininity, the postfeminist action heroine simply reinforces stereotypical femininity and presents a version of female empowerment that is ultimately unattainable and unsustainable.

In 2017, in Season 1 of *DSC*, postfeminist portrayals of female empowerment linger despite *DSC*'s apparent critical stance on gender, racial and sexual inequalities. Phillipa Georgiou (seen in her Starfleet uniform in Figure 1) is first introduced to viewers as a Starfleet captain (in the Prime Universe), but suffers an untimely death as early as the second episode. In episode 11, 'The Wolf Inside', when the USS Discovery crosses over to the infamous Mirror Universe—which, being the opposite of the Prime Universe, is governed by a violent, racist and totalitarian regime, the Terran Empire—it is revealed that the Mirror version of Captain Georgiou is in fact the Emperor of this Empire.² This is, of course, highly ironic, as *Captain* Georgiou represents the epitome of Starfleet diplomacy and liberal humanism—she never steps out of line, she embraces all races and species, and she is a consistent voice of reason for her crew and especially for Michael Burnham (the main protagonist).³ In the pilot episode, for example, when the Shenzhou stumbles upon the Klingon flagship, Burnham is convinced that they should fire *first* to display Starfleet's dominance and superiority. Captain Georgiou, instead, intends to follow Starfleet Command's orders and wait for the fleet to arrive and open a channel of communication to make first contact diplomatically—a far more reasonable and conservative course of action.

Conversely, the Mirror Universe supposedly exists outside the neoliberalist confines of the Federation, which has allowed *Star Trek* (in previous Mirror episodes) to explore different forms of femininity and female empowerment than those embodied by pristine Starfleet officers such as Captain Georgiou (Rauscher 2020:246). Instead of being merely 'captain's women', or captains of starships, female characters from the Mirror Universe, such as Terran Empress Hoshi Sato (from

Star Trek: Enterprise, seen in Figure 2) and Bajoran Alliance Intendant Kira Nerys (from *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*), are ‘female rulers’ (Rauscher 2020:246). While Rauscher (2020) predominantly focuses on how these Mirror women perpetuate imperialist feminist ideals, I aim to show how they can also be read as manifestations of postfeminist empowerment and embody many characteristics of the postfeminist Supergirl.



FIGURE N° 1



Captain Phillipa Georgiou (Prime Universe), *Star Trek: Discovery*, 2017. (Star Trek.com).



FIGURE N° 2



Terran Empress Hoshi Sato, *Star Trek: Enterprise*, 2005. (Women at Warp).

In true postfeminist fashion, while being female rulers who do not submit to the patriarchal order of The Federation, women in the Mirror Universe are almost always portrayed as ‘hyper-sexualized versions of their Prime Universe counterparts’ (Rauscher 2020:246). Figure 2, for example, shows Empress Hoshi Sato, whose cropped top uniform flaunts her slim stomach; in the Prime Universe, Sato wears a boiler suit that covers her entire body and does not draw attention to her figure. As Rauscher (2020:243,251) further explains, in contrast to the Prime Universe, in the Mirror Universe, ‘the empowerment of women depends on their integration into totalitarian, militaristic structures that rely on openly imperialist and racist ideologies’, wherein they are ‘willing to do whatever is necessary’ to gain power. As such, the women of the Mirror Universe’s empowerment is, like postfeminism, somewhat ambiguous, as it is predominantly built on violence, sexualisation, and the exclusion of anything deemed “other”.

Emperor Georgiou initially follows in this legacy as a female ruler in the Mirror Universe. In contrast to her Prime Universe counterpart, Captain Georgiou (see Figure 1), Emperor Georgiou uses sex, manipulation, and violence to secure her position of authority in both the Mirror and Prime Universes. *DSC* is rife with elaborate fight scenes (executed skilfully by the experienced Michelle Yeoh) that display Emperor Georgiou’s ‘masculine assertiveness and power’ (Genz 2009:152,155), and her solution to conflict usually involves resorting to violence. Moreover, following the postfeminist tradition of depicting powerful women in the Mirror Universe as ‘hyper-sexualized’, Emperor Georgiou also dresses in ‘dominatrix-style outfits’ in contrast to Captain Georgiou, who is always shown in her unisex Starfleet uniform (see Figure 1) (Rauscher 2020:246). As seen in Figure 3, which exhibits one of Emperor Georgiou’s many elaborate outfits, she is clad in a tight leather corset, with tall, high-heeled boots and an emblem strategically placed to draw attention to her groin. In these ways, like the postfeminist action heroine, Georgiou uses violence (as a traditional signifier of masculinity) in combination with her feminine (and sexualised) body to imbue ‘old signifiers of...helpless femininity with new meanings of strength and agency’ (Genz 2009:152,155).

Emperor Georgiou’s sexualisation is further emphasised in instances such as the brothel scene in the episode ‘Will You Take My Hand?’ where we witness Emperor Georgiou, wearing a leather corset and underwear, in bed with both a male and female Orion prostitute (see Figure 4). While discussing payment for their services, Georgiou knocks the male Orion unconscious and chokes the female at gunpoint for information. In another scene in the episode ‘The Red Angel’, she flirts with the openly queer Lieutenant Stamets. When she is reminded that he is homosexual by his ex-lover, her response is ‘Don’t be so binary, in my universe, he was pansexual,



FIGURE N° 3



Emperor Georgiou as a Section 31 operative in *Star Trek: Discovery*, 2019. (Trekmovie.com).

and we had DEFCON-level fun together’. She often also makes remarks such as ‘what you call pain I call foreplay’ while being tortured by enemies (see the episode ‘Far From Home’). Regarding her evident sexual prowess, violence, and attire then, Emperor Georgiou potentially offers viewers a postfeminist vision of female agency, which, like the Supergirl, conflates sexualisation and violence and presents it as women’s empowerment. As I argue next, however, perhaps owing to the socio-cultural climate in which *DSC* was produced (see Gill (2017) on the current state of affairs), the character also opens avenues beyond this limited postfemininity.



FIGURE N° 4



Emperor Georgiou with two Orion prostitutes, *Star Trek: Discovery*, 2018. (Screen shot by the author).

Space Hitler and Saint

Before elaborating on Emperor Georgiou as a character in the fictional *Star Trek* universe, it is notable that an actress of Asian descent portrays her. The first two contentious points that surface in fourth wave feminist literature are diversity and celebrity feminism. It is significant that Georgiou is played by Michelle Yeoh (aged 62 at the time of writing), who has starred in countless Hong Kong Kung Fu films before becoming well-known in the west for her roles in more commercial films such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and even as a Bond girl in *Tomorrow Never Dies*. In 2023, Yeoh became the first Malaysian actress to win a Golden Globe and an Oscar for Best Actress. Following nominations and wins at various awards ceremonies for her lead role in *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, snippets of interviews and acceptance speeches of her talking about women, diversity, and representation in the film industry flooded social media.

Rivers (2017:2-3,14) contends that recent similar manifestations of feminism in the media in many instances simply reinforce western and colonial notions of female agency and buy into what she terms 'feminism lite'. Rivers (2017:62) would also argue that Yeoh's persona following her successes is another instance of celebrity feminism. While celebrities' endorsement of feminism and advocacy for diversity and inclusivity certainly raises awareness, and while these stars may function as role models for women in some instances, this form of "activism" (if one can call it

that) ultimately fails to address the structural issues that constitute “free choice”. Yeoh proudly stated in her Oscar acceptance speech, ‘For all the little boys and girls who look like me...this is the beacon of hope and possibilities... And ladies, don’t let anybody tell you you are ever past your prime. Never give up’. While “inspiring”, Yeoh not only generalises but also speaks from a highly privileged position, having had great financial success as an actress and being married to wealthy businessman Jean Todt. In this way, celebrity feminism and feminism lite are situated within the postfeminist framework, and Yeoh’s casting as Captain and Emperor Georgiou in *DSC* might simply be *Star Trek* capitalising on the current liberal zeitgeist that supposedly celebrates and rewards diversity.⁴

As Rauscher (2020:247) further (and rather pessimistically) contends, the sexualisation of characters such as Hoshi Sato (played by Korean actress Linda Park, seen in Figure 2) and Emperor Georgiou is ‘particularly problematic because even though the characters’ sexual self-determination subverts Orientalist stereotypes of Asian women as passive sex objects, their hypersexualization perpetuates racist and indeed imperialist (feminist) fantasies’. Additionally, the exoticisation of the Mirror Universe, as well as presenting these women as sexually “deviant” (being bisexual and engaging in BDSM practices) (see Raucher 2020:246-247),⁵ may further situate them as Other. Nevertheless, having Asian women portray these (one bisexual and much older) postfeminist characters also subverts the very narrative of postfeminism as exclusively white, young, and heterosexual. That is to say that as much as Emperor Georgiou is a typical postfeminist action heroine, and the casting of an actress who is central and vocal in issues of diversification in the media industry could be aligned with postfeminist “feminism lite”, she also possesses many attributes uncharacteristic of the postfeminist Supergirl.

Rauscher (2020) makes a convincing analysis of Emperor Georgiou as an imperialist (post)feminist character, and as I have also shown, in some ways, she fits a postfeminist model of female empowerment. However, as I hope to illustrate for the remainder of this article, Emperor Georgiou ultimately transcends her initial postfeminism and presents (at least) an attempt at a more nuanced engagement with alternative types of femininity. I would argue that her new version of femininity instead displays a fourth wave feminist *disillusionment* with postfeminism. Her transformation from what fans on *Star Trek* forums have dubbed “Space Hitler” to what I see as a “saint” is fostered by the emphasis on her as a mother figure, and a more inclusive view of Others on her part. Her redemption arc in Season 3 of the show further presents possibilities for a queer-positive reading of the character, which is counter to the heterosexual narrative of postfeminism.

In the Season 3 two-part episode, 'Terra Firma', in which the character is sent off, a dying Emperor Georgiou returns to the Mirror Universe and is given the opportunity to relive the betrayal of her adopted daughter, Mirror Michael Burnham—the day she also lost her position as ruler of the Terran Empire. Since her arrival in the Prime Universe, the Emperor slowly sees the value of the liberal-humanist ideals that govern the Prime Universe, and although her methods are often questionable, she does ultimately fight on the “good side”, being instrumental in the peace treaty between the Klingons and the Federation, and so forth. It is in this two-part episode though, dedicated almost entirely to exploring her final character arc, that her transformation into one of the “good guys” is complete.

The first significant moment for her characterisation is at Part 1's climax, where Georgiou decides not to execute her daughter (as she does in the original timeline), but rather attempts to regain Burnham's loyalty and save her life. In a few touching scenes throughout Part 2, Georgiou is shown to appeal to Mirror Burnham as a *mother*, visiting her in her holding cell while recalling traumatic events from Burnham's childhood, placing a globe of fireflies next to Burnham to remind her of all they have overcome together, and keeping a watchful eye on Burnham from her private quarters, hoping that her daughter will return to her. What is apparent here is that Emperor Georgiou does not employ violence to address the problem, but rather adopts a more “feminine” approach, using her status as Burnham's mother and various caring gestures to resolve Burnham's mutiny. In fact, Burnham herself comments that the Emperor has ‘become soft’ after refusing to execute her for mutiny.

The scenes described above display a shift in Georgiou's methodology where there is a pronounced emphasis on Georgiou's traditionally “feminine” qualities, such as motherhood, compassion, and sensitivity. Most notably, it is *because* she chooses to act on these instead of adopting a more “masculine” disposition that she is given a second chance at life by the Guardian of Forever at the end of 'Terra Firma'. Therefore, in terms of her representation, we see a subtle shift from the postfeminist action heroine, who combines traditionally masculine qualities with an overtly feminine body and presents it as female empowerment (see Genz 2009), to a character who adopts a feminine disposition, with an emphasis on the element of motherhood. Her new feminine approach is, most importantly, presented as the vehicle for her redemption.

To briefly digress, it is noteworthy that in a recent publication on *Fourth wave feminism in science fiction and fantasy* (Frankel 2019), an emphasis on motherhood and femininity are recurring themes in representations of so-called fourth wave

feminist heroines. For example, Melissa Wehler (2019) presents a similar argument to mine on the character Maleficent in 2014's *Maleficent* (Stromberg). Wehler (2019:110-111) contends that Maleficent also displays 'maternal roles such as protector, mentor, and companion', as well as 'fertility, compassion, and sympathy', which are all characteristics traditionally associated with femininity—characteristics also displayed by Emperor Georgiou in 'Terra Firma'. Moreover, Maleficent is redeemed as a hero as a result of the maternal attachment she forms with Aurora (see Wehler 2019). Other films discussed in the abovementioned collection of essays include *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller 2015), in which the Many Mothers offer salvation from the tyrant, Immortan Joe, and the horror/comedy film, *The Final Girls* (Strauss-Schulson 2015), where a mother and daughter team up to confront a killer (Berns, Fontao & Zárate 2019:85).

While an emphasis on motherhood certainly displays a shift from postfeminist representations, it is not entirely unproblematic, and not that new either. In fact, it is an age-old trope used to make powerful female characters more acceptable to conservative audiences. One of the icons of female empowerment in sci-fi, Ellen Ripley, has undergone similar treatment. Peter Wood (2010:47), for example, is of the opinion that the focus on Ripley as a mother figure in *Aliens* is 'central to what Mulvey describes as the "devaluation, punishment, or saving of the guilty object"' as Ripley is being punished in the film for being a bad mother to her daughter, whom she left behind to serve on The Nostromo, and effectively being offered redemption through the adoption of the little girl, Newt. Ximena Gallardo and Jason Smith (2004:97) further argue that Ripley's motherhood allows her to *act* as the hero while still remaining safely contained within the patriarchal social order. Wood (2004:33) goes on to suggest that representations such as these reinforce women's assumed connection with motherhood and, therefore, imply that 'being female means being, always already, a mother'.

On this point, it is notable that in 'Terra Firma' we also see Georgiou in alternative costumes reminiscent of a dominatrix style. Perhaps most intriguing is the scene showing the christening of the ISS Charon, where Georgiou is seen wearing a halo that unmistakably visually harks back at images of the Virgin Mother in Catholic iconography (see Figure 6). Moreover, as seen in both Figures 5 and 6, throughout the two-part episode, Georgiou is often shrouded in yellow light, which further emphasises her beatification, and all her other outfits from this episode contain elements of gold. It seems that motherhood is not only offered as a vehicle for her redemption, but elevates her to saintly status. As problematic as this may be, Georgiou's less sexualised attire from 'Terra Firma' further indicates that fourth wave representations could potentially be 'troubling "postfeminist" dominant forms

of beauty and embodiment' (Retallack *et al.* 2016:99), while at the same time departing from the hyper-masculine character with the hyper-feminine body of the postfeminist Supergirl (see Genz 2009).



FIGURE N° 5



Emperor Georgiou in her golden robe, *Star Trek: Discovery*, 2020. (Trekcore).



FIGURE N° 7



Emperor Georgiou at the christening of the ISS Charon, *Star Trek: Discovery*, 2020. (Star Trek on Paramount+ on Twitter).

The second aspect of Georgiou's transformation is the Emperor's condescending view of alien Others that has been significantly altered during her time in the Prime Universe. Although I am hesitant to claim that this is social commentary on the issue of intersectionality on the part of *DSC*, once again, it is a departure from the exclusionary narrative of postfeminism. In the episode, 'The Wolf Inside', it is revealed that the Terrans slaughter and eat a sentient alien race called Kelpians while also using them as personal servants. This is a stark contrast to the Prime Universe, where a Kelpian named Saru is, in fact, the First Officer and later Captain of the USS Discovery. Upon returning to the Mirror Universe, the Emperor not only takes Kelpian meat off the menu, but she saves Mirror Saru by revealing to him that what Kelpians call the Vahar'ai is not the end of life, as they believe, but simply another stage of their evolution—something that she learned in the Prime Universe. Following this conversation, Mirror Saru fittingly says to the Emperor that 'You are not Terran', which might translate to saying that she no longer follows the pattern of other (postfeminist) female rulers from the Mirror Universe, who oppress Other races, but that she has become something different. Whereas the Emperor previously subjugated the Kelpians on the basis of race and class, she now acknowledges the predicament that this intersection has placed them in and attempts to atone for her past actions by helping Mirror Saru.

There are therefore various aspects of the character that show an attempt to move beyond the exclusionary middle-class, white, and heterosexual narrative of postfeminism (see Genz, 2009:343). Firstly, as mentioned earlier, Emperor Georgiou, who is (in the Prime Universe at least) canonically Malaysian, is played by a Malaysian-Chinese actress. Although these may be stereotypical markers of Asian culture—perhaps included to add to the exoticism of the Mirror Universe—Emperor Georgiou eats with chopsticks, and she is evidently trained in Chinese martial arts. One might argue that the acknowledgement of her Asian heritage avoids the issue of “whitewashing”—where a non-white character is portrayed by a white actress/actor—something other sci-fi franchises have been accused of.⁶ Secondly, Emperor Georgiou is canonically openly bisexual, as shown in examples cited earlier, and she is much older than the typical postfeminist action heroine. Finally, Emperor Georgiou ultimately lets go of her racist, imperialist ideals and acknowledges alien Others. Of course, I do not mean to equate postfeminism with imperialism (although Raucher (2020) argues that imperial feminism is one branch of postfeminism), as postfeminism has, in fact, been argued to be fundamentally neoliberal in nature (see Gill (2007) for example). However, these various aspects of the character could metaphorically refer to a shift away from exclusionary (white, heterosexual) postfeminism to a more inclusive, fourth wave approach.

Interestingly, Gill (2017:612) argues that the term postfeminism has recently opened itself up to ‘intersectional interrogation, questioning the assumption that white, western, middle-class, heterosexual young women are the privileged—or indeed the sole—subjects of postfeminist discourse’. If one concurs that this is indeed a recent development within postfeminism, then all the “departures” from postfeminism displayed in Georgiou listed earlier might not indicate a fourth wave representation at all, especially considering the fact that she does not abandon her violence or masculine disposition entirely. After all, Emperor Georgiou does end Mirror Burnham’s life (again) by forcing her sword through Burnham’s stomach, albeit out of self-defence, and earlier she places Mirror Burnham in a torture chamber until she submits. Although there is no mention of sex in ‘Terra Firma’, we also cannot assume that she has suddenly put her bisexuality and “deviant” sexual practices behind her. Evidently, there are many discrepancies and much confusion here, but these ambiguities are exactly what should compel a rethinking of the feminist/anti-feminist status of the character, and more broadly, of the type of feminism that women in sci-fi television (and popular culture more generally) in the 2010s and 2020s advocate.

On this point, I suggest a queer-positive reading of the character that might provide insight into the tensions between contemporary feminisms. As Teresa Cutler-Broyles (2017:50) observes, the ‘sexually aware female [from the Mirror Universe] who cannot be tamed cannot exist in the philosophically and morally advanced 23rd-century world of the Federation’, and so in the past, all female rulers from the Mirror Universe would remain there, and are not given the opportunity to cross over or to stay in the Prime Universe. Yet, Emperor Georgiou, with her “deviance” intact, despite embracing Federation values and her supposedly “soft” approach to Terran mutiny, not only remains in the Prime Universe for more than two seasons of the show, but successfully impersonates her Prime Universe counterpart for much of her time there.

This might suggest that finally, there is a place for women in the Prime Universe (and in sci-fi and the popular consciousness more broadly) whose ‘aggressiveness includes sexuality’, or who are sexually ‘deviant’, like Hoshi Sato and Kira Nerys, who were never allowed to cross over universes (Cutler-Broyles 2017:50). In fact, Emperor Georgiou, who keeps her postfeminist edge, while simultaneously being highly critical of it, is elevated iconographically to saintly status, and narratively to one of *Star Trek*’s significant heroic figures. Unlike any other Mirror woman in *Star Trek*’s six-decade history, Emperor Georgiou, despite her “bad” behaviour, is given a two-episode send-off, dedicated almost entirely to her, as well as her own *Star Trek* movie event in 2024.

Conclusion

Emperor Georgiou, and likely other women of colour in *DSC* and 2010s and 2020s sci-fi, is clearly more than simply another regurgitation of (in my view, outdated) postfeminist femininity. While there are many traces of postfeminism that remain, many aspects that are distinctly anti-postfeminist are also introduced with the character. I have chosen Emperor Georgiou as the object of analysis for this article, because she exemplifies these tensions, but many other female characters in not only *DSC*, but other recent *Star Treks* as well, lie even further on the apparent fourth wave side of the spectrum than Georgiou does. A prime example is, of course, Michael Burnham from *DSC*, who is not only a woman of colour, but is notably androgynous and incredibly complex in terms of her characterisation, character arc, and representation. To relate this phenomenon to sci-fi more broadly, heroines such as Furiosa from *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller 2015), Grace from *Terminator: Dark Fate* (Miller 2019), Katniss from *The Hunger Games* (Ross 2012, Lawrence 2013, 2014, 2015) and Rey from *Star Wars* (Abrams 2015, 2019, Johnson 2017), to name only a few, all present a clear departure from postfeminist femininity and should be investigated further. Fourth wave feminism might simply be postfeminism 2.0, and Emperor Georgiou clearly embodies these ambiguities, but it might also open possibilities for new types of feminist consciousnesses and femininities—glimpses of which are witnessed in the very same character.

Notes

1. See Gill's (2007) famous text on "the postfeminist sensibility".
2. In *Star Trek* canon, the Mirror Universe is an alternate reality in the same space as "our universe" (also called the Prime Universe), but on another dimensional plane. This alternate universe derives its name from the fact that all characters and ships in the Prime Universe also exist in the Mirror Universe, but as their opposite counterparts. As such, Mirror Universe characters tend to be the evil doppelgängers of Starfleet captains, crews, and so forth. The Mirror Universe timeline is fragmented in the *Star Trek* series, with characters only occasionally "crossing over", but in the realm of *Star Trek* comics, the Mirror Universe is explored in more detail—a personal favourite being *Star Trek Voyager: Mirrors and Smoke*, which follows Pirate Queen Janeway and her crew as they plunder the Delta Quadrant.
3. See my discussion of Michael Burnham in my chapter on Michael Burnham and intersectionality in *Star Trek: Discovery* (forthcoming).
4. Paramount seems to be taking advantage of Yeoh's recent popularity further by finally greenlighting a Section 31 spin-off film starring Yeoh as the lead role, set for release in 2024 (Otterson 2023). Yeoh will be reprising her character, Emperor Georgiou, after four years since Georgiou's send-off on *DSC*.

5. In the context of this discussion, like Cutler-Boyles (2017), I consider the word “deviant” to refer to non-normative sexual practices—what is considered “normative” in the west is, of course, also a social construct.
6. There was, for example, much controversy in 2017 after Scarlett Johansson was cast as Major Motoko Kusanagi in the *Ghost in the Shell* (Sanders) live-action remake.

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