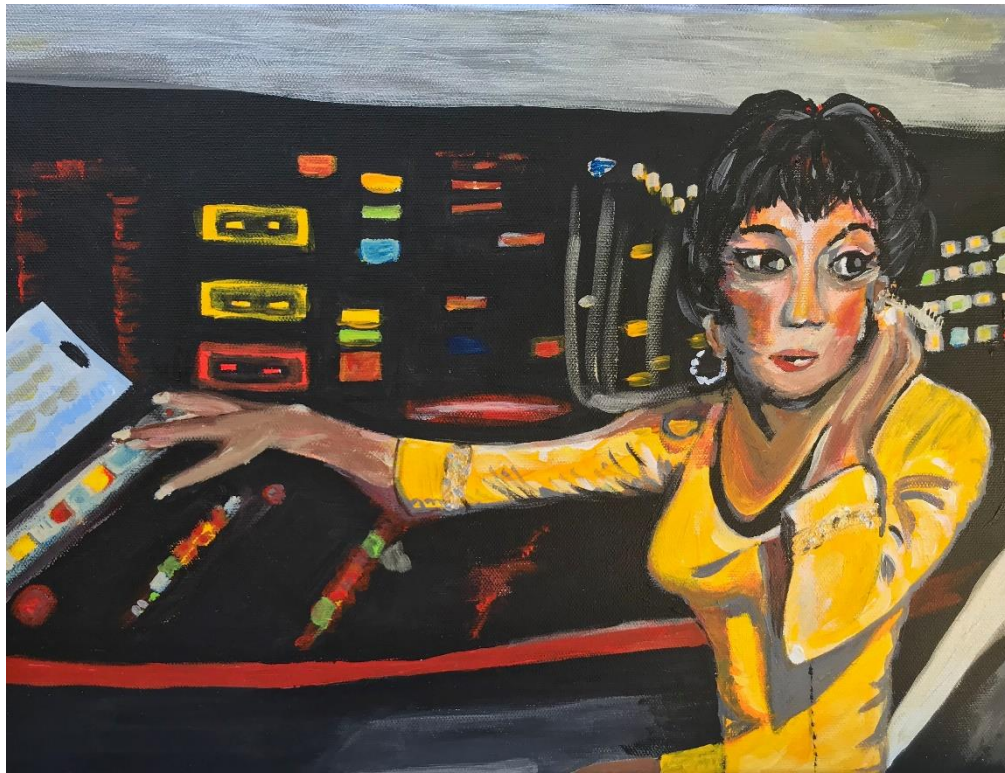


# Black Popular Culture Icon Inspires Space, Exploration, and Communication Futures

MICHELLE FERRIER

“Captain, hailing frequencies open.”



On the bridge of the USS Enterprise, Lieutenant Uhura turns to Captain Kirk: “I’m picking up a faint signal coming out of Gamma Quadrant, Sector 15, Mark 5.”

Lt. Nyota Uhura, as played in the original series by Nichelle Nichols, is captured in this iconic pose in my painting that I completed just a month ago.

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Nichols and her character made a deep impression on me that has resonated throughout my life and career. This painting celebrates the release of the biopic *Woman in Motion* (2020, dir. Todd Thompson),<sup>1</sup> a documentary that shines a light on the deep impact of Nichelle Nichols on space exploration. The film chronicles Nichols' journey from singing in Duke Ellington's orchestra to portraying Chief Communications Officer Uhura on *Star Trek*, who then used her science fiction fame to challenge the real space program with the question "Where are my people?" and helped launch new STEM education initiatives with the message "Space is for Everyone!"



In her *Star Trek* role, Nichols broke color barriers, but in a twist of art imitating life, she would become an ambassador for NASA to help recruit a more diverse astronaut pool. Her character and life inspired me and others like Mae Jemison, Ronald McNair, Sally Ride and the first women and African-American, Latino, and

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<sup>1</sup> Directed and Produced by Todd Thompson, the film features actors, activists, scientists and astronauts including Nichols, Neil deGrasse Tyson, George Takei, Pharrell Williams, Martin Luther King III, Al Sharpton, Vivica A. Fox, Walter Koenig, Rod Roddenberry, Michael Dorn, and more. The film is distributed by Shout! Studios and has Nichelle Nichols as a co-producer and Benjamin Crump and Greg Galloway as executive producers. The film's trailer can be viewed at <https://womaninmotionmovie.com>, which also has a link to the executive summary of her report to NASA on her recruiting campaign.

Asian Space Shuttle astronauts. Ben Crump, a civil rights attorney and executive producer on the documentary, said on the film's website that "Nichelle Nichols not only was a trailblazer in Hollywood, she was a trailblazer for the future of our society. She took the fight for Civil Rights, diversity and inclusion and gender equality to new frontiers with NASA which continue to serve America's space program today. She was ahead of her time." She would lure me as a child to the television screen to imagine a different, better future.

I was a young girl when *Star Trek* debuted on television sets across the United States in 1966, running in its original season through 1969. Popular culture was deep into space and alien encounters. *Lost in Space* debuted on television screens in black-and-white in 1965 and ran through 1968. In it, a family must learn to survive when their mission fails and they cannot return to Earth. *The Jetsons*, a cartoon show about a futuristic family, has a matriarch that sends her husband off to work each day in his flying saucer. The patriarchy clearly made it to the future in *The Jetsons*. It aired in color during primetime from 1962 to 1963, then in reruns in syndication. However, *Star Trek* was the adventure show that outshone all these others, delivering the alternative futures my young imagination craved.

It also was the only show in which anyone in the future looked like me.

Just three years old at *Star Trek*'s debut, I was already reading books. I quickly graduated from children's fantasy to science fiction, setting off on exploration with the NCC-1701 crew as it roamed the stars on a mission from Starfleet—to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before.

During this time, Americans were captivated by real-life space exploration as well as civil unrest. I watched as NASA sent Apollo 7 to space in 1968 and Apollo 11 landed humans on the moon in 1969. Police brutality and violence also paraded across America's televisions alongside peaceful protest. Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered in 1968. When I was nine years old, my family visited Cape Canaveral in 1972 for the Apollo 17 launch. I still have the mission button that I purchased at the NASA gift shop. I remember the long drive from Orlando to Cape Canaveral and back. I had forgotten that we had been forced to change our lodging when the hotel manager refused our reservation because we showed up Black.

Space became my obsession. Science fiction my playground. In it, I imagined futures where my color becomes less important than my species or planet. I watched as Lt. Uhura made first contact with new cultures as a communications officer. I saw her role as the highest expression of my love for bridging cultures and peoples to imagine something better.

In 1977, NASA asked Nichelle Nichols to assist them in recruiting a diverse astronaut corps, leveraging her fame from *Star Trek* to bring people of color into the new Space Shuttle astronaut training program.<sup>2</sup> In that role as NASA's ambassador, Nichols made public appearances and commercials, touting a career in aerospace. Her face became part of the interstitials in the television shows I watched, showing the way to an offscreen career in space exploration.

In 1978, I purchased my own subscription to the debut magazine, *OMNI*, that featured space, imagination and the future. I decided I wanted to be an astronaut and a pilot. I took the military ASVAB test to determine eligibility for Air Force flight school. I failed the eye exam.

In 1980, I was nominated by my science teacher to participate in a summer internship program at NASA Goddard Space Flight Center (that is me in the newspaper story below). That summer, I studied meteorology as part of the Earth Remote Satellite Sensing Unit on the campus right outside of Washington, D.C.. My first summer, I digitized Landsat data, creating the first digitized maps of the Earth's surface of roads, land features, and structures. These digital renderings became the basis of our global mapping systems for navigation and roads. Using Landsat photographic images, we plotted points spaced millimeters apart along roads, rivers, and other topographical features, creating the first digital renderings of the Earth's surface.

I returned to NASA the following summer, this time in the Space Shuttle engineering unit, working with scientists building navigation and operating software for the new shuttle program. I became part of the newly launched Summer High School Apprenticeship Research Program (SHARP), recruiting talented high school students of color interested in STEM careers. I learned computer programming in FORTRAN, dove into research on spinoff technologies, and began exploring new communication technologies being developed by NASA for Earth surveillance using remote sensing.

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<sup>2</sup> For more on Nichols relationship with NASA, see this Smithsonian Channel Story on Nichelle: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rtMNAHwPSgA>.



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This summer was not spent idly searching for something to occupy my time. As an AU participant, somebody else did it for me. I was placed at the Eastern Regional Remote Sensing Applications Center, (ERRSAC) located in building 22. Here, I worked under the guidance of my mentor, Dr. Herbert Blodget, and others of the staff. Mornings were spent digitizing which is the process by which analog values are converted into digital values. After-

I applied to aerospace engineering programs all over the country. In 1981, I set off to Virginia Tech to study aerospace engineering. I worked summers at NASA as a program assistant in the SHARP program for three years, where I helped write reports and newsletters; design our communications, programs and events; and document the experiences of our summer interns. I also was able to travel via NASA's own propeller planes to our other facilities in Langley, Wallops, and Washington, DC., where the scientists and engineers of color were hosting other SHARP students for the summer, hoping to guide them into STEM careers. I swear to this day that I met Katherine Johnson, the mathematician who rose in NASA to train early "human computers" how to program the new mainframe computers at NASA facilities. I surely met some of her recruits to engineering and programming, who were the scientists who mentored us during our summer internships and shared their experiences as experts of color on NASA campuses.



That is why I painted the second piece, from the movie *Hidden Figures* (2016, dir. Theodore Melfi), when I painted Lt. Uhuru. Both are my lineage—the women of color in technology, in science and in space exploration—that that provided pathways for navigating to the stars. I know in my five years as part of the SHARP program that I met and learned from these hidden figures. That they must have had a hand in developing such a program as SHARP, to introduce young adults to careers in STEM and space. After all, they had started a similar training program for women of color.

I did not graduate in engineering, instead taking up business courses and a journalism degree. Early in my communications/technology career, I pushed early bulletin board systems to nonprofit organizations as tools for communication and connection. I organized some of the first Mac User groups in the Washington, D.C, area and beta tested new digital tools for design and publishing. I worked with colleagues in the nonprofit sector to build out the HandsNet social sector community on the Internet before the World Wide Web. I was part of the National Education Association's web development team, creating the first online presence

for the organization in AOL and then on the web. I was a cybernaut, building out this new cyberspace.

I began to look at digital tools for creating community, connection—a way to make visible a constellation of talent in a geography. I began mapping ecosystems like media and local systems, to understand how to deliver better news and information, but also to create connection and shared work. I dove deeper into digital networks, communication, critical media studies and building out new digital tools and media innovation and entrepreneurship. I developed some of the first online only student news enterprises and the first media entrepreneurship classes and curricula.

I have come full circle following in Nichols pioneering footsteps to boldly go where no one has gone before. I completed my Ph.D. in Texts and Technologies. I am a digital content and infrastructure architect, designing emerging cyberspaces for learning, collaboration, and exploration. Today, some of my research and work harkens back to my days at NASA. I map media deserts, using digital forensics and remote sensing to design digital community spaces. I help connect the lived experiences of residents to imagine better inclusive communication tools, systems, and representations. I work at the intersection of technology, media, science and culture, examining ways to create the future.

Truly, I am walking in Nichelle Nichols' legacy and through the doorways opened by pioneering NASA scientists, mathematicians, and engineers of color. Today, I run the Media Innovation Collaboratory, the training ground for students to imagine better. A place for students to explore, seek, develop, and co-create new ways of communicating, new technologies, new ways of connecting people and communities. I have been living Nichols' legacy, ensuring that new communication technologies have someone that looks like Lt. Uhura on the command bridge.

Life creates art. Art imitates Life. Life inspires imitation. Imitation inspires art.

Black popular culture is featured prominently in my artwork. My themes are drawn from current events like the Black Lives Matter Movement and protests against police brutality growing across the globe. I have also painted stark black-and-white historical images of Black life and culture as a way of marking and remembering. I have painted icons like Billie Holliday. Bob Marley. Michelle Obama. I have painted my grief through Prince's death, expressing his legacy in purples and raw creative power. I now work from "The Prince Room," a room filled with his memory that has become my office since the pandemic and a place to paint, listen to music, do my research, and grieve in my purple womb.

And most recently, I have painted to honor Chadwick Boseman as King T'Challa in *Black Panther*. As an icon of Black popular culture, the world is weeping for the fallen Wakanda king. The impact of Boseman's performance on a new generation is still unfolding. The cover painting is titled "Kisses for the Once and Future King," a passing of the torch and a Wakanda Forever salute to send the King on his way.

I have been a painter, just as I have been a writer and an aspiring astronaut, all my life. Most recently, while in lockdown from the COVID-19 pandemic, I have lost my words and my ability to express my pain and anger. I feel choked of spaces to breathe, to express my rage and act. And so I turned to canvas again, to paint the pain I saw expressed through photojournalists who brought us striking images of protest from around the globe in support of Black Lives Matter.



I have been painting my grief, at the death of people of color in all spaces—while shopping, grilling, selling water, sleeping. I have been painting my way through the pain, memorializing all the losses, the lost potential, the lost dreams. I have also been painting myself into the protests, blending my emotions with the canvas to



touch the viewers soul in a different, visceral way. Beyond words. Implanting memories and emotions like an earworm cropping up in your memory, haunting you throughout the day. Bypassing the cognitive functions to elicit a connection.

Hailing on different frequencies, perhaps.

To boldly go.