

# Race, Class, Gender and Television

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It's no secret that I get giddy over the mysteries of ABC's television series *Lost*. The storytelling is humane and the actors are talented (okay, and super hot). With *Alias* creator J.J. Abrams at the helm, *Lost* has managed to reach cult status, critical acclaim and a mainstream audience in just one season -- a feat not even *The X-Files* could achieve.

But *Lost* has something more to offer than "good watchin'" -- and it's something that has the potential to be more powerful than that monster in the jungle.

You see, *Lost* represents a range of cultural diversity that is unprecedented in television, surpassing landmark shows such as *ER*, *Star Trek* and even the Sci-Fi network series, *Battlestar Galactica*, in its depictions of race, ethnicity, class, gender, weight and ability. While storylines are conscious and deliberate -- intended to provoke thought -- they are never heavy-handed.

Illustrating diversity on television as *Lost* does is invaluable in our evolving global community because popular culture not only reflects social consciousness but also has the power to change it.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. understood this when he encouraged Nichelle Nichols (a.k.a. Lt. Uhura ) to remain on *Star Trek*. Though the first black woman to be featured in a major television series, Nichols felt that her minor role as communications officer was insignificant. King told her he was a fan of the series and that Lt. Uhura was a role model for young black girls. And indeed she

was; Nichols went on to volunteer at NASA where she helped recruit minority and female personnel to the program.

Like the passengers of Oceanic Flight 815, we as an audience make snap judgments based on race, ethnicity or other visual "clues" -- and the writers of *Lost* want us to. The very essence of the show is about things being not what they seem. Existing ideas about otherness are exposed through the actions of the flight's survivors -- and our reactions can often be as surprising as the ones we see on TV.

For example: Charlie asks Hurley how he manages to maintain so much weight when there is little food around (you know you wondered).

"For the record, I'm down a notch in my belt," responded Hurley, who proceeds with his trademark sense of humor. "I'm a big guy, it's going to be a while before you're going to want to give me a piggy back ride, okay?"

There's also the poignant scene when Hurley finds out that Sayid fought in the Gulf War. "No way. I have a buddy who fought over there. He was in the 104th Airborne. What were you, Air force, Army?" Sayid replies, "The Republican Guard."

Beautiful.

Stereotypes continue to be dispelled throughout the course of the series. We discover through flashbacks that the privileged white surgeon is emotionally damaged, and that the tough-as-nails hunter was confined to a wheelchair before the crash. Petite and unassuming Kate can track movement through the woods -- as well as throw a mean punch. No character is what or who they initially seem to be, especially Sun, who turns out to have more power and substance than just about anyone on the show.

Korean actress, Yunjin Kim, who plays Sun, was originally up for the role of Kate. The producers had been toying with the idea of

having a couple on the show that did not speak English, as would inevitably happen on an international flight (and they have since gone on to air groundbreaking episodes that, for the most part, have been in Korean with English subtitles). When they met Kim they were so enamored of her that they cast her as one half of that couple (instead of as Kate). Korean-American actor Daniel Dae Kim (no relation) was hired to play her husband, Jin.

"When I first read the pilot script, to be frank, I thought these two Korean characters [Sun and Jin] were very stereotyped and I had a problem with that," Kim told Mark Cotta Vaz, author of *The Lost Chronicles* -- a companion guide to the series. "The idea of Sun as the typically submissive housewife -- I don't know any Korean women like that in 2005."

She called Abrams to tell him so. He explained to her that there is more to Sun than meets the eye, and after talking to him she understood that the story of Sun and Jin was not about racial stereotypes, but about a couple who had lost the ability to communicate with one another. And as we've seen throughout the series, communication is a skill that everyone stranded on the island is going to have to learn.

In most episodes, the struggle of a larger lesson is reflected in the smaller stories of the characters. And those smaller stories reflect us. Whether you read the characters on *Lost* as multilayered or stereotyped, I hope that at least the presence of such a diverse and talented cast promotes discussion about how larger issues are represented and reflected in popular culture.