**The monster inside: 19th century racial constructs in the 24th century mythos of Star Trek** Denise Alessandria Hurd *Journal of Popular Culture;* Summer 1997; 31, 1; ProQuest Central pg. 23

# The Monster Inside: 19th Century Racial Constructs in the 24th Century Mythos of Star Trek

# **Denise Alessandria Hurd**

That is the ineffaceable curse of Cain. Of the blood that feeds my heart, one drop in eight is black—bright red as the rest may be, that one drop poisons all the flood. Those seven bright drops give me love like yours, hope like yours—ambition like yours—life hung with passions like dew-drops on the morning flowers; but the one black drop gives me despair, for I'm an unclean thing—for-bidden by the laws—I'm an Octoroon!

Zoe in The Octoroon, 1859

Myself, I think I got the worst of each...that [my Klingon side] I keep under tight control...some times I feel there's a monster inside of me, fighting to get out...My Klingon side can be terrifying, even to me.

K'Ehleyr from Star Trek: Next Generation, 1989

Judging from the above two quotes, not much has changed in 130 years of racial image management. The language may have become less poetical by the time of *Star Trek*, and the "Other" race less specifically marked as an existing ethnic group, but the construction of the Other, especially the Hybrid Other, even down to the implication of an inevitable atavistic biological essentialism when two races are mixed, remains the same. In the world of *Star Trek*, the society of the future is a pattern card of egalitarian homogeneity. Prejudice is gone and brotherhood reigns supreme, at least theoretically. It is just those pesky "alien" cultures that repeat outmoded cultural conflicts. Or is it? In this article I wish to examine how this television series, whose original intent was to explore and disprove the encoded prejudices of contemporary society by displacing this debate onto a future and presumably utopian society, still tends to reify a particularly loaded image from nineteenth century psychology and anthropology in the United States: The Tragic Mulatto.

Beginning with the character of Spock in The Original Series (TOS) and on down to B'Elanna Torres on the newest series, *Star Trek: Voyager*, (*STV*) the following familiar crisis is enacted: A Hybrid charac-

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ter lives with a personal angst which stems from the difficulty it has in living with the "pull" of its different blood. These characters' lifestyles are based upon the race they have chosen to "play." They remain celibate (or at least do not procreate), adhering to the theatrical tradition wherein the mulatto character only becomes a real threat to society when it has children. If they do have children, either the child or the parent dies. Why is this such a popular motif in the world of *Star Trek*? Why and how does this stereotype still resonate in the modern world?

The stereotypical construct of the mulatto was used in various ways and in various venues in the nineteenth century. It was referenced in theatre, literature, philosophy, anthropology, physiology, and the emergent field of psychology. The term "mulatto" is itself "derived from the Spanish word for Mule, mulo." It referred generally to "a person of mixed Caucasian and African-American ancestry" or specifically to a "first generation offspring of such a union" (The New Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 4th Edition). The stereotype was used to explain the economic condition of freedmen in the United States, the evils of miscegenation, or conversely, to underscore the evils of slavery. The mulatto's entire personality was biologically determined. The common supposition was that as the hybrid result of two different species (Black and White), mulattoes were likely to inherit the worst traits of both races. Therefore, they were either destined to become monsters in human form, too politically ambitious for their "natural" station in life, or frightened despondent creatures never belonging to any one world and therefore prone to depression, suicide or madness. Neither education, political or economic achievements, or social status could change the fact that the mulatto was "a degenerate, unnatural offspring, doomed by nature to work out its own destruction" (Dr. Josiah Nott, 1844, qtd. in Stanton 68).

Sander L. Gilman, in his study of stereotypes called *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness*, has linked the creation of the same to the identification of pathology in the mutable self or the pathologizing of such identifying characteristics as race and gender. The material reality of the mulatto is the embodiment of the mutable self. All things being equal, i.e., they are half one group and half another, after all, what then are they? This mutability of identity created an anxiety which is evident in the contradictions in the stereotype itself. For example, scientists in the nineteenth century asserted that since the mulatto was the offspring of two different species like their equine namesake, they must be sterile, or at least have a diminished capacity to procreate, which was coupled with an unfortunate voracious sexual appetite (Stanton 54-72). That this notion of inherent sterility belied the ongoing cataloging of the various degrees of mixed races such as

Quadroon, Octoroon, Sentaroon, Mestizo and so on was conveniently elided.

When the stereotype of the mulatto was evoked scientifically, it was used to explain basic personality traits. When it was evoked theatrically, it was used to imply those traits. In the 1859 play The Octoroon, the playwright, Dion Boucicault, created a character who was the cumulation of these traits and which, arguably became the model for the theatrical Tragic Mulatto stereotype. Boucicault cannily counted on his nineteenth century audience's expectations of this stereotype when he created the title character of Zoe. With her, he created an image that so connected with national prejudices and expectations that it remains with us today with relatively little change. All Zoe needed do to characterize herself for her audience was to cry: "I'm an Octoroon." By implication, a mulatto's complete character, including their likely fate in the narrative, was given with such a simple statement. Whereas other characters' personalities were ultimately defined by their deeds, the mulattoes' liminal racial status defined not only their character but also their plotline. According to the stereotype, their racial status itself is the central obsessions of their life. This obsession is used to explain, justify and otherwise influence any actions they may take.

There were two variations on the mulatto stereotype, one for males and one for females. While the female was destined to wallow in depression and degradation, the male would likely "revert to type" and become a bestial savage, more dangerous than the "pure" black because he had the cunning of the white blood to spur him on. This trait was very similar to the "savage-renegade-half-breed-Indian" stereotype also popular on stage and in literature at this time. But while the "ignoble savage" often turned up on stage, the enraged "light-skinned buck" was rare. Most theatrical mulattoes were doomed women or disenfranchised children, perhaps made palatable to the largely white audience by their meekness. They were always played by white actors with minimal "brownface." After all, many of the plots revolved around the mulattoes' doomed efforts to "pass" for white. With rare exception, and this usually in abolitionist plays, they all ended badly because of their desire to deny their darker, more savage blood.'

This casting bias is repeated in *Star Trek*. Only two Hybrid characters out of the ten depicted have been played by an actor who was evidently non-Caucasian. They disappeared from the *Trek* universe almost as soon as they were introduced. One was a half-Klingon and half-Romulan woman (traditional enemies in the *Trek* world), named Ba'el who was played by an African-American actress. Her character had an "unusual sense of tolerance toward both cultures" and eventually chose to withdraw herself from the universe and to live in exile because of the "racial intolerance she would experience in either the Klingon or Romulan empire" (Okuda, Okuda and Mirek 19). The other character was a half-Human and half-Napean (a previously unknown species with telepathic abilities) named Lieutenant Kwan played by an Asian actor. He only existed in the prologue of The Eye of the Beholder episode of Star Trek: The Next Generation (STNG) where he commits suicide, a rare action for Trek people but a common action for mulattoes. Later in that same episode, the only other Hybrid character on the ship, the half-Human and half-Betazoid Deanna Troi, also nearly commits suicide. Apparently, it is the fact that they each had only the limited telepathic ability of a Hybrid and neither the full control of a pure Alien nor the lack of telepathic ability of a pure Human that made both these characters susceptible to psychic suicidal impulses. If they had been "pure," there would have been no plot. Once again, the Hybrid's blood dictated its storyline.

The "passing for other" scenario has also been used on Trek. In the episode The Drumhead of STNG, a character who is in reality part Romulan tries to pass himself off as part Vulcan. In the Trek universe, Other races are clearly and visually marked (pointed ears and so on), but even so, the Hybrid has an ability to subvert those markers. This ability is seen as perfidious. The character in question, Tarses, is arrested for his willful deceit. This being the Trek universe, which has a commitment to episode contained resolutions, he is eventually freed. On closer examination, this resolution is problematic. Tarses is not freed because he is absolved of the crime of lying about his forebears. Rather, the case is thrown out because the prosecutor is exposed as an hysterical zealot. This resolution leaves the question of whether or not Tarses' concealment of his racial background inevitably made him "unclean" unanswered. The implication is that he did indeed have to conceal his race in order to become a viable member of society, but the concealment tormented him. Again, this behavior is very consistent with the nineteenth century mulatto stereotype.

Gilman says of the term stereotype that "its origin is in the manufacture of texts" (16). One can argue that a stereotype's use in theatrical texts is as a shorthand for the audience who are well steeped in the conventions that have been outlined by those texts. In the nineteenth century, these stereotypes served as such a dramatic shorthand. As such, they were somewhat crude in their presumptions and repetitive in their use. In the twentieth century, stereotypes are still being created and used. Gilman has pointed out that: Stereotypes are a crude set of mental representations of the world. They are palimpsests on which the initial bipolar representations are still vaguely legible. They perpetuate a needed sense of difference between the "self" and the "object," which becomes the "Other." Because there is no real line between self and Other, an imaginary line must be drawn; and so that the illusion of an absolute difference between self and Other is never troubled, this line is as dynamic in its ability to alter itself as is the self. (17-18)

Modern audiences are more diverse and more sophisticated. As audiences have changed so have the encoded stereotypes that they encounter. Ethnic groups have more access to means of advocating for positive images. In television, networks try to please as many potential consumers as they can. Political correctness is good business, or at least the appearance of political correctness is good business. These circumstances make *Star Trek*'s almost brazen evocation of the mulatto stereotype all the more curious. But, as Gilman has pointed out: "...stereotypes can also be perpetuated, resurrected, and shaped through texts containing the fantasy life of the culture, quite independent of the existence or absence of the group in a given society" (20). As demonstrated by examples from *Star Trek*, a stereotype can also be perpetuated through its displacement onto groups that have resonance in the fantasy life of a culture but who will never actually exist in a given society.

Star Trek was first aired in the United States in 1966, at a time of racial, social and cultural turbulence. It confused its network, NBC, who was expecting a sort of "Wagon Train in space" anthology show and didn't know what to do with this odd science fiction show whose characters' stated purpose was "to explore new worlds; to seek out new life, new civilizations; to boldly go where no man has gone before."<sup>2</sup> The network canceled the show after one year. There was an unprecedented viewer response, kicking off the audience appropriation that is now a part of the material existence of Star Trek. The show was renewed for two more years and then finally canceled. It was (and still is) rerun in syndication and went on to become a popular culture phenomena. It has spawned eight movies to date plus three spin-offs of the original show. Star Trek has its own published encyclopedias, technical manuals, chronologies, magazines and fan clubs. The source material for all of these are the episodes as aired and the movies as filmed. If it wasn't aired or filmed (discounting the animated series which the producing company Paramount eschews) it did not happen in the official Trek world (Okuda, Okuda and Mirek iii). Therefore, all the racial constructs in this world are what one sees in the show and not what one can read in the speculative fiction, and "fanzines" which are sometimes more politically sensitive.

Gene Roddenberry, who helped create all but the current Voyager series, was committed to using the science fiction format to examine current social tensions. He insisted on having women, ethnic minorities and a genuine Alien, Spock, as permanent crew members. Spock, however, was not just an Alien. He was a Human/Vulcan Hybrid constantly at odds with the distasteful emotionality of his Human half and constantly denying it. He was designed to be read as a positive variant on the mulatto stereotype. Contrary to the convention, the Hybrid here didn't desire to be us (read white) but desired to be more completely the Other. Still, vestiges of the baseline stereotype remained. Spock was estranged from both Human and Vulcan culture. His one desire was to be wholly Vulcan, a coldly logical and unemotional species which was apparently biologically impossible. The fact that the series itself established that Vulcan logic was a philosophy and not a biological necessity did not change Spock's fear of betraying his bloodlines through his actions. Other Vulcans saw him as flawed, the implication being that he would "revert" to Human excesses. His one attempt at marriage was thwarted by his intended for this reason and he was never allowed to express his sexuality or have that expression reciprocated. As his character moved through TOS, the films, and into STNG he was rewarded for his lifelong DNA based psychological struggle by becoming an increasingly messianic figure. At one point, he even died and was resurrected. Later on, he chooses to devote the rest of his life to healing a century's old rift between the people of his planet and their distant, more violent cousins (closer to human?), The Romulan Empire. In a two part episode of STNG called Unification, he became the focus of an underground quasireligious cult intent on undermining the political rigidity of the Romulan Empire, unifying Vulcan and Romulus, and incorporating the relatively more peaceful Vulcan philosophy of logic into the philosophy of pragmatic totalitarianism that governs the Romulan Empire. It is not a stretch to say he took on Christ-like proportions, and he was able to do this because of his biological struggle. He could negotiate his way through two different cultures because he had been constantly at war within himself.

Even though Spock was the only Hybrid alien character in the Classic *Trek* universe he set the pattern for a whole host of others that came in the late eighties and early nineties starting with *STNG*. These Hybrid characters differed from Spock in some significant ways; They were almost all female (with three exceptions), they almost all preferred their human or more "civilized" half (again with two notable exceptions)<sup>3</sup> and, evidently, they were not alone. They could exchange views on what it was like to be a Hybrid. Such exchanges tended to sup-

port an essentialist notion of race. Expressions such as "I got the best of both cultures," "I got the worst of both cultures," "sometimes I can't control my\_\_\_blood," "I hate my\_\_\_half, even though it gives me strength," etc., are peppered throughout the series, often substituting for a psychological explanation of character.

Presumably, since the hard-core Trek audience has already seen how this DNA based struggle expressed itself in the character of Spock, no other demonstration of character was necessary. In other words, it is enough for a character to say they were half Human and half blank to give the audience an expectation of behavior if not function in the plot. That expectation is almost always fulfilled. Hybrid characters adhere to the behavior of the non-Human Other, even when they wished not to. Usually, their behavior is representative of the cruder less civilized race. They tend to revert to whichever is more savage. This is a consistency the later Hybrid characters share with Spock because, in his case, his human side was the less civilized race. They also become great leaders but only in the Alien culture. Sela, a half-Human and half-Romulan Hybrid soundly rejects her Human half, betrays her human mother to death and becomes one of the most ruthless and tactically brilliant military leaders of the Romulan empire. She is hated by Humans, not wholly trusted by Romulans and has neither an extended family nor her own family. She has her work. K'Ehleyr, a half-Human and half-Klingon Hybrid, is a trusted ambassador and aid to the Klingon Emperor, the closest a woman can come to ruling in the phallocentric world of the Klingon High Command. Unfortunately for her, she commits the ultimate crime of the Hybrid. She is content to be liminal in her racial identification (even though she is constantly trying to suppress her Klingon side) and she has a child. She is brutally murdered in the same episode where she introduces her child. That child, Alexander, who is technically only one quarter Human, is destined to become a great spiritual leader of his people. In The Firstborn, a STNG episode, an adult Alexander travels back in time to kill himself as a child if he can't persuade himself to embrace Klingon culture and eschew Human culture. Even though he has become a legendary leader (or will become), and this is because of the lessons he has learned as a Hybrid struggling with himself and struggling for acceptance, he resents the burden of being even partially Human. He wants to kill himself to prevent himself from not becoming a true Klingon and inadvertently causing his father's death. A complicated motivation for what amounts to temporal suicide, but again, it is grounded in his psychological struggles as a Hybrid character. Racial composition determines personality.

When Star Trek: The Next Generation began airing in 1987, it introduced the first of at least nine new Hybrid Human/Alien characters; Deanna Troi the half-Human, half-Betazoid ship's counselor. Her presence on the show seemed to be a tribute to Spock, almost as if it wouldn't be a real Trek show without a Hybrid on the bridge. Star Trek: Deep Space Nine (DS9) took four years to introduce a Hybrid character. A recent episode of DS9 centered around a former Cardassian leader (analogous to a nineteenth century slave owner) searching for his hybrid Bajoran daughter to either ensure her continuing exile or to kill her. Ducat eventually chose to return with her to his home planet and deal with the inevitable political and cultural acceptance problems. This was a rare instance where the maladjusted psychology of the hybrid character was not the central story and can be seen as a positive development. However, the episode did still evoke the classic stereotype as an expositional shortcut and the daughter herself had no personality. She was simply a plot device to explore the character of Gul Ducat. She has since returned to become a permanent character on DS9, but it remains to be seen if she will revert to Star Trek type, or be a character in her own right. STV, the third spin off, also had a Hybrid from the beginning. Interestingly, according to most fans, DS9 is the least "authentic" of the Trek shows.<sup>4</sup> Its format is different, it is set on a fixed space station rather than a moving starship and, until recently, there were no captains. It is the only one that has a classic bi-racial race child though (female, naturally), the half-Japanese, half-Irish child of one of the main characters, Miles O'Brien, but she and her mother are very rarely seen.

While *STNG* and the others were set a hundred years further in the future from TOS, the stereotype had not much changed from the Spock prototype. Troi was defined by her Hybridity. She didn't even have a real function on the ship until later in the second season when she was established as the ship's psychologist. This position is significant because its presence represents an emphasis on "psychologically stable personalities" in the *Trek* universe which is an ease of mind denied the Hybrid by nature. On the other hand, their biological personality conflict is never noted as being pathological in this world.

Troi has empathetic abilities from her Betazoid half but no real psychological resources of her own. On those episodes where she lost her empathetic ability or lost control of it, she would fall apart whereas logically, she should have just become a "normal" human. Apparently, without the Betazoid half of her to define the Human half, Deanna was left by the scriptwriters with only one option, excessive neurotic behavior.

Of course, mental instability stemming from the conflict in the blood is the material condition of the mulatto stereotype. This is also so in the Trek world. For example, in a STV episode aired the week of May 8th, 1995, called significantly Faces (race is what one sees on the face, I guess) the Hybrid Human/Klingon character B'Elanna Torres was split into two beings, one "pure" blooded Klingon and one "pure" Human. By the end of the episode her Klingon DNA has to be reincorporated with her Human DNA in order for her to survive. Before this is done to her, the wholly human Torres remarks "right now, the way I am, I'm more at peace with myself than I've ever been before ... and that's a good feeling.... I guess I'll just have to accept the fact that I'll spend the rest of my life fighting with her [meaning her Klingon half]." She cries, fellow characters look on sympathetically and the whole scene is constructed so as to make the audience recognize the horror of the character's subcellular civil war. Outside the context of the Trek universe, this division of the self into several selves (even though Torres had been actually split apart, she is about to have her DNA restored in the above episode and not have another person grafted onto her body) would be symptomatic of Dissociative Identity Disorder. In any other character in the Trek universe or in our universe, such a statement as B'Elanna's regarding fighting with "her" meaning herself, would be a sign of mental instability. In a Hybrid character such mental instability is accepted as stable.

Like Deanna Troi before her, B'Elanna is established as a Hybrid merely to give the audience insight into her character. Unlike other characters on *Voyager* whose personality is established by what they have done or what they have had done to them, the sum total of B'Elanna's personality is that she is a Hybrid constantly at war with her inner self. She physically lashes out at people and her only explanation, which is accepted as reasonable by everyone else, is that sometimes her Klingon blood is difficult to control. But this statement actually is contradictory to scientific facts established in the *Trek* universe: The DNA of all humanoid species in the galaxy come from a single race.

Partially to explain why so many Aliens were humanoid, and perhaps explain why Alien species could have mixed children, a 1993 *STNG* episode entitled *The Chase* established that all these species were the result of a cosmic seeding project by a primeval sentient humanoid race (a form of genetic imperialism perhaps?). Therefore, at the most basic level, all the Alien races are the same. This would mean, logically, that any behavioral differences from species to species could not be essential and must be either environmental or philosophical. *Trek* has a tradition of explaining its facts after establishing them, and rarely looking at the implications of their own science from episode to episode. Still, it is a reflection of the perniciousness of the mulatto stereotype that it took nearly thirty years for fan questions of why Alien species could procreate to be heard. Even then, with the above explanation, there is a basic acceptance that character is biologically determined across the *Trek* universe which is belied by the internal logic of the show. The stereotype is evidently more understandable to an audience on a visceral level because it is so familiar to our culture.

When Paramount launched the newest Trek spin-off in 1995, Star Trek: Voyager, it touted it as a return to classic Trek. They were careful to have a broad spectrum of ethnic minorities on the show and had a celebrated search for "the first reoccurring female captain" in the Trek universe. They were also careful to have a Hybrid character, B'Elanna Torres, whose every thought is determined by her struggle to reconcile her internal cultural biologically determined conflict. Each character on Voyager has their own idiosyncratic personality quirks. Torres' personality adheres to a thirty year old pattern. Nothing that has been aired so far contradicts this. She is estranged from her family. She was persecuted by both of her hereditary cultures for being a Hybrid. She hates the more savage "Other" side of her and fears her own tendency towards atavistic behavior. The series is young yet, but she is the only main character who has had no romantic liaisons, present or referred to in the past. Every other character on the show has had a some kind of a sexual relationship, either ongoing, blossoming or in the past. Torres isn't even allowed to flirt.<sup>5</sup> All that remains is for her to become some sort of grandiose leader. but even in the *Trek* world that would take time.

The culmination of this use of the mulatto stereotype was in the afore mentioned Faces episode where Torres was spilt into two people, one Human and one Klingon. As if to underscore that the Hybrid stereotype was directly based upon the mulatto stereotype, which in itself depends upon the persistence of stereotypes of black people, the two characters were both behaviorally and figuratively marked as stereotypical Black and White. The Klingon Torres was darker skinned, with kinkier hair. She was savage, instinctual, anti-intellectual and possessed of a voracious sexual appetite (not demonstrated, just referred to). Even though she had the same store of knowledge as the Human Torres, she didn't know how to do anything but fight, hunt, and kill. In the end, she dies saving the Human Torres, continuing the tradition of a black character dying to save a white one. The Human Torres, on the other hand, seemed like a poster child for the cult of white womanhood. She was more delicate and weaker. She used her intellect and eschewed savagery. In the end, she makes the tearful admission that her life is destined to be a struggle because she will always be fighting her blood. In many ways this was a difficult episode to watch because they left practically no aspect of the stereotype undepicted.

Star Trek tries to have a liberal and positive outlook. In many ways, its depictions of conventional ethnic groups are very encouraging for the future of race relations. After all, how many other current shows have Asians, Native Americans, African-Americans, Arabs and other ethnic groups represented by lead characters all living together harmoniously? In fact, the show recently was rewarded for its ethnic diversity in casting. But, the show tries to have its racial equality cake and eat it, too. By constantly returning to the Tragic Mulatto stereotype to define different species, the *Trek* world only perpetuates the ideas that character is biologically essential, race is immutable and people of different colors and habits are really different species. *Trek* preaches tolerance for others and for that it is justly praised, but it does so by being oddly intolerant for which it should be watched carefully.

#### Notes

'For more on the stereotype of the Mulatto in Amrica, see Judith R. Berzon's book *Neither White Nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction* (New York: New York UP, 1978).

<sup>2</sup>In *STNG*, the mission became "to boldly go where no *one* has gone before."

<sup>3</sup>Except for two characters, Ba'el, who is half Romulan and Half Klingon, and Ze'al who is half-Cardassian and half-Bajoran, all the hybrid characters are half Human and another race. This inadverently brings up two intriguing implications: Either Humans are universally attractive or Humans will sleep with anything.

<sup>4</sup>Various letter columns in Star Trek magazines.

<sup>5</sup>Since this writing, Torres has been shown in a romantic relationship on an episode which depicted a possible future for the crew. Within five minutes of this scene, her character was killed.

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