

Racial Stereotyping in *Star Trek* and its Fandom

“There was persecution on Earth once. I remember reading about it in my history class.”
“Yes, but it happened way back in the twentieth century. There’s no such primitive thinking today.”

--Chekov (Walter Koenig) and Sulu (George Takei) in “Let That Be Your Last Battlefield,” *Star Trek: The Original Series*¹

In the mid-1960s, Gene Roddenberry created *Star Trek*, a space opera that featured an unusually multicultural cast for the time and self-consciously used science-fiction and fantasy plotlines to address contemporary racial politics. Roddenberry strove to frame the *Trek* universe as a utopian future in which racial divisions no longer plague mankind. In fact, as the above exchange between the *Enterprise*’s Russian navigator and half-Japanese, half-Filipino helmsman indicates, in the 23rd century such divisions have become all but unimaginable. Praise for *Star Trek*’s commitment to multiculturalism also echoes throughout the documentary *Trekkies*. The film suggests the transference of the racial utopia of the series to *Trek* fandom. According to one quoted fan,

“The whole infinite diversity in infinite combinations is something that’s very attractive to all of us, and it’s something that I wish the world would grasp onto as beautifully as the *Star Trek* fans have. People of all races, religions, political backgrounds, sizes, shapes, et cetera, are all absolutely equal at a convention, and nobody is ostracized because they’re different.”²

But despite the *Star Trek*’s reputation for racial progressivism, scholars have documented pervasive patterns of racial discrimination in the production of *Star Trek*, racial stereotyping in the world of *Star Trek*, and the placement of white actors, white characters, and white culture at

¹ Daniel Leonard Bernardi, *Star Trek and History: Race-ing Toward a White Future* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 27, quoting “Let That Be Your Last Battlefield,” *Star Trek*, Dir. Jud Taylor, Written by Oliver Crawford, NBC, 1/10/69.

² “Trekkies Script - Dialogue Transcript,” *Drew’s Script-O-Rama*, http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/t/trekkies-script-transcript-star-trek.html (Accessed 24 April 2008).

the top of a racial hierarchy within the *Star Trek*-verse. As might be expected, *Star Trek* fans reproduce these racial issues, especially through their acceptance of biological and essentialized race. Even in fannish discussions and deconstructions of problematic racial representations in *Star Trek*, stereotypes about human “races” are often reproduced instead of questioned.

The late 1990s saw the rise of a scholarship that began to look critically at Roddenberry’s vision. Daniel Leonard Bernardi, Micheal Pounds, and Denise Alessandria Hurd suggest how all is not so tolerant as it seems in the *Trek*-verse. On the production side, Bernardi documents discrimination against actors of color in the production of *Star Trek*, prejudice which was then reflected in the way those actors were used onscreen. Reflecting on the endless whittling down of her character’s screen-time, Nichelle Nichols, the actress who played the *Enterprise*’s African chief communications officer Uhura, commented, “[I]t finally got to the point where I had really had it. I mean I just decided that I don’t even need to read the FUCKING SCRIPT! I mean I know how to say, ‘hailing frequencies open.’”³ Throughout the original series, NBC concern over viewer fallout resulted in overtly racist decisions. An onscreen kiss between Kirk and Uhura was cut; studio executives protested Kirk’s marriage to a Native-American-resembling alien in a different episode.⁴

Bernardi, Pounds, and Hurd also track more subtly racist elements in *Star Trek*. *Star Trek* may teach viewers that all races can get along, but it also preaches that the most important factor in a person’s personality is his/her race—in fact, with many aliens on *Star Trek*, race is the only factor in their personality. Klingons are violent; Romulans are mysterious; Bajorans are mystical; Ferengi are greedy. The list goes on. Hurd’s discussion of the prevalence of the “The Tragic Mulatto” stereotype in *Star Trek* provides an excellent analysis of how far the biologicalization

³ Bernardi, 40-41, quoting Nichols, quoted in William Shatner and Chris Kreski, *Star Trek Memories* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1993), 212.

⁴ Ibid., 38-39, 46-47.

of racial personality goes in *Trek*. Hurd notes that almost all “Hybrid” characters in *Star Trek* (those with bi-racial or bi-species heritage) “live[] with a personal angst which stems from the difficulty [they have] in living with the ‘pull’ of [their] different blood.”⁵ Furthermore, these characters never develop beyond this angst: “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.”⁶ If, as these scholars and many fans suspect, species in *Star Trek* are frequently grounded in human racial stereotypes (Romulans as Chinese stereotypes or Cardassians as Arab stereotypes, for example⁷), *Trek* implies that humans divide neatly into personality types based on their racial characteristics. This message is furthered as these flattening portrayals are written into bi-racial characters as well as bi-species characters. Thus, Sulu, for example, chooses between his Japanese and American sides—apparently he can separate the two, and it is impossible to synthesize them.⁸ A half-Brazilian, half-American character who was cut from *The Original Series* was similarly described as having personality traits that could be traced back to his racial duality—genius from his American half and temperamental moodiness from his Latino half.⁹ Notably, in most instances, the human or white half of hybrid characters is preferable.¹⁰

Thus, racial essentialization in the series feeds racial hierarchies with whites at the top. Just as *Trek*’s writers often deprive “ethnic” characters of development, they grant white characters interesting plotlines and more easily allow them to evolve. Pounds notes that “‘ethnic characters’ have little or no independent social reality of their own. They exist as local color, ‘functionaries’ whose place is to provide a familiar background against which the heroic Captain

⁵ Denise Alessandria Hurd, “The Monster Inside: 19th Century Racial Constructs in the 24th Century Mythos of Star Trek,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 31, Iss. 1 (Summer 1997), 23-35: 24.

⁶ Ibid, 29.

⁷ Bernardi, 51, 139.

⁸ Ibid., 40.

⁹ Ibid., 35.

¹⁰ The exception is Spock, who prefers his Vulcan side.

Kirk and Picard may pose.”¹¹ One of Bernardi’s primary claims in his book *Star Trek and History: Race-ing Toward a White Future* is that the supposedly multicultural Federation and its friendly alien participants mostly display the values of white culture—the Federation may be technically multiracial, but few influences from Earth’s past beyond those of Europe appear to have survived.¹² Evil aliens are also more likely to be dark-skinned or have other characteristics that signify non-white ethnicity. Unfortunately, because *Star Trek* claims that racism has been eradicated within the Federation, it is impossible for the characters on the show to address racist understandings that still clearly exist.

Fans, on the other hand, are not unaware of these issues, though *Trekkies* may make them seem that way. Unfortunately, fandom, though conscious of problematic racial representations in *Star Trek*, often has the tendency to reproduce and reinforce similar ideas. After all, notes Hurd, “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 the those texts.”¹³ Thus, crude racial stereotyping is productive for *Star Trek* producers because the fans are aware of such tropes and respond to them, filling in any necessary blanks. Bernardi discovered something similar when he monitored STREK-L, an Internet listserv for Trek fans, from 1992-1994. Though fans on STREK-L often speculated about *Trek*’s use of human racial stereotypes in the show’s alien characters, these speculations frequently failed to question those stereotypes. Thus, a fan was convinced that Klingons are based on the Japanese due to “their sense of ‘honor’ and ‘family,’” while another contended that Klingons “seem to be a savage race

¹¹ De Witt Douglas Kilgore, “Promises Deferred: ‘Race,’ ‘Star Trek.’ And the Future on Television,” *Black Camera – A Micro Journal of Black Film Studies*, Vol. 16, Iss. 2 (Fall-Winter 2001), 5-6: 5. This article is a review of Micheal C. Pounds, *Race in Space: The Representation of Ethnicity in Star Trek and Star Trek: The Next Generation* (Lanham MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1999).

¹² Bernardi, 51, 56, 62.

¹³ Hurd, 26.

like the Mongols, are warlike, and eat like I imagine the Mongols might have.”¹⁴ Fans speculated that the Cardassians represent Arabs without bothering to distinguish between Arab stereotypes and reality.¹⁵ Fans also buy into the biologicalization of race even as they try to celebrate multicultural identities in the *Trek*-verse. Says one fan in *Trekkies*, “Klingons are popular because they’re fun. Klingons allow us as non-Klingons to express a certain aspect of our personality, I think, that we’re not allowed to do in public.”¹⁶ While a fan may dress up as a specific human character at a convention and take on that specific character’s traits, simply dressing up as any Klingon indicates that one is tapping into their aggressive, wild side. No individual identity within the race is necessary. *Star Trek* is thus both responding to the culture that spawned it—one fluent in racial stereotyping—and continues to feed racist impulses in that culture.

This analysis may appear overly harsh to *Trek* and *Trek* fandom. For many fans, *Trek* presented a powerfully multicultural vision in a time in which the media was famously whitewashed. Pounds, himself an African-American *Trek* fan, begins his analysis with a description of “his youthful impression that the original series offered ‘blacks, and other ethnic groups, [hope] of a better future world.’”¹⁷ But just as fan studies have in general moved away from utopian descriptions, *Trek* studies have rightfully followed. Interestingly, most of the analyses of racism in *Star Trek* and *Trek* fandom ignore *Voyager* (except Hurd), which featured the most racially diverse *Trek* cast to date, and all ignore *Deep Space Nine*, the only *Trek* series featuring a non-white main captain. This despite the fact that the studies cited in this paper were published well into the runs of both series. Clearly, further research is needed to analyze how

¹⁴ Bernardi, 170, quoting Barry, 4 June 1994 and Stephanie, 27 June 1994.

¹⁵ Ibid., 167-168.

¹⁶ “Trekkies Script - Dialogue Transcrip.”

¹⁷ Kilgore, 5, quoting Pounds, 8.

Star Trek and its fandom have responded to the evolving understandings of racism and the terms of racial debate in the late 20th century.

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