

# Some Thoughts on Being Mixed-Race in America

By Winslow Funaki

## Identity: Internally and Externally Defined

As someone who is half-asian and half-white, I make a point of identifying myself as “multiracial” or “mixed-race”. Occasionally, when filling out forms, I am asked to “choose *one*” (clearly enough people have chosen more than one race to warrant the emphasis placed on “*one*”) despite the fact that since 2000, the federal government standard is to allow respondents to choose whatever options they feel best describe themselves<sup>1</sup>. When I am forced to choose *one*, I usually choose “Other” or it’s only slightly better variant, “Mixed-Race.” With the latter, I am lumped in with every other person who cannot choose *one*, all of whom have wildly different backgrounds and experiences which doesn’t seem statistically useful.<sup>2</sup> The former semantically others me in the most literal way possible. None of this deeply offends me but the effort I must exert to repeatedly explain this to people at all levels of bureaucracy is nonetheless annoying.

I do not choose *one*--although it would probably make my life a little easier-- because the genetic and cultural input from both of my parents is valuable to me and I would prefer not to align myself with one over the other. I also feel--and I can only speak for myself--that it is only responsible to claim what whiteness I have. As a white woman, my mother has had certain advantages that were passed on to me, advantages that someone who is 100% asian might not have gotten.

If I were inclined to choose, however, it would seem that the choice is virtually made for me. I don’t think anyone would stop me from choosing “White” but I can imagine that it could get me some weird looks--I don’t look *that* racially ambiguous. This leaves me to choose “Asian” which I am hesitant to do. The feeling that I *should* choose “Asian,” that I am not white enough to choose “White” is the legacy of policies of racial purity in the United States. You are white until something else muddies the water; then you and your descendants are that something else forever<sup>3</sup>. We have a binary in this country; on one side is everyone with a lily-white family history and those that can pass and on the other is everyone else. To choose “Asian” feels like I am capitulating to a racist binary set up to “protect” whiteness. This is precisely why I find the term “person of color” problematic<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See Lawrence Wright’s “One Drop of Blood” on the discussions leading up to this decision. Wright, Lawrence, “One Drop of Blood,” *The New Yorker*, 24 July, 1994, <http://www.afn.org/~dks/race/wright.html>

<sup>2</sup> This is also why this essay is written in the first person and mainly filled with personal anecdotes. I don’t want to speak for other mixed-race people because I know that my experience is vastly different from someone who is half-black and half-asian, to give an example.

<sup>3</sup> Davis, F. James, “The One-Drop Rule Defined,” *Who is Black?: One Nation’s Definition* (Penn State Press, 1991), <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jefferson/mixed/onedrop.html>

<sup>4</sup> While “person of color” is certainly better than “non-white” which is defined negatively against whiteness, it is still predicated on this binary. I do think the term is politically useful--it needs to be pointed out that whiteness is privileged in our society while other races are not--but I worry about it being taken up as an identity in-and-of itself.

Of course, whiteness is not as pure as we are made to believe. We all know that almost no one (at least in the United States) has a family history that is entirely white (whatever that actually means). It is also true that the idea of whiteness has expanded over the years to include groups previously thought to be non-white<sup>5</sup>. It would seem then that nearly all white people are engaged in an extreme form of passing. Race here is less about family history and more about physical appearance, yet at other times the opposite is true. Our conception of race is based on some bizarre combination of ancestry and physical features that changes from person to person. A person may identify one way and the people around them may identify the person a number of different ways and even this might change depending on their access to certain information. Race is intricate and fluid. It is not based on anything concrete. It is certainly not based on mathematics.

### **Cultural Appropriation**

This logic around culture and identity has become personally problematic. I am half-Japanese but I have lived in the United States my entire life. My father grew up in Japan but does not really immerse himself or his children in that culture. I know some things about Japanese culture--probably more than your average American--but for the most part, I feel culturally American. At the same time, however, I claim my Japanese identity and my Japanese citizenship. This is why I get annoyed when people who are often--but not necessarily--white (people whose claim to Japaneseness I deem less than my own) know more about the culture than I do. I at first assumed that my annoyance was at cultural appropriation (which sometimes it is but certainly not always). When I found that the white person sitting at the front desk of the Japanese consulate could read Japanese while I couldn't, I felt deeply uncomfortable. I soon realized that my annoyance was directed towards myself and not at this person. As someone who works in the Japanese consulate, she has a very good reason to know Japanese, probably a better reason than I might have. Although Japanese citizenship is my right I couldn't help but feel that I was claiming something that didn't entirely belong to me.

As I began incorporating Japanese culture into my work, I wondered whether it is possible for me, as an American who has only ever lived in America (and at this point, will probably never *not* be culturally American), to appropriate Japanese culture. This is absurd, of course--Japan is a part of my heritage and I have every right to learn more about it and use it in my work--yet it is a feeling I had nonetheless. I am left with the question of what it means to own my Japaneseness through association--through my father--without having lived it myself.<sup>6</sup> Should my great, great grandchild be able to claim their Japaneseness and (assuming that I am their only ancestral link to Japan) how can they if I do not?

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<sup>5</sup> Painter, Nell Irvin, "The Expanding Definition of Whiteness," *Big Think*, <http://bigthink.com/videos/the-expanding-definition-of-whiteness>

<sup>6</sup> I am reminded of Zipporah Gene's controversial essay positing that some black Americans appropriate African cultures. Gene, Zipporah, "Black America, Please Stop Appropriating African Clothing and Tribal Marks," *Those People*, 3 Sept, 2015, <https://thsppl.com/black-america-please-stop-appropriating-african-clothing-and-tribal-marks-3210e65843a7>

## **The Myth of Inner Conflict**

On a family vacation some years ago (I was probably in my early teens) my parents, my brother, and I were sitting at the counter in a restaurant. My parents were to my left and my brother to my right. Two middle-aged white women sat down to the right of my brother and after a while started talking about mixed-race children. They seemed to agree that interracial couples should not procreate because it was “unfair to the children” and “they won’t ever really belong anywhere.” My brother and I probably should not have been eavesdropping but these women probably should not have talked about people who were sitting within earshot. It is possible that they were not talking about us specifically but when you see my whole family together it is pretty clear what is going on. I’m told that I look just like my mother, I think my brother looks a lot like my father, and my mother and father are clearly of different races.

I relate this story because I don’t think these women realized they were being racist. I think that they genuinely believed that they were feeling compassion for some yet-unborn mixed-race child and maybe for my brother and I. Since these women were clearly not mixed-race (or didn’t believe themselves to be) and I’m willing to guess that they did not spend very much time around people who are not white, I wondered where they had gotten this idea.

It is true that historically<sup>7</sup> mixed-race people have sometimes had problems fitting in but this was twenty first-century Delaware (at that age I probably assumed that all of America had the New York tri-state area values and customs that I was used to). My brother and I had never encountered problems because of our race, so why would these women, or anyone, still think it were true? We both had a sense of belonging in our community; we were embraced by both the white kids and the asian kids (and the black kids and the latino kids and the other mixed-race kids--you get the picture).

I suspect that mixing races makes some people uncomfortable because it breaks the white/non-white binary and upsets a sense of social order. A blatant white supremacist would tell you that mixed-race people contaminate the white race. I don’t believe these women were white supremacists and (I am assuming here) believed themselves to be enlightened, modern women. The narrative that miscegenation is cruel to the poor, poor children is an easy way to justify the anxiety it causes them and this narrative is repeated in popular culture again and again.

## ***Star Trek*: Attitudes on Race Projected into the Future**

The *Star Trek* franchise serves as a good example in this capacity because as science fiction set in the future, *Star Trek* is able to offer perspectives on topics like gender, race, foreign policy, and economics (this is another essay entirely) through metaphor. The enduring nature of

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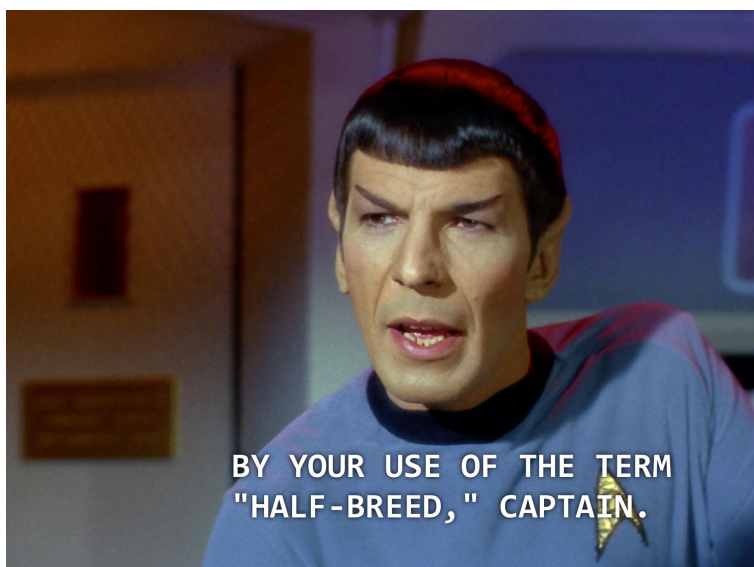
<sup>7</sup> Piper, Adrian, “Passing for White, Passing for Black,” TRANSITION, Issue #58, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/secret/readings/piper.html>

the franchise also gives us a look at social attitudes from the 1960s through today. (I am also, apparently, a major geek.)



The first iteration of *Star Trek*, retroactively dubbed, *The Original Series (TOS)*, aired from 1966 through 1969. Given the time period, the cast of recurring, named characters is surprisingly diverse. One quarter of these these characters are not white and over 60% are clearly identified as not American. It is an optimistic view of human life in the 2260s, particularly from the point-of-view of Cold War, Civil Rights Era America<sup>8</sup>.

Despite all this, there is still one point of racial anxiety and it rests in Spock, the ship's first officer and science officer. Spock is half Human and half Vulcan, the only member of the crew



BY YOUR USE OF THE TERM  
"HALF-BREED," CAPTAIN.

with any alien origins. To make Spock a mixed-species character and not simply the ship's resident alien was a very deliberate choice. Spock is for the most part, culturally Vulcan, preferring to suppress his emotions in favor of pure logic. In many episodes, he does serve as a simple foreign entity and is often having to remind his crew members—and viewers—that he is half human. Sometimes, however, Spock's mixed heritage becomes a significant plot element and when it does it usually causes him inner conflict. Being mixed has made Spock an outcast; he is neither

fully embraced by Humans or Vulcans. Much of the supplementary *Star Trek* novels, comic books, animated series, and the 2009 re-boot bolster this idea.

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<sup>8</sup> I think we should all take a moment to recognize what a badass Nichelle Nichols is.



We can view Spock's mixed-species status as a metaphor for being mixed-race, where his Human half is analogous to whiteness. If we remember the time period that *TOS* was created, this assertion seems further evidenced by the questionably playful antagonism that McCoy, the crotchety, old, Southern doctor, displays for Spock. McCoy constantly jabs at both Spock's non-human physical features (his pointy ears and eyebrows) and his cultural differences (his cold, "brutal" logic). In this case, *TOS* would seem to be a warning against miscegenation. Living and working harmoniously with people of many different races is a good thing but procreating with them is a step too far.

*TOS* reflects an attitude towards miscegenation that was certainly prevalent in 1960s America. In 1967, the year that the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that anti-miscegenation laws were unconstitutional (*Loving v. Virginia*) seventeen states still actively enforced laws that banned marriages between whites and non-whites. I'm sure that even among more liberal Americans, those who supported the Civil Rights movement and certainly did not consider themselves to be racist, some believed that mixing races was a bad idea, not because the white race had to remain pure (at least some did not believe this on a conscious level) but because it was cruel to mixed-race children (sounds familiar). Like Spock, they would never be truly welcomed into either community which they can claim to be theirs. While I do believe this to have been true historically, it is also fairly obvious that this line of thinking only perpetuates the very problem it is seeking to avoid.

In the years since *TOS*, it would be hoped that attitudes towards mixed-race people improved. *Star Trek: Voyager* is a *Star Trek* spin-off which aired from 1995 through 2001. *Voyager* is a notably less progressive program relative to *TOS*. In the three decades since the creation of *TOS*, it seemed that attitudes regarding race had improved, yet the cast is only slightly less white than that of *TOS* and although made in the 90s, there are no queer characters at all. This is not to call out *Voyager* specifically, nearly all contemporary television shows were the same. Only in the area of female empowerment—the captain is a woman and there are several other women in prominent authority roles—does *Voyager* make some strides.

Like *TOS*, *Voyager* also features a mixed-species character, B'Elanna Torres, the chief engineer. B'Elanna is half human and half Klingon. Despite the fact that *Voyager* is set in the 2370s, over a century after *TOS* took place, B'Elanna faces the same, if not more, inner turmoil as Spock. Granted that many of B'Elanna's feelings are also tied up in her parents' separation this plot line comes up again and again. This is all without the prodding of a McCoy, too. No one on the crew seems particularly bothered by B'Elanna's mixed heritage; all of her feelings are self-imposed.



It would seem that the *Star Trek* franchise is hung up on the idea that a person cannot be mixed and be well-adjusted without significant struggle. As far as I am aware, there are no mixed-race Human characters on either *TOS* or *Voyager*.<sup>9</sup>



There is one mixed-species character who is virtually untroubled by being mixed, Deanna Troi, the ship's counselor on *Star Trek: The Next Generation (TNG)* (1987-94). Deanna is half Human and half Betazoid, a psychic species who, except for some slight differences in the look of their eyes (they appear to have large pupils with no irises), look just like humans. Deanna displays almost no inner conflict whatsoever. What conflicts do arise are almost always centered around Deanna's Betazoid mother, Lwaxana. Deanna is placed in the familiar narrative of the immigrant or the child of an immigrant who disagrees with her mother's Old World ideas. These clashes in themselves tend to be minor and are only exacerbated by the separate issue of Lwaxana's big personality. In every situation, Lwaxana is quick to forgive her daughter—if it is even a situation that calls for forgiveness—and is always asserting that she just wants Deanna to be happy.

Of the three mixed-species characters, Deanna appears the most human. Unlike the actors who portrayed Spock and B'Elanna, Marina Sirtis (who played Deanna) did not have to undergo any special effects makeup. At most, she may have had to wear some colored contacts. If it weren't explicitly stated, viewers might not know that Deanna was not full Human. I don't think it is coincidental that the mixed character who is able to pass as Human (read white) also has the

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<sup>9</sup> There is one interracial couple who appear in the first *TOS* spin-off, *Star Trek: The Next Generation (TNG)* (1987-94), and later in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine (DS9)* (1993-89). Chief Miles O'Brien (who is white and ethnically Irish) and Keiko O'Brien (nee Ishikawa) (who is asian and ethnically Japanese) and their two mixed-race children do not encounter very many problems because of their mixed status. There is one moment in *TNG*, however, shortly after the couple are married in which their differences in culture, specifically what kinds of foods are appropriate for breakfast, cause an argument and hurt feelings. For a moment, viewers are left to wonder whether the union between two people of such vastly different cultures (from two distinct hemispheres of the earth!) will work out. First off, I find it not only unrealistic but ridiculous for people who grew up with the ability to instantly transport themselves around the globe to be so unaware of basic food customs. Second, Keiko is totally exoticized as a provincial, eastern woman. From personal experience, I can say that late twentieth-century Japanese people were familiar with—and often eat—western-style breakfasts. Sausage and eggs would not be a shock to anyone. Furthermore, Keiko does not come straight out of a small, insular, traditional community. She is a highly educated botanist and the type of person who decides to join a star ship with a core mission of exploring space. Whether in the twentieth or the twenty-fourth centuries, someone like Keiko knows about western breakfast. Keiko and Miles eventually make up and henceforward have a relatively harmonious relationship. Yet it seems the writers couldn't let the relationship go without at least one cultural hiccup. I know that they meant well, though. Miles and Keiko are supposed to be an example of people overcoming their differences to build a life together. The sentiment is a particularly 80s/90s one in which people of every race and culture stand together and hold hands and sing *We Are the World*. While this is a laudable—if corny—goal, it is still being approached from a western perspective.

least struggle. This is not to say that mixed-race people who can pass are inherently more or less conflicted than anyone else because, of course, each person's lived experience is unique. That Deanna's mixed heritage is less of an issue for herself, as a character, and for the show, in general, than that of the other mixed characters betrays the unwittingly racist attitudes of the writers. It seems that Deanna's life is less troubled because she looks human, looks beautiful. She has none of the grotesqueries of brow ridges or pointy ears. Although I know that my race-species metaphor only goes so far, this does seem to suggest that only those with passably white skin and features can be as beautiful and carefree as Deanna.

## **Rethinking Race**

Mixed-race people do not fit neatly into our current system for thinking about race. This reveals a number of things that are useful to multiracial and single-race people alike. Race is far more fluid than we generally believe it to be. There is a tension between self-identification and being identified by others and both come together to form what we think of as racial identity. In America, race generally breaks down into a white/non-white binary meant to keep whiteness white. The reason that mixed-race people do not fit neatly into our current system for thinking about race is because it was designed to preclude their existence.

The number of mixed-race people in America is relatively small. Pew Research Center estimates that about 6.9% of Americans are multiracial<sup>10</sup>. That number is expected to rise, however. It has been 50 years since *Loving v. Virginia* lifted any legal bans on interracial marriage and social stigmas on mixed-race relationships have slowly lifted as well. The US Census estimates that the number of mixed-race Americans will triple by 2060<sup>12</sup>. It's clear that we are going to have to change the way we think about race.

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<sup>10</sup> "Multiracial in America," *Pew Research Center*, 11 June, 2015, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/06/11/multiracial-in-america/>