

Life on the Fence: The Hidden Power of the “Tragic Mulatto”

By Halan DeBoise

The Mulatto by Seymour G. Link

Because my Mother thought
That a black sin
Was white if it was brought
In a White skin,

Because my father brought
At cost of pride
The lusthead that he sought
From a black bride

The god's bestow on me
A life of hate-
A white man's gift to see
A nigger's fate

O, god who gave me sight
To see my lack-
Dreams of a bitter white
And soul of black

Must I forever be
Slurred of two races?
Must I forever see
Kin of two faces? (Link 1929)

Race is a socially constructed concept born from colonialism and brought to life by the system of slavery and exploitation that followed. It is a concept that is slowly placed in our conscious mind filling us with confidence and self-consciousness in accordance with prevailing narratives about who we are and what we can be. At the moment of our birth we are un-aware that we are Black, White, Native, Mexican, or Asian. We are more preoccupied with the great mystery of our toes and our parent's ability to remove our noses and replace them using some form of dark magic. Race has been the "great organizer," giving a form to our hierarchical social structure and separating each other by space and emotion for as long as this nation has existed. The sixties brought a revolution on how we thought about race. People of all colors took to the streets to establish a law that says that we cannot be discriminated against in social settings despite what color we may be. We even have a black president, and despite his failures, there would be no possibility for him to be there only thirty years ago.

Race matters, it always has in this country. So what about those of us who stand in the middle? Who are the people who sit on the fence? Who are they who are forced into a life between races? Who are they that stand in a liminal space, a synthesis of two different cultures belonging to both and neither? How do they act, how do they feel? How do they classify themselves? This is the "mulatto question." So who are they? They've been called many things. They are mulattoes, they are mestizos. They are bi-racial, they are mixed-bloods, they are half-breeds, they are abominations, and they are a new people. They are the phenotypic reminders of a once taboo act, here still to reveal the shame of the past and the hope for the future. Bi-racial people are the socially fluent answers to the factional issues we face in this polarized society. They represent a new race, and this is not only their story, it is also mine.

This is an auto-ethnography. It not only details the life experiences of the people I interviewed but also a fly on the wall reflection on my own history. The typical ethnographer is said to be un-biased and blocked off from the subject that she/he studies in order to have the results reflect the data but this project will be a slight deviation from the norm. While I will represent the data presented to me in an un-biased manner, it is impossible not to put my voice into this piece. I have lived on the fence since race became an important factor in my life and one of the reasons I chose this subject is to confirm that my self-consciousness at an early age was also experienced by the people I interviewed. I have found, by using open ended un-leading questions, that I was not alone in those feelings, more than that I have found that there exists a certain power in my “racial situation” that I will detail in my results.

Mulattoes through a socially constructed historical lens

The term “mulatto” first appeared in colonial Latin America. Conquistadores came to this “new world” with a dominance narrative and very few women. Rape and sexual conquest accompanied the conquistadores’ march inland, evidenced by the terrified looks of the native women and the half light/half dark complexion of the new children they carried. The question then came; what do we do with this new kind of person. How do we classify it? Where does it stand in society? The term “mulatto” was coined to, in one word; create a new place in the rigid Spanish hierarchy for people of mixed-blood, and to permanently label the new class as inferior. “Mulatto” comes from an Iberian word for mule, and it was argued that much like the mule the product of reproduction between an inferior and superior race would lead to infertility three to four generations down the line from the first offspring (Morton 1985).

“Mulatto” didn’t make an appearance in North America until the mid 1800’s when German abolitionists began using the term in their anti slavery propaganda. The term also makes

a famous appearance as the character Topsy in the book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Gullickson 2010, Morton 1985). The "Tragic Mulatto" was an archetype used to show the lost-ness of bi-racial peoples because they are neither black nor white but rather some sad mix of the two. The character was usually happy being with a white paternalistic figure but after that figure is cut out of their lives (due to death of the white father or the slave's manumission) the "Tragic Mulatto" is forced to aimlessly wander the world in search of a purpose and doomed to find none because of their racial situation.

The "Tragic Mulatto" was also portrayed as a scarlet letter; a face of a white mans weakness and a black woman's savagery. Morton (1985) has found "the most prevalent image in both white and black authored fiction, the 'tragic mulatto'...depicted mixed-bloods as a visible symbol of lust" (111). We were the physical manifestation of a taboo act, and because of this narrative, half-black children followed their mother's fate as a slave, forced to be bastards in a world that didn't accept them.

During the re-construction, racial boundaries were being reformed and re-evaluated. The south could no longer depend on the institution of slavery to be the rock of their racially charged hierarchal formation (and the cheaply produced products of such an institution) so they turned to old fears to keep "niggers" and their "high-yellow" brethren in their proper place (Gullickson 2010). The Mulatto ceased being a tragic figure and started becoming either a threat or an abomination. Morton (1985) states that Jim Crow literature "painted Mulattoes as distinctively sensual, brutal, and treacherous and dangerous, particularly as they were more intelligent than Negroes because of their white blood" (Gullickson 2010, p. 112). Mixed-blood people were also perceived as taintors of the pure white race. Morton states "mulattoes were both physically and mentally inferior and miscegenation was to be prevented at all costs since it produced

offspring... psychologically unstable and volatile because of the jumbling together of basic and incompatible racial characteristics” (p.112). The mulatto was a despicable stain in the eyes of Jim-crow era media and that notion has been handed down generation to generation and is still a self-consciousness suffered by mix-blood people today.

During this “race neutral” era, one would think that the time of questioning the Mulatto was at an end, but that is not the case. In May of 2013 a cheerios commercial was put out that featured a bi-racial family. The little mixed girl asks her mom if cheerios was good for your heart, to which the white mom replied yes they were. The ad cuts to the families black patriarch waking up on the couch with cheerios covering his heart to show the benefits of the cereal as seen by the little mixed girl. It’s a pretty cute ad right? Well the negative perceptions of the YouTube community regarding the little mixed girl came into the light and YouTube was forced to shut the comment section of the video down. The Huffington post reports that “the comments section had been filled with references to Nazis, troglodytes, and racial genocide,” and more, forcing the video site to shut down a comments section that usually puts up with such slurs. Fortunately it seems that things are looking better for the modern mulatto, according to the huff post, as many other people posted positive responses to the video. It is surprising to see that even after all these “let’s all just get along” years people still have negative reactions to multi-racial families and the children they have.

Mulattoes in Academia

Mulattoes have historically been a mystery to the academic world. From the term’s first appearance in North America, “car window” sociologists and social Darwinist theorists have disputed our role in society. Was the mulatto a threat or some sad picture of confusion like media images portrayed us as? Or, as EB Reuter (1917) asked “is the mixed-blood group to remain the

superior class within, or caste above the race and to furnish the intellectually capable men during the entire period required for the [black] race to lose its distinct racial traits and to disappear within the general population” (1917, p. 87). What did scholars say about us Mulattoes?

Surprisingly, the people in academia I have cited, both past and present have found that the mulatto has enjoyed a privileged life as compared to their “full-blood” contemporaries. While some authors use a more pejorative approach at the study, many of the articles I have collected have shown that Mulattoes have been advantaged rather than pitied.

Aaron Gullickson (2010) did a study on the occupations Mulattoes held in the mid 1800’s and he discovered that when the white population of a given community didn’t feel threatened, either by having greater numbers or greater economic opportunities, mulattoes held fairly high prestige level jobs. Mulattoes held more positions in professional, managerial, clerical, sales, crafts, and service than “pure-bloods,” and he postulated that it was because the Mulattoes lighter skin color made them appear more intelligent and civilized in racially glassed eyes.

Howard Bodenhorn (2002) studied the nutritional advantages that Mulattoes had by looking at how tall they were in comparison to “pure-bloods.” He found a slight difference in the average height of Mulattoes and he says that is because Mulatto parents had greater prestige. He found that “Mulatto parents tended to be more well-to-do; they had greater access to food, healthcare, housing and clothing...Mulatto children matured in a better net-nutritional environment and the advantages became more apparent in adolescence” (p.32). With greater access to food Mulattoes were able to reach a greater biological potential than pure-bloods and it is because, unlike the portrayals in the media or perhaps because of them; they were paternalistically valued in American society.

The advantageous position that Mulattoes held in America is not a product of hind-sight. Some scholars in the early 1900's have also found this trend. EB Reuter (1917), while incredibly racist by today's standards, has also postulated that Mulattoes held a relatively elevated status in America. Unlike his contemporaries, Reuter denied the widely held belief that mix-blood people held a higher status because of the white blood flowing through their veins. Mulattoes, in Reuter's opinion, are intellectually superior to their full-blood brothers and sisters because of the superior genes of their black mothers. Reuter approaches the Mulatto question through a social Darwinist lens saying "[the Mulatto] was the product of the best Negroes and an average white and would by heredity be superior to the average of the black group" (p.100). The genes, occupations, and health of the mulatto has, in the eyes of academia, placed them on a pedestal above their full blood brothers and sisters. Seymour G. Link (1929) paints a different picture however when he said "the gods bestow on me a life of hate, a white man's gift to see, a nigger's fate." That quote suggests that perhaps the historical life of the mulatto wasn't as good as it has been portrayed through the years.

My Method

So who was right? Is the Mulatto of the current age the savage sly tragedy as the socially/historically constructed narrative has postulated? Or is he/she the "uppity high-yellow" member of a semi-privileged caste as studied by past and current academics? This project will seek to answer this question, the "mulatto question." How does the modern American Mulatto define themselves in this polarized, one or the other society? Do they pick which race they are or are they happy sitting on the fence between the two, acting as translator and crucible for re-examining racial boundaries? If the latter is true has that always been the case in the individual's life? Has the modern American mulatto been born with a fluency in social settings or have they

encountered tension in “picking” a race to project to the world through habits and mannerisms. This study will also investigate the social fluency that the once “tragic mulatto” has been gifted with, and the benefits to society that comes along with such fluency.

Before I go into my methodology I feel that it is necessary to define my variable. While I have used the term Mulatto to encompass half black/half white individuals I now want to expand that term to cover any person of mixed racial heritage that has at least 25 percent of another race in their genetic history. In other words, my sample will consist of people of a wide range of ages (20-60) who has a grandparent that is one race and another grandparent of a different race. It is my theory that mixed-race individuals have a shared experience as the people who stand on the fence living in the middle of a society that is very dualistic and has a very nasty habit of looking down on those who do not “fit the mold.” I will use the terms bi-racial, multi-racial, mestizos, mixed-bloods, and half-breeds to reveal the power or paralysis that comes from self-identification and to encompass more of my subjects by using words they choose to use. The Modern American Mulatto of all race mixes also share a unique power of translation and social fluency that I will investigate in this study.

My sample will be relatively small given that short amount of time allowed for this project. I interviewed 6 people for a period of 30 minutes to 1 hour allotted for each interview. The location of the interview was decided by the interviewee because I have found that location is a key factor in making my subjects comfortable and more willing to give an honest and open answer. I gathered my subjects by simply asking their racial background and if they had time to be interviewed for this project if they revealed that they where self identified mulattos. My subject’s name, as well as any social markers, will be kept confidential unless he/she gives express instructions to use it. I will change their names both in this essay and in my notes to

protect their identity and will allow them to review my notes and see the final paper before I turn it in to make sure I properly represented them.

Given the nature of the interviews I will need to be a known researcher to the people I interview. At first I thought that there would be no ethical considerations to prepare for when approaching the topic of the tragic mulatto but as my research unfolded I found that there may be harm in the intense identity reflection that my subjects go through when answering my questions. Many of them had never thought that hard about how they may have been viewed and sometimes the thought process put some un-fortunate events in their history into a new light.

I had to be careful of my bias when approaching this topic. I have always felt that I am in a liminal space when it comes to the question of race. I often get asked “what are you” and I am mostly unable to answer the question. I couldn’t allow myself to project my own self-consciousness to guide my interview questions or my interpretations of my subjects’ answers. I wanted to do this project for this class, not only because I am close to the subject, but also to answer some questions I have held for most of my life. I feel like humanity’s greatest mistake is thinking that we are alone in our self-consciousness. I hope that this research will go to prove that not only is that a false statement but we can also rally behind the fact that our multiraciality provides a fluency of culture which is an answer to the polarizing politics that forms a wall between human beings. While my mixed-race background will serve as a source of rapport and camaraderie, I will need to bracket myself in order to get an answer to the “mulatto question.”

What Are You? Projected identity

What are you? It’s a question that seems like it belongs in one of those old werewolf movies when the dude in the letterman jacket is about to “turn” and his date, terrified, turns and

overacts the question with a scared look on her face, but surprisingly, I get asked it more than one would think. People often come up to me and ask “what are you mixed with?” “What is your ethnic background?” Sometimes I even get asked flat out; “what are you?” There is a little self-consciousness that comes from the ambiguity of being bi-racial. To avoid making my interviewees feel like a werewolf on a full moon, I asked them what box they check. Everyone knows about the box. Every time a person goes into the DMV, takes a standardized test, or participates in the national census they get asked “what is your race,” and they respond to that question by checking a box. How does the modern American Mulatto answer this question? I found that the multi-racial people I interviewed use three ways to choose an identity to project to cope with any tension that comes along with being multi-racial in a black and white world, phenotype, familial narratives, and hyper Americanism.

Phenotype refers to the darkness of pigmentation in a person’s skin that could classify them as a member of a minority race. Phenotype is like the cover of a book and many of the people I interviewed, at one point in time or another, used it as a way to feel more confident in their identity. One of the people I interviewed, whom I’ll call V, said that phenotype “Cast the dice for who I was, and what people expected of me.” Having darker pigmentation, V told me that many people assume he is native. Without knowing him, people who are un-aware of the “real story” of native culture expect him to “act native,” or to exhibit the habits and mannerisms the viewer would expect from a Native person. The darker the mixed-race person is, the more likely that they will be considered a member of the minority class. Another of my interviewees, L, talked to me about an experience he had at a catholic church. He told me “People looked at me and my family differently when I went to that church. We didn’t get invited to a lot of the social functions that went on...I was really more accepted at the traditional church in my tribe, I

feel like I belonged there more and I went to more of the functions.” L later told me that people were reacting to his fur coat, or phenotype, that they classified him as native because he looked like he was. This was a determining factor to help him choose a projected identity when he went through a period of inner racial tension.

The second way that the modern American mulatto “chooses” an identity is by following materialistic and paternalistic narratives in accordance with the surrounding community. Bi-racial people will look to the sex that has historically “worn the pants” in their community and project an identity accordingly. If the community is matrilineal, like some native societies, the bi-racial person will follow the path of their mother; if patrilineal they will follow their father. One of my subjects, D, when asked which box he checked said; “Black, my dad was black and I was a guy so it felt right.” I had a similar experience. I remember when I went to the doctor and he asked my mom what my race was she told him that I was black. I was a little confused because I’m brown not really black, but my mom said that my dad was black and that made me black, that was a very defining moment in how I chose my projected identity. The concept is similar when I talked to a person whose community was historically matrilineal. V, the subject I previously mentioned, said a tribal mantra was “pay attention to your mother... [So] I learned to speak French and learned a lot about her culture and I’m a Christian like she was.” Our parents are our primary socialization agents who have themselves been formed and shaped by the dominant culture around them. The neo-mulatto picks up on that dominant culture and can choose to project a cultural identity in accordance with it.

The last way that bi-racial people cope with conflict of racial identity is to engage in hyper-Americanism. A, is a person whom I have known my entire life. I never thought that our experiences would be so different but interviewing her has given me a unique perspective on the

struggle of the modern American Mulatto. While she wants to learn more about the roots of her black father and her white mother, A believes that her racial situation makes her more American, more a part of the mixing pot mentality that comes with the co-mingling of different racial cultures under the national narrative. “We are Americans, no beliefs and no creeds we just have to be who we are,” she says. She also takes pride in the family she is from. “My family is like an object lesson to people,” she told me, “we are an example of how to handle yourself in diversity...I think I believe in gay marriage because of the acceptance of the diversity of my family.” The neo-mulatto is the neo-American, the true example of the melting pot, not because of a narrative, but because of the immersion of historically differing cultures that their life experience has given them.

Fluency

All but one of the multi racial people that I talked to said that once they overcame the self-consciousness of being multi-racial, they realized that they had a unique talent. They realized that if their parents felt it was necessary to immerse them in both cultures traditionally tied to their race then they enjoyed a certain unique fluency in many social situations. They realized that standing on the fence between racial categories gave them the ability to relate the experience, struggles, tribulations, and triumphs in the kind of words that would cause their message “sink in” to the un-knowing group. The language, cultural knowledge, and thought process possessed by the “neo mulatto” grants them a social fluency that not only negates any feelings of self-consciousness they feel from their racial situation but also provides an interesting service to society that I will detail later in this paper.

Language is the window that we view our world through. A chair is always a chair, but its label “chair” is associated with that particular object through historical acculturation. The

Mulatto of the current age, if properly immersed in the racial cultures they are a product of, know the words of those cultures and hence the cultural importance behind those words. The modern mulatto has the ability to act as a translator relating the cultural importance of certain words to the un-knowing groups of people they come across. Cultural emersion came into play with D who said that he did feel like he acted like a translator. “I feel like I beat down stereotypes,” he says, “I talk to a lot of rednecks about football, like how I like the Denver Broncos. I feel like after we talk about that then he doesn’t see me for the cloths I wear but he sees me as a human being. I hope that changes how he reacts to other people who dress like me and talk like me.” As crucibles of change, the neo-mulatto has the ability to cross cultural barriers through the language they have picked up by being immersed in their parent cultures.

Another interesting thing that I have learned from doing these interviews is that the exotic phenotypical traits possessed by the mulatto has the ability to alter what we find to be attractive. “Chicks love high yellow niggas man,” D tells me talking about the lightness of his complexion, “when I see a girl she’s usually like hey you cute what you mixed with?” V also brought up the subject when he said “un-expected phenotype breakaways become attractive. Older phenotypes are boring with new, exotic, and strange ones.” Personally I don’t really find this to be true but because of the frequency of times that it popped up in interviews I felt it was necessary to include it in this project.

The Hidden Power of The Tragic Mulatto

WEB Dubois famously said that the problem of the twentieth century was the color-line. That statement still rings true today as the brown population of the world continues to remain in the vice-grip of colonization, but as the gap between rich and poor continues to grow, as natural

resources deplete, and as the culture of consumerism threatens our environment it is obvious that the problem of the twenty-first century will be the class line. In order to progress into the future we must first break down the walls that defined our past. The split between black and white, male and female, hard science and human science, **3 credit and 4 credit advocates**, republican and democrat, American and Iraqi, along with the un-countable dualities that hinder progress need to be eradicated in order to find an answer to problems that face the human species. The hidden power of the neo-mulatto is this concept of social fluency. The Mulatto, as seen in the data I have gathered (data that would have much more depth given more time) has the ability to stand on the fence and serve as translator to the cultures and subcultures that reside on either side. If you don't know the whole story, you will believe any one that you're told. The neo-mulatto, being immersed in multiple cultures, has read those stories and can inspire the historically walled off cultures to pick up the book by acting as intermediary, as a crucible that can alter the social chemistry that DuBois' era came to be defined by. This project has shown that historical cultural divisions can be knocked down by people who have been immersed in differing cultures. If our specie is to survive I suggest that we all follow their example.

