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“We Are Strong”: The Pakleds and Cognitive Disability in the Utopia

« Nous sommes forts » : les Pakleds et la déficience intellectuelle au sein de l’utopie

Lucas Cober, PhD
Concordia University
lucas.cober@concordia.ca

Abstract

This paper considers the role of the Pakleds as representing intellectually disabled people interfering in *Star Trek*’s utopia. Appearing first in *The Next Generation* and then again in *Lower Decks,* the Pakleds are a species of slow, technologically inferior aliens with poor verbal abilities and low intellectual capacity who trick and coerce other species into giving up advanced technology to them so that they can be “strong”. The Pakleds are consistently mocked and derided by other characters in the franchise, even when they are portrayed as profoundly dangerous. This dichotomy in representation of them as both backwards and silly, but also very dangerous to the Federation, is because the presence of intellectually disabled people threatens the Federation’s ideals of intellectual achievement and productivity by disrupting the neoliberal progress narrative upon which *Star Trek*’s imagined future is built. Using Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s conception of the normate body and Jeffrey Weinstock’s articulation of Extraterrestrialism in science fiction, I will analyse the Pakleds’ role in the *Star Trek* universe as a force that inherently disrupts the capitalist notion of productivity necessary for the progress narrative to function. The Pakleds’ appearances are nearly always contrasted with physically disabled characters experiencing acceptance and accommodation, making it clear that it is not disability that has no place in *Star Trek*’s utopia, but specifically that *intellectual* disability is problematic in a world where a person’s value is determined by their ability to contribute to the Federation’s intellectual environment, echoing real-world eugenic policies about immigration and inclusion.

Cet article analyse le rôle des Pakleds comme représentation de personnes vivant avec une déficience intellectuelle qui perturbe l’utopie de *Star Trek*. Introduits dans *The Next Generation* puis repris dans *Lower Decks*, les Pakleds sont des extraterrestres lents,

technologiquement en retard, dotés de faibles capacités verbales et intellectuelles. Ils dupent et contraignent d’autres espèces pour obtenir une technologie avancée qui les rendrait « forts ». Ils sont régulièrement ridiculisés et dénigrés par les personnages de la franchise, même lorsqu’ils sont décrits comme profondément dangereux. Cette double représentation, à la fois rétrograde et risible, mais aussi menaçante pour la Fédération, découle du fait que la déficience intellectuelle met en cause les idéaux de réussite intellectuelle et de productivité qui soutiennent le récit de progrès néolibéral structurant l’avenir imaginé par *Star Trek*. En mobilisant la notion de corps normé de Rosemarie Garland-Thomson et l’analyse de l’extraterrestrialisme proposée par Jeffrey Weinstock, j’examine les Pakleds comme une force qui perturbe la conception capitaliste de productivité nécessaire au récit de progrès. Leur présence est presque toujours opposée à celle de personnages ayant un handicap physique, qui bénéficient d’acceptation et d’accommodements. Cela montre que ce n’est pas le handicap en général qui est exclu de l’utopie de *Star Trek*, mais spécifiquement la déficience intellectuelle, problématique dans un monde où la valeur d’une personne dépend de sa capacité à contribuer à l’environnement intellectuel de la Fédération, ce qui fait écho aux politiques eugénistes contemporaines en matière d’immigration et d’inclusion.

Keywords
Intellectual disability – Eugenics – Immigration – Inclusion – Otherness – Normate body

Mots-clés
Déficience intellectuelle, eugénisme, immigration, inclusion, altérité, corps normé

Introduction

The *Star Trek* universe is huge and has room for everyone. Throughout its sixty years on television, the utopic Federation has included humans and aliens from different nationalities, sexualities, races, genders, classes, ages and levels of ability. This inclusion has evolved over the decades, with *Star Trek*’s inclusion of disabled characters becoming much more robust and allowing those characters much more agency and nuance than in its earliest days. However, this is largely true only for *physically* disabled characters. *Star Trek* is light on intellectually disabled characters and those who do appear do not typically receive the same inclusive treatment as other marginalized characters.

The Pakleds are a species of greedy, entitled, violent and intellectually juvenile aliens first encountered in the *Next Generation* episode “Samaritan Snare.”[1] They are depicted as having low intelligence, low reasoning ability, low language abilities and quick tempers, all traits they demonstrate on their own, and that the main characters remark upon. They are compared to children and fall for very simple ruses that allow the Enterprise’s crew to defeat them. And though they might easily be dismissed in the history of the franchise as a poorly-thought-out, one-off relic of the late 1980s that was rightfully left behind, a recent incarnation of *Trek* has not only chosen to bring the Pakelds back, but increase the focus on their low intelligence and reasoning for comedic effect. Though superficially more threatening on *Lower Decks,* the Pakleds’ intellectual capacity is now openly the butt of a joke.

This paper will consider the Pakleds’ appearances throughout *Star Trek* and the ways in which the ideals of the Federation allow them to be excluded and mocked even in a supposedly universally inclusive utopia. Using the Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s heuristic of the normate body[2] and Jeffrey Weinstock’s science fiction alternative to Orientalism, which he terms Extraterrestrialism[3], to consider disabled bodies as Other from the perceived norm, I will analyse the Pakleds’ appearances in the franchise and consider the ways in which the *Star Trek* writers are informed by histories of eugenics and immigration law, and use that legacy to craft a race that must always be excluded from the Federation. Because a primary value of the Federation is intellectual achievement tied with technological advancement, the Pakleds are treated as Other from the Federation. All things are defined at least partly by that which they are not, and identities are often defined by the people they do not include. Consider for example the invisible centralization of whiteness described by Jeffrey Melnick[4] and others, in which the apparatus of eugenic science produced scientific explanations and information for non-white racial and ethnic groups in order to centralize whiteness as the “normal” identity. Nothing and nobody can exist in a vacuum, and we differentiate ourselves from others to explain who we are. The Federation is a largely inclusive space that allows entry to most, but never all, aliens it encounters.

The Self of the Federation must always have an Other and that target shifts over the decades as formerly antagonistic species become allies to Federation’s umbrella, included in its agenda of “deep-space multiculturalism,”[5] and a species like the Pakleds are always conveniently Other. *Star Trek* has a complex relationship with eugenics and is generally

critical of the concept, but the rejection and Othering of the intellectually disabled Pakleds troubles that critique by highlighting the erasure of one of the groups of people most frequently targeted by eugenicist policies. Ultimately, the Pakleds highlight a major flaw in *Star Trek*’s utopia and in its focus on a narrative of technological and intellectual progress, demonstrating that the biases of the cultures that produced the franchise continue to impact our thinking of a future in which some people will be included far more slowly than others.

The Pakleds

The Federation first encounters the Pakleds in the year 2365, when a false distress signal lures the Enterprise to their location and false engine trouble lures chief engineer Geordi La Forge to their ship by saying “We are Pakleds. Our ship is the Mondor. It is broken.”[6] The Pakleds are treated dismissively by the Enterprise’s crew, who characterize the Mondor as having a “basic early design” held together “by rubber bands.”[7] The Pakleds themselves are characterized as being unable to handle verbal or written instructions from the Enterprise’s engineering crew, because they are “a little slow,” according to Commander William Riker, with the only defence of them offered being that “They may merely have poorly developed language skills.”[8] The Pakleds speak in slow, simple sentences, repeating the same few ideas constantly. They are physically different from the main cast; most of them are overweight, and they walk in a lumbering manner the viewer may associate with children, peering curiously at everything while dressing in rough-looking clothes that suggest earlier

periods in Earth’s history. The reactions of the main cast to the Pakleds throughout the episode belay that both the characters’ and the writers’ opinions about the Pakleds are formed at least in part through these first visual impressions, which were intentionally conveyed to the audience through casting, costume and makeup.[9]

The only people on the Enterprise who perceive them as a threat are the empathic Deeana Troi, who can sense their deception, and Klingon Worf, who comes from a species also typically portrayed as having lower intelligence than others in the *Star Trek* universe, but who are nonetheless very dangerous. Riker perceives no danger from the Pakleds based on his assessment of their cognitive ability, and chooses to ignore calls for caution, allowing La Forge to transport over to their ship, where he is kidnapped and forced to build weapons for them. The crew later surmises that the Pakleds are “unwilling to wait for the timely evolution of their species’ intellectual capacity,”[10] characterizing them as greedy, selfish and impatient as well as violent as they discuss the Pakleds having stolen technology from other species, though how the technologically inferior Pakleds were able to steal from other species such as the aggressive and violent Klingons and Romulans without being killed is left unanswered by the episode’s writers.

Riker manages to rescue La Forge by tricking the Pakleds with an extremely transparent ruse, realizing that the Pakleds “equate intelligence with strength”[11] and convincing them that they are weak, and should therefore return La Forge and let the Enterprise leave. After this first appearance, the Pakleds are occasionally mentioned or seen in the background of the franchise, but do not receive a focus again until thirty-one real life years and fifteen in-universe years later, when in 2380 they destroy a Starfleet ship

and engage *Lower Decks*’s main vessel, the Cerritos, in battle. Seeing their very large, technologically advanced ship with its high-grade weaponry, Cerritos captain Carol Freeman says of the Pakleds and their reputation as a joke in Starfleet, “looks like they’re not a joke anymore.”[12] The Pakleds of *Lower Decks* are even more dangerous than before, piloting massive “clumpships” scavenged from technology and parts from dozens of different species.

Despite the danger they now pose, however, the Pakleds’ intellectual capacity continues to be the butt of most jokes about them in *Lower Decks*. The complex plan they appear to be enacting against Starfleet is said to be “above their grade level,”[13] and that someone must be manipulating them, which is later proven to be true.[14] This is to say it is not only the characters in-universe who mock the intelligence of the Pakleds, but the narrative itself. Even after they’ve caused untold destruction to Starfleet vessels, on her way to negotiations with the Pakleds in their capital, Big Strong City, on their homeworld, Pakled Planet, Captain Freeman remarks “Remember, it’s just the Pakleds. This shouldn’t be too complicated,” before immediately being captured and drawn into a hostage situation that can only be resolved by a succession of Pakled leaders with increasingly larger hats, culminating in another transparent ruse to obtain information from the Pakleds about their plans.[15]

Lower Decks is a comedy; all elements of the *Star Trek* franchise are used as comedic fodder, from the Klingons to the Borg to Q to the Federation itself. The Pakleds are not and should not be an exception to that; however, every joke about them, down to the last sight gag, is about their cognitive capacity. The Pakleds are never in on the joke, and the

jokes about them are never about strange or overwritten storylines they had in the past, they are always about the fact that the Pakleds, at the end of the day, are not smart enough to be included.

The Pakleds are introduced to the *Star Trek* universe just one episode after another, far more obviously threatening, Other to the Federation. The hive-minded cybernetic Borg collective is superficially nothing like the Pakleds, but the ways in which the two species mirror each other are remarkable. Both are species who seek to unfairly steal technology from others to add to their own power (as measured by level of technological advancement). Both appear to experience species-wide disability through the Pakled’s cognitive challenges and the Borg’s choice to create bodies that are difficult to mobilize with, as well as the subservience of their own cognitive capacity to the collective’s will. Even the Pakleds’ repeated commentary about themselves (“We are Pakleds. We look for things to make us go. We look for things to make us strong”) appears to semantically echo the one the Borg later come to use (“We are Borg. We will add your technological and biological distinctiveness to our own. Resistance is futile.”[16]). Obviously, the Borg are a far more serious threat than the Pakleds, but the franchise appears to position them at either end of the same spectrum of threat. Two types of disabled aliens whose minds it would be too dangerous to include.

Ultimately, the utopian future of *Star Trek,* cannot be for everybody. The Federation needs Others, enemies it can either culturally oppose, philosophically disagree with or, failing those things, fight. It is a body that exists on a principle of tolerance for all people, no matter how different, and insists upon the validity of all cultures and people, but also

reserves the right not to allow those people to influence their own utopia. All of *Star Trek*’s alien Others are dangerous to the Federation’s ideals in some way. The Borg Collective challenges the Federation’s individualism and acceptance of difference by assimilating everything in its path. The hyper-violent reptilian Gorn Hegemony challenges the Federation’s desire for peaceful co-existence by refusing to communicate and treating humans like game to be hunted and fed to their young. The authoritarian Dominion is an imperializing mirror to the Federation, controlling multiple species under the dictatorial and theocratic military rule of a race of gelatinous shapeshifters.

Among this pantheon of those never to be included in the normative body of the Federation are apparently the Pakleds, whose difference is different from all of those enemies listed above. Their non-normate intellectual capacity threatens the Federation’s self-perception as an evolved society that focuses on intellectual rather than base pursuits, and more importantly threatens the neoliberal progress narrative upon which the utopian ideal of the Federation is built. Therefore, the series comes to the same conclusion that many modern societies have arrived at with regards to intellectually disabled people: they must never be included.

Intellectual Disability, Physical Disability, and Normate Bodies in Space

Despite some changes in access for physically disabled people, intellectually disabled people are still subject to unmarked exclusions from many institutions of contemporary

society. Most official documents continue to be written in complex, obscure language. We still privilege public figures who speak eloquently and with a complex vocabulary, insist on eye contact as a form of politeness, and grow frustrated when people need to be told something more than once. Some of this is because individual attitudes are harder to change than societal barriers, but some of it is because acceptance narratives are often framed around the neoliberal capitalist heuristic of productivity. “The primary oppression of disabled persons,” write disability rights activists Marta Russell and Ravi Malhotra, “is their exclusion from exploitation as wage laborers.”[17] Productivity, in other words, is imagined as the capacity to hold a job in a capitalist system, and most employers refuse to offer accommodations to cognitively disabled employees, meaning that cognitively disabled people are deemed unproductive, with little or nothing to contribute to a society, and are therefore not worth including. [18]

This lack of ability to produce has serious social and legal consequences throughout history. Allison Carey points out that historically in the United States, people with intellectual disabilities were expected to forfeit any rights they may have due to their “dependence” on their family or friends,[19] prefiguring the logic of American immigration law that turned people away if they were deemed likely to become “dependent”, meaning if they were perceived to be in some way disabled.[20] This concern about dependency broadened in the eugenic era to a fear that intellectually disabled people would become dependent on the entire state, therefore taking resources that others needed,[21] and that they were potentially dangerous, lacking understanding of morality.[22] These justifications among others were reasons for keeping intellectually disabled people out of the country,

out of the body of the Self, through disallowing them immigration, among other tactics.[23] The Pakleds are not trying to immigrate into the Federation, but it is very clear that they are not being included it the culture of the Federation or its allies, echoing a familiar nationalist assumption that “feebleminded” people and those from other nations are one and the same.[24] The normate culture of the Federation has no room for outsiders whose intellectual abilities are so inferior to their own.

I use the term “normate” intentionally. The normate body as articulated by Rosemarie Garland Thomson is a critical theoretical framework for understanding the Otherness of the Pakleds in *Star Trek*. The normate body is a nonexistent body that serves as an ideal for a culture. Occupying a position of as much privilege as possible, this body is an unattainable template by which all other bodies are measured—and invariably fall short.[25] Though nobody’s body is a normate body, certain people’s bodies more closely approximate it, and are therefore able to occupy positions of social power. In our world, those bodies generally belong to white able-bodied heterosexual cisgender men.

The normate body of *Star Trek*’s utopia is more diverse than in our world and is far more inclusive as a result; the diversity of the Federation is its normal state. Lennard Davis reminds us, however, that “disability represents that which must be suppressed for diversity to survive as a concept,” and that the underlying messaging of diversity politics being “ ‘we are all different; therefore we are all the same’ becomes ‘we are all the same because aren’t *that* kind of different.’ ”[26] In other words, no diversity mandate is fully inclusive of all manner of people. The Pakleds are *that* kind of different. Their intellectual disability is nearly always contrasted with the “acceptable” physical disabilities that do not

impact their work in Starfleet. In “Samaritan Snare,” it was perhaps inevitable that the Pakleds kidnapped Geordi La Forge due to his role on the Enterprise as the chief engineer and therefore the narrative’s designated character for storylines involving mechanical failures. Regardless of intent, however, *The Next Generation*’s pre-eminent disabled character spends the episode outsmarting the Pakleds, demonstrating that in every way except for physical—for the Pakleds mantra that they are strong proves true in respect to their physical strength—he is superior to them.

In “No Small Parts,” The Pakleds are eventually also defeated by a disabled engineer, Samanthan Rutherford, who wears a cybernetic implant on his head that was given to him when he suffered a traumatic injury. While La Forge’s disability is incidental to his defeat of the Pakleds, Rutherford’s is directly implicated in the defeat; it is only because he has the implant that he is able to upload the computer virus that destroys their ship. The removal of his implant becomes necessary and causes him traumatic memory loss, a cognitive disability that is overcome quickly in the next season and rarely addressed going forward. As a *Star Trek* main character and productive member of Starfleet, of course Rutherford cannot be allowed to be intellectually disabled.

It is however in the B-plots of both “Samaritan Snare” and “No Small Parts” that the dichotomy between physical and intellectual disability becomes very clear. In “Samaritan Snare,” the Pakleds threaten the Enterprise while Captain Picard is away for a medical procedure which he is reluctant to discuss with his crew, because he is concerned that his “image” as the captain may be tarnished if they discover it.[27] Picard later reveals that he has a prosthetic heart, which he received after a near-death experience in a bar fight as a

young man. [28] When Picard arrives at the medical facility, the audience is assured that he is in “extraordinary physical condition” aside from his malfunctioning prosthetic, and after some mishaps in his replacement procedure, the Enterprise’s doctor Katharine Pulaski assures him that the crew’s opinion of him has not diminished despite now knowing about his medical condition because “You’re still the captain. You’re still invincible.”[29] This coming shortly after the Pakled admission that “we are not strong”[30] clearly contrasts not only Picard’s acceptable physical disability with their unacceptable cognitive disability.

The crew spends the entire episode mocking and deriding the Pakleds even when they pose serious danger to La Forge, but despite Picard’s fear that he will suffer the very same treatment, we are assured that their respect for him has not changed. Notably however, the episode ends at this point, so we see no real evidence of this. Picard’s artificial heart is mentioned periodically throughout the remainder of *The Next Generation,* however, and the audience is never shown any evidence that he is discriminated against for it. The juxtaposition of these two storylines in the same episode is clearly intentional and clearly meant to affirm which types of bodily difference are acceptable. The intellectually disabled Pakleds are looking for things to make them go, which is invalid of them. Picard’s artificial heart—the part that makes him go—is repaired and he is reaffirmed to be a valuable member of society.

“No Small Parts” repeats this theme with the character of Peanut Hamper, a sentient, floating maintenance robot who has recently joined Starfleet. Conical in shape and about the size of a large dog, Peanut Hamper has platform feet but no hands. Instead, she materializes tools through a nozzle at the tip of the cone that serves as her face. She is

introduced to the ship by enthusiastic officer D’Vana Tendi, who makes sure that other officers are conscientious about Peanut Hamper’s lack of hands and do not assign her work that she will not be able to do.[31] Peanut Hamper’s non-normative embodiment is no problem for anyone on the Cerritos, who take no issue with her, and she also proves to be an extremely competent medical assistant. At the end of the episode, when the crew is discussing how to deliver the computer virus to the Pakleds, Tendi realizes that Peanut Hamper’s size and technical ability make her the perfect candidate for the job, at which point Peanut Hamper elects to leave Starfleet and the ship, refusing to use her disability to sacrifice herself for the greater good.[32]

Future Pakled episodes do not continue the trend of contrasting the Pakleds’ intellectual disability with the physical disability of Starfleet characters, though “The Spy Humongous” does include a B-plot involving the principal characters trying to maintain their bodily integrity in the face of several strange objects they are attempting to catalogue. It is clear, however, that the normate body of *Star Trek* has plenty of room for nontraditional physicality, but just as clear through every Pakled episode that it has no room at all for nontraditional cognition. Weinstock’s articulation of Extraterrestrialism is one that acknowledges that representations of aliens in science fiction are always at least partly representing humans and therefore reproducing intra-human power dynamics.[33] *Star Trek’s* Extraterrestrialism is here using an alien species to comment on the necessity for excluding intellectually disabled people from normate society. In this way, *Star Trek*’s utopia uncomfortably echoes modern eugenic ideals.

Eugenic Futures

Star Trek has a complicated relationship with eugenics. It explicitly disavows most principles of modern eugenics, such as white supremacy, in its persistent commitment to the most diverse future possible. But it also only directly engages with the topic of eugenics as a fantastical futuristic technology that gives human beings exceptional strength, surpassing intelligence, and other unreal advantages in life. A persistent element of the *Star Trek* history is the Eugenics Wars, a conflict on pre-spaceflight Earth between humans augmented through eugenic science and unaugmented humans, which resulted in alterations to the human genome becoming illegal.

None of these things are features of real-life eugenics, but one consistent feature of most real-life eugenic initiatives is that they seek to remove disabled people from the body politic of the society who has put the initiative into place. *Star Trek* eugenics is explicitly used for this exact thing as well; in a later episode of *Deep Space Nine,* it is revealed that genius doctor Julian Bashir had what resembles a learning disability as a child, and was taken to an illegal eugenics facility and augmented to be inhumanly smart.[34] Bashir’s friends eventually come to accept his augmented status, and he later wonders if they would have done this so readily had he been less conventionally intelligent and socially adjusted, based on their reactions to several other augmented humans who *are* cognitively disabled and/or mentally ill in a later episode.[35] These individuals are later tolerated only because their disabilities mask a high degree of strategic intelligence that allows them to turn the tide of the ongoing Dominion War. Other characters who can be read as cognitively

disabled usually fall into the autistic supercrip stereotype of a very smart but socially awkward character who lacks understanding of normative emotion or relationships.

Characters who fall into this archetype are common in *Star Trek,* and include *The Original Series*’s emotion-repressing Vulcan Spock (and arguably many other Vulcan characters), *The Next Generation*’s android Data, *Voyager’s* ex-Borg Seven of Nine, and many others. The frequency of this archetype in *Star Trek* can partly be attributed to the franchise’s desire to replicate *Original Series* dynamics, but also possibly to *Star Trek*’s desire for storylines that balance intellectual and scientific achievement with humanism. Notably, most of these characters tend to desire normative human emotional experiences, despite none of them being (fully) human. Extraterrestrialism in *Star Trek’s* writing ensures that such characters are always nonhuman in some way, and are, often, always striving to be traditionally human, even if that is an impossible ideal. The centrality of able-minded cognition and emotional processing, coded as default human experience, is often invisible but is easily perceived with these characters. To be human, in other words, is to be able-minded and neurotypical, either by masking one’s disability or by finding a way to remove it.[36] This is not true of all such characters, but for several of them their overall narrative trajectory is to mask or remove their non-normate cognition as much as possible—something not afforded to the Pakleds.

Erasure of disability is a common feature of utopian thinking. In a short survey of feminist utopias, Alison Kafer remarks in *Feminist, Queer, Crip* that feminist thinking that a utopia would naturally have gender parity and bodily autonomy, with reproductive control in the hands of women, also tends to assume that a utopia would naturally not include

disabled people.[37] In the unattainable reaching for perfection we remove the things and people that we perceive as taking us farther from that goal, and disabled people are nearly always one of those things. The eugenics of utopia are closely tied to the social evolution progress myth—things always get better, and people always get smarter over time—but also to the neoliberal capitalist fetishization of productivity. Things and people getting better means that people are more able to be productive.

In *Star Trek,* everyone is productive despite living in a post-currency socialist society. Everyone is an artist or a scientist or a soldier or a business owner; it doesn’t matter what a person does as long as it is *something* that contributes in some way to society. I argue that this, much like contemporary capitalist societal structures, leaves limited space for disabled people, because their bodies or minds do not always cooperate with the societal need to be “productive.” However, because productivity in *Star Trek* need not be physical labour, physical disabilities are rarely the ostracizing factor that they might be for people in the real world. *Star Trek’s* utopia includes many physically and sensorially disabled characters whose minds, nearly universally, are more valuable than their bodies.

This does not leave intellectually disabled people in a good place. Intellectual disability is nearly nonexistent in *Star Trek* and when it does appear, the people it affects, as discussed above, are intellectual savants who are smarter than everyone else on the ship. The Pakleds are not that and never can be. They are consistently represented as greedy, violent and selfish ruffians who use primitive tactics and weapons to take resources that rightfully belong to others, and which they do not appear to need. They are smart enough to trick and steal from technologically and intellectually superior species,

(and are occasionally able to use more complex language and plan more detailed schemes, making one wonder if the writers are struggling to maintain the threat of such an intellectually feeble villain), but are not smart enough to take seriously as characters, unlike other greedy and dangerous species like the Ferengi, who receive depths of characterization as the franchise goes on. Les Landau, the director of “Samaritan Snare,” claimed that the “ugly and slow” Pakleds “have a need for things, which can be a reflection of our society. That's what *Star Trek* tries to do, take an almost unbelievable situation in an unbelievable time and somehow make all of us realize that's what's happening today,”[38] suggesting that rather than representing disabled people, the Pakleds are meant to represent Americans more broadly.

Regardless of his intention, it is also the case that the Pakleds echo many stereotypes about disabled people, specifically intellectually disabled people, in the modern era. They are a drain on the intellectually advanced society of the Federation, especially in their later incarnations as they steal sufficient technology to be legitimately dangerous to Federation ships instead of merely annoying. Importantly, their advanced technological prowess does not come hand in hand with increased intellectual abilities; despite being militarily equal to the Federation, they are still looked down upon and treated as inferior, which the narrative treats as justified, because they simply have not evolved as far as the Federation, have not progressed along a linear path of progress needed by its dominant cultural progress narrative.

Societies and cultures, just like people, are meant to evolve with time, according to this narrative of progress. Evolution in this context rarely refers to a biological change,

though the Pakleds’ non-normative lumbering gaits, simplistic facial expressions and physical size being somewhat larger on average than a humans’ could be argued to be a somatic extension of their mental unfitness. However, this narrative typically implies a *psychological* change that accompanies a technological change. That is to say, over time we get smarter and we build better machines. Everything becomes faster, to paraphrase medievalist Irina Metzler, who goes on to say that the capitalist insistence on speed leaves intellectually disabled people behind for being “slow,”[39] a perspective echoed by Russell and Malhotra, who argue that the advent of industrial capitalism intentionally pushed out bodies that were deemed physically or mentally less fit than others.[40]

Usually, this ideology is tied to a belief that human societies will outlive religious ideologies as they grow more technologically advanced, but the general thrust of this narrative is that humans strive for perfection more and more, and invariably get closer and closer to it with each new innovation, each new step forward. *Star Trek’*s wholesale acceptance of this narrative is incredibly apparent. Earth’s past is generally remarked upon as backwards and dark prior to the discovery of warp technology, though certain elements of rural American and to a lesser extent European life, such as farm ownership, are romanticized. Only the parts of history that are deemed quaint and harmless are allowed to persist in the Orientalizing frame of *Star Trek* historicity. Just as critical for the perpetuation of the progress narrative is its universality. All cultures in *Star Trek* proceed along the same technological grounds, from agrarian cultures to industrial ones to the development of nuclear or equivalent energy to the advent of warp technology, with presumed corresponding decreases in intra-planetary conflict. Alien societies following the exact

technological development of Earth are considered normal to the point where it is remarked upon when it does not happen because in *Star Trek,* progress is presumed. Due to their lack of intellectual capacity, the Pakleds can presumably never progress along the linear path that is required for Federation membership, and this means they are permanently imperfect in a way that is unacceptable to the normate body of the Federation. It also means that their very existence and success as a species is a challenge to the Federation’s self-understanding; they become advanced and militarily powerful enough to pose a threat to the Federation. This is the reason why the audience must always be reminded that they are unintelligent and funny. Because if they are not, then where does the Federation’s intellectual enlightenment stand?

Conclusion

Star Trek constructs a very inclusive and diverse universe where almost all cultures and almost all forms of embodiment are valid. But the Self of the Federation can never be coherent without an Other, and most of those Others represent threats to the foundational ideas of the Federation itself. The Pakleds are one such Other, not because they are dangerous or overwhelmingly powerful, but because their disability-coded cognitive reasoning and linguistic skills are anathema to the Federation’s intellectual environment. One thing that the scientifically minded, enlightened Federation cannot tolerate is a species who cannot participate as an intellectual equal to its member species, and the Pakleds never can. Cast as greedy and selfish people who steal resources they don’t truly

need from those who do, the Pakleds are a caricature of intellectual disability and, intentional or not, a commentary on the role intellectual disabled people are imagined to play or not play in our own culture.

The utopia of *Star Trek,* like many utopias, erases disability in its pursuit of perfection, the writers unable to imagine a future scenario in which such people could be meaningfully included, and settling on one in which, for the supposed betterment of all, they no longer exist. The utopian eugenics of *Star Trek* allow for the inclusion of people of any racial, ethnic, national, gender or sexual background, and also for the inclusion of physically disabled people and those whose cognitive or intellectual disabilities are perceived as imparting valuable qualities by a capitalist metric, but not for cognitively disabled individuals who require support to participate in the same way as everyone else.

The Pakleds threaten the very vision of the *Star Trek* utopia with their non-normate cognition and speech, and therefore can never be included, and this sends a concerning message to cognitively disabled people in the real world in which *Star Trek* is created. But one thing that *Star Trek* remains consistent on throughout all media is its optimism for a future that is, above all, better than what we currently have. People who previously were excluded from the utopia now have a part in it, and we can hope, therefore, for an even more inclusive future for the franchise moving forward.

Endnotes

[1] *Star Trek: The Next Generation,* Season 2, Episode 17, “Samaritan Snare,” directed by Les Landau, aired May 15, 1989, by Paramount Pictures.
[2] Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (Columbia University Press, 1997), 8.
[3] Jeffrey A. Weinstock, “Freaks in Space: ‘Extraterrestrialism’ and ‘Deep-Space Multiculturalism,’” in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body,* edited by Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York University Press, 1996),
[4] Jeffrey Melnick, “Immigration and Race Relations,” in *A Companion to American Immigration,* edited by. Reed Ueta, (Blackwell, 2006) 265.
[5] Weinstock, “Extraterrestrialism”, 333-334.
[6] “Samaritan Snare,” 7:30-8:00.
[7] Ibid., 7:18; 8:03.
[8] Ibid., 9:03-33.
[9] Michael Westmore, et al., *Star Trek: Aliens & Artifacts* (Pocket Books, 2000), 111-113.
[10] “Samaritan Snare,” 31:40.
[11] Ibid., 38:24.
[12] *Star Trek: Lower Decks,* Season 1, Episode 10, “No Small Parts,” directed by Barry J. Kelly, aired October 8, 2020, by Paramount Pictures, 14:12.
[13] *Star Trek: Lower Decks,* Season 2, Episode 2, “Kayshon, His Eyes Open,” directed by Kim Arndt, aired August 19, 2021, by Paramount Pictures, 6:00.
[14] *Star Trek: Lower Decks,* Season 2, Episode 9, “wej Duj,” directed by Bob Suarez, aired October 7, 2021, by Paramount Pictures, 14:46.
[15] *Star Trek: Lower Decks,* Season 2, Episode 6, “The Spy Humongous,” directed by Bob Suarez, aired September 16, 2021, by Paramount Pictures, 00:36; 8:16; 14:11-18; 20:00-23.
[16] *Star Trek: First Contact,* directed by Johnathan Frakes, (Paramount Pictures, 1996), 8:30-8:17.
[17] Marta Russell and Ravi Malhotra, “Capitalism and the Disability Rights Movement,” in *Capitalism & Disability: Selected Writings by Marta Russell,* ed. Keith Rosenthal (Haymarket Books, 2019), 2.
[18] Allison C. Carey, “Beyond the Medical Model: A Reconsideration of 'Feeblemindedness', Citizenship, and Eugenic Restrictions,” *Disability & Society*, 18:4 (2003), 420-421.
[19] Ibid., 415.
[20] Douglas C. Baynton, *Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics,* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 79-81.
[21] Carey, “Beyond the Medical Model,” 416.
[22] Ibid., 417.
[23] Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Duke University Press, 2017), 110-111. Cf. Nancy Ordover, *American Eugenics: Race, Queer Anatomy, and the Science of Nationalism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
[24] Edwin Black, *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America’s Campaign to Create a Master Race* (Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003), 78.
[25] Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 8.
[26] Lennard J. Davis, *The End of Normal: Identity in a Biocultural Era* (University of Michigan Press, 2013), 13-14, emphasis in original.
[27] “Samaritan Snare,” 1:56.
[28] Ibid., 11:00.
[29] Ibid., 31:15; 43:30.
[30] Ibid., 41:25.

[31] “No Small Parts,” 10:40.
[32] Ibid., 17:37.
[33] Weinstock, ““Extraterrestrialism” and “Deep-Space Multiculturalism,”” 339.
[34] *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine,* Season 5, Episode 16, “Dr. Bashir, I Presume?” directed by David Livingston, aired February 24, 1997, by Paramount Pictures.
[35] *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine,* Season 6, Episode 9, “Statistical Probabilities,” directed by Anson Williams, aired November 22, 1997, by Paramount Pictures.
[36] Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 5, is the most well-known scholar to make the argument that people who are seen as “defective” are disqualified from the category of human.
[37] Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Indiana University Press, 2013), 73.
[38] Quoted in Edward Gross and Mark A. Altman, *Captain’s Logs: The Unauthorized Complete Trek Voyages* (Little Brown & Co., 1995), 180.
[39] Irina Metzler, *Fools and Idiots? Intellectual Disability in the Middle Ages* (Manchester University Press, 2016), 223-224.
[40] Russel and Malhotra, “Capitalism and the Disability Rights Movement,” 3.

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