A Future Perfect?
Colorblind Racism in Science Fiction Television

by

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Introduction: Science Fiction and Colorblindness

I have a distinct memory of reading Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* (2008) for the first time. My tastes to that point hadn’t run so dark, but it was a gift, so I read it out of politeness, if nothing else. From the first page, though, it had me. My own vapid middle school world of consumerism and competition felt directly implicated. But at the same time, Collins painted a world that felt so unlike my own: technology was everywhere, high fashion involved sadistic mutilations of the body, and screens dictated what to do and when to do it. While I read it somewhat as an indictment of capitalism and violence in my own life, I was still able to separate it from the real world I experienced in a very clear way.

From this first taste, I was hooked on speculative science fiction. What began as a literary obsession soon branched out to include movies and television and internet commentary. From *Star Wars* to superheroes, *Frankenstein* to *Back to the Future*, I consumed it all. Slowly I started noticing that there were recurring themes in all of my science fiction media: heroes and villains, battles between different species, and oppressive technologies, to name just a few. I became the ultimate fan girl, decorating my wall with movie posters, buying more and more books, and scouring spoiler articles for television shows I watched. As I read interviews, again and again I heard creators saying similar things about their speculative futures: race and gender didn’t affect their characters in these imagined universes. These works supposedly existed completely free of the restraints of contemporary society. Could it be so?

This thesis is essentially born from that question. In order to answer it, I needed to understand the conventions of science fiction (sci-fi) in a more formal way.
It quickly became clear that sci/fi has both conventions of story (plot devices within the fictional narratives) and also conventions of rhetoric (ways in which creators talk about their worlds). The research in this thesis aims to hold the two conventions together, in order to understand how precisely race and racialized sexuality are interacting through the characters in these shows, as well as what relationship the shows have to the real world in which they were created. The basic building blocks of this project came together in my research on sci/fi as a category, as well as in current theories of race and representation more generally. As I dug into each of those topics, their connection became sharper. Sci/fi, I learned, does have specific goals, and in those goals lie parallels to rhetoric of race and racial control utilized in other parts of society. The rest of this introduction lays out the foundational knowledge necessary to understand these two “building blocks” in conversation together, before giving a brief overview of the specific shows I analyze in the later chapters.

The Science of Science Fiction: Formulas and Conventions

As a genre, sci/fi is an elusive category and one that is particularly difficult to define. Some books and movies feel easily categorizable as sci/fi: Star Trek and H.G. Wells’ The Time Machine (1895) are two more obvious examples. But what precisely defines something as a part of the genre? Darko Suvin proposes that a sci/fi work’s “main device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment.”¹ In Suvin’s words, then, almost any fictional world or society could be considered sci/fi. This sweeping definition could include any sort of utopian or

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dystopian imagining, any magic or science system, and take place in any time future or past. This definition alone seems too broad, and not specific enough to encapsulate only what the average person would conceive of as sci-fi. In order to give the genre a more distinct shape, aspects of a definition given by critic and novelist Damien Broderick are helpful. Broderick cites anxieties over technology and production means as central to sci-fi, and he asserts that stories with these themes are born of a society going through large-scale questions of systemic change. John Rieder emphasizes this, arguing that sci-fi “explore[s] the impact of technology or scientific discovery on lived experience.” Within that narrative framework, a society in dilemmas over technology can employ metaphor as a rhetorical convention to assert its message through sci-fi. Through distance from realism, a commentary emerges.

What is apparent in each of these definitions is that both form and content are crucial in a sci-fi work. The form is an imaginary that utilizes fictional technologies in order to feel separate from the creator’s reality, and the content is commentary on that exact reality. Utilizing storylines that include everything from dystopian surveillance to journeys through the vast outer space, sci-fi manages to maintain and shape morals for its time. The precise form a work takes can vary based on the time in which it is created, as both the work and the society shape each other and must be read in conversation with each other. Indeed, it is the interplay between distance and closeness of the sci-fi work and society that shapes the work’s message for its time. Additionally, sci-fi is not specific to any particular time in history, but has been utilized throughout various time periods in different ways.

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While the term “science fiction” didn’t emerge until the April 1926 edition of Hugo Gernsback’s *Amazing Stories*—which at the time actually spelled it as one word: “scientifiction”⁴—the genre can trace its roots as far back as the theater of the Ancient Greeks and some of Aristophane’s more fantastical plays.⁵ Still, most scholars identify Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, published first in 1818, as the earliest contemporary sci/fi work, though this theory places the focus primarily on Western literatures. Following *Frankenstein*, writers such as Robert Louis Stevenson and H.G. Wells adapted Shelley’s theme of a dark inner self that becomes manifest through scientific discovery, and the genre took off. By the 1920s and 1930s, sci/fi literature had become what Rieder refers to as “a clearly delineated niche market genre,”⁶ one that fans would now actively seek out. Thus, sci/fi was popular enough to be marketable, as more and more people were looking to the genre for entertainment.

The genre took on a new unique character with the emergence of the moving picture. What had previously been a genre based primarily on morals and metaphor quickly became a genre concerned with “visual spectacularism.”⁷ Visuality and image became key components of portraying the future, allowing the viewer a more visceral experience in sci/fi’s imagined worlds. Though the popularization of serial comics had previously allowed the introduction of visuality into sci/fi, no comics felt as realistic as television and film. Cartoonish icons still left their readership with a level of disconnect and distance. On the screen, however, futures and anxieties that had previously been intangible were made realistically visual, allowing viewers to situate

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⁵ Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction*, vii.
⁷ Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction*, 264.
themselves within the narrative and thus making the metaphor more accessible.

Television did this even more than movies could, as it brought the spectacle straight into the viewers’ homes.

Though the moving picture more generally was central to shifts in sci-fi, commercial television became a specific site of potential because it emerged at a time when nations were exploring a new science that forever changed sci-fi. America’s watchful eye was looking to space, technology, and a new frontier, and sci-fi television reflected all the curiosities and anxieties that came with every new discovery. Frontier narratives had always been extremely present in American sci-fi, so this national interest sparked a renewed interest in the genre as one onto which to project American imaginings of its new frontier. Some of the earliest shows that took up this mantle include Captain Video and His Video Rangers (1949-1955) and Tom Corbett, Space Cadet (1950-1955), each of which took traditional elements of the western and crime genres into outer space, utilizing traditional frontier imagery in a new technological landscape. These traditional elements were primarily classic American values that set a white male hero fighting an evil villain. It was the usual tale of conquest over savage and uncivilized frontiers, a thinly veiled metaphor for Manifest Destiny reborn.

Star Trek, which premiered in 1966 and was perhaps the most culturally prominent of the emerging sci-fi shows, took a similar approach, from its start attempting to recreate distinctly American values in its own world. The most

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9 Roberts, The History of Science Fiction, 271.
10 Siegel, “Science Fiction and Fantasy TV,” 94.
notable of these values, as stated within the show itself, was the quest “to boldly go where no man has gone before,” or in other words, to explore (and then conquer) new frontiers. Star Trek was actively playing its narrative as a mirror to its surrounding society, which was looking to extend to its “final frontier” in space. But it was not only mirror; it was also a tool in keeping the language and violence of frontier at the forefront of American consciousness. It was both reflective and formative.

The frontier imagery sets up for sci-fi a dichotomy between American and Other, between moral and savage, and between conqueror and conquered. This binary of metaphorical good and evil has been central to the genre since its inception—indeed, Frankenstein used scientific disaster to deal with humanity’s wickedness quite explicitly. In later sci-fi, beginning in and around the 1920s, this theme of good and evil took on the trappings of another trope: superheroes and villains. Not separate from frontier narrative styles, the superhero structure blends together with it to create the basic narrative building block of sci-fi. Often the villainous forces of terror situate themselves in technological advancements,\(^\text{11}\) though in many other cases fictional and alien species play the evil foil to the morally good humans.

Often creators blatantly direct the portrayal of good and evil, creating a similar feeling as to when the moral is stated at the end of a children’s fable. This bluntness has led sci-fi television to be conceived of as juvenile and lowbrow popular entertainment, rather than complex and well-drawn art that has the potential to make serious commentaries.\(^\text{12}\) However, this represents a total underestimation of the genre’s potential. At the center of sci-fi’s portrayals of unambiguous good are


\(^\text{12}\) Ibid., 26.
distinguishably American images; In *Buck Rogers in the Twenty-Fifth Century* (1979-1981), these images took shape as hamburgers, rock and roll, and a soldier’s patriotism, as one example. In a period still feeling the impact of staunch McCarthyism and tests of American loyalty, it’s no surprise that the mirror on society was one that portrayed firmly loyal expressions of Americanness as the heroic ideal. But again, this was more than just a mirror; it was also a wish for how Americans would behave in this era, a projection of ideals for viewers to emulate.

Because many viewers perceive sci/fi as a fringe subculture on the periphery of popular culture, the idea that it might have any effect on public opinion and political belief can seem doubtful. However, the exact opposite is true. Especially in more recent years of television production, the number of sci/fi shows has increased immensely, as well as the popularity of these shows. Almost all of the major television networks (CBS, NBC, Fox, and others) have at least one sci/fi show currently, and The CW has over five alone. Most recently, the HBO remake of *Westworld* premiered with the highest average viewership of any first season for the network, proving that sci/fi can and does still attract viewers in enormous numbers. This popularity makes sci/fi of particular relevance to understand and analyze culturally, as its far-reaching influence has the potential to greatly shape the worldview of its enormous audience.

In order for these shows to gain and maintain this level of popularity,

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13 Siegel, “Science Fiction and Fantasy TV,” 100.
15 This thesis works on the assumption that television in general has a formative influence on society. For research on this topic, see Tukachinsky, Mastro, and Yarchi (2015); and Dixon (2008).
producers often capitalize on the conventions of the genre to draw in viewers disillusioned by modern politics; these showrunners use rhetoric of idealistic world building to engage viewers. In short, they create a (supposedly) alternative reality. This rhetoric takes on the character of colorblind idealism, with claims that these shows portray a world in which the realities of race and racialized sexuality are not factors for the characters. However, sci-fi television’s portrayals of race continue to act both as a mirror and as a mode of formative racialization. In order to situate this language among contemporary racial discourse, the next section further explores this phenomenon.

**The Rhetoric of Race**

Race both shapes and is shaped by individual actions and media. To understand this framework, this thesis looks at specific television shows as *racial projects*, which Michael Omi and Howard Winant define as “efforts to shape the ways in which human identities and social structures are racially signified, and the reciprocal ways that racial meaning becomes embedded in social structures.”16 Omi and Winant assert that race is present in many things, and that racial projects emerge from these many things to become sites for the meaning of race to be upheld or shifted. Racial projects can take the form of anything from an individual fashion choice, such as the choice to wear dreadlocks, to a political speech that openly takes a stance on racial politics. Whatever it is, the racial project becomes a key site of racialization, working to shape how race operates in society. In this way, sci-fi shows

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are racial projects because they explicitly and implicitly make racial commentary and
direct the audience’s views on race.

Because of the visual nature of television, a reading of a show’s racialization
must take into account both the way in which race can be read at a glance and the way
it interacts with the narrative of a show. For example, it’s easy to read that many sci/fi
shows now feature people of color in far greater numbers than in the past, and
according to most producers, this is intentional. Thus, many shows are normalizing
racial diversity at least in some capacity. The next layer, then, is to read how the
diverse screen comes to signify racial meaning through narrative. If sci/fi attempts to
create a mirror that points to important issues of contemporary society, then race on
the screen must also mirror its modes of operation from society. A disconnect exists,
however, in producers’ claims that race is not important in their shows or that creators
are working in a vacuum separate from existing racial roles. These claims posit that
sci/fi shows are “beyond race” and perhaps create a new racial order that doesn’t
necessarily reflect what viewers know reality to be.

While producers claim to be beyond literal race, however, their stories do
attempt to metaphorically capture racism and discrimination through portrayals of
battles between species. One notable example of this use of metaphor is from Star
Trek: The Next Generation (1987-1994), an early iteration of Star Trek that pitted the
human race against the extraterrestrial Ferengi, who were established early on as a
clear threat to the human heroes. Examples of tensions between humans and
otherworldly creatures continue to this day, in everything from the recent movie
Avatar (2009) to the currently airing television show Supergirl (2015—). However,

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17 This thesis will identify specific claims in relation to each show in the later chapters.
the non-acknowledgement of real-world racial dynamics leaves these metaphors to fall flat in their messaging, and it also puts the shows in a difficult bind: how can a show attempt to make commentary on social issues without openly acknowledging them? To actively confront race, a show must do more than meet the subject metaphorically. It must also confront the layered ways in which it acts as a racial project, and it must be conscious of how it racializes each character (white and non-white) and produces racial meanings.

Instead of doing this, producers use a strategy common in today’s society: colorblind racism. Colorblindness is a form of racism that capitalizes on the racist subject’s good intentions, rather than the impact of their words or portrayals. It does not necessarily imply that people do not see or acknowledge race, as the word might indicate, but rather that they believe it to no longer be a social determinant, simply an individual descriptor. Instead, this framework allows the visual display of diversity to be read as the ultimate measure of successful racial inclusion. If people of color are present, colorblindness allows a group to absolve itself of responsibility for the specific ways in which racial groups interact.

Being well past the years of overt slavery and subsequent Jim Crow racism, colorblind ideology asserts that racism no longer exists on a structural level. Rather, colorblindness puts the responsibility for racism on an individual basis, despite the reality that racism still exists on a highly structural level. This hypocrisy sits at the center of how colorblindness operates. While mass incarceration targets

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19 For specific examples and analysis of contemporary structural racism, see also: Michelle Alexander, Marc Lamont Hill, and Lisa Marie Cacho.
predominantly black and brown bodies, and the so-called War on Drugs remains a war waged by white supremacy,\textsuperscript{20} colorblind rhetoric provides racists ways to avoid taking responsibility while maintaining these forms of racism. These methods of exemption take the form of several central frames, which Eduardo Bonilla-Silva names as abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism.\textsuperscript{21}

Abstract liberalism operates to frame America as an equal opportunity meritocracy, one in which any preference toward any race, such as Affirmative Action, is unfair and takes away from individual choice. Bonilla-Silva explains that, “this claim necessitates ignoring the fact that people of color are \emph{severely} underrepresented in most good jobs, schools, and universities,” as well as “ignoring the multiple institutional and state-sponsored practices behind segregation.”\textsuperscript{22} Thus, instead of acknowledging race for the purpose of mitigating disparities, abstract liberalism favors ignoring race altogether. Meanwhile, naturalization is a strategy of explaining away segregation or racial disparity as a naturally occurring phenomenon, brought about because people inevitably flock toward those similar to them. This emphasis that things are “just the way they are” suggests that racial separation or disparity is a biological occurrence and not one brought on by an individual’s racist behavior. Next, cultural racism creates ideas of cultural norms among races and blames these imagined norms for racial disparity. Examples of this language include claims that Latino families do not emphasize education highly or that black families

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 76-77.  
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
are too big and like to have many children.\textsuperscript{23} This deflects responsibility from racist structures onto the very individuals experiencing racism and their communities. The final frame, minimization of racism, posits that though discrimination still exists, it functions on a small, individual level and doesn’t greatly impact a person’s chances at success. Minimizers take the attitude that racism is simply not a big deal anymore, but merely an overblown focus in society. Together, the four frames work to uphold racism without the appearance of racism.

As racial projects, each of the shows I analyze within takes on these frames of colorblindness and reworks them into new forms. In order to understand how colorblind racism uniquely operates in the shows \emph{Firefly} (2002-2003), \emph{The 100} (2014—), and \emph{Battlestar Galactica} (2003-2009), the analysis must occur at several levels. First, the rhetoric of colorblindness operates within the language that the creators of each show use when talking about race in their shows. Next, racialization is constantly happening within the shows themselves, through narrative construction and character development. The heart of this thesis lies in the overlap between these two levels, forming an analysis of the contradictions between the racialization and the messaging. I argue here that these three shows, as case studies of sci/fi more broadly, support the structure of colorblind racism by maintaining current beliefs regarding race and racialized sexuality through frameworks of Orientalism (both old and new) and necropolitics.

In order to situate this argument, I have developed four categories for reading television characters: hero, object, invisible figure, and agent. These categories build off of a central theme in sci/fi: unequivocal good and evil, often manifesting through

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
superhero narratives. The classic superhero is a white male, and this is no coincidence. The hero category contains those characters who hold the power to control and subjugate other people and are racialized as respectable, dominant, and more often than not, white. The object character is one at the complete opposite of this binary of good and evil, power and powerless. They are a character denied agency and instead belittled and racialized as wholly Other. In the classic set up of race, white people are the heroes and black people act as objects. In sci-fi, the racially Othered object can also manifest as a “nonracial” alien or machine that is in fact specifically racialized.

Between these two binary categories of hero and object sits the agent figure, a person who is offered representation and small amounts of power in their narrative in order to wield that power to objectify other characters. This category operates like the category of model minority, offering a status that seems to signify some level of success but actually comes attached to its own unique kinds of racism. One specific example that this thesis explores is the model minority role of the Asian American in American society, looking at specific Asian characters that come to embody the agent role in these shows. Finally, the invisible figure is one whose representation is physically absent from a show. While this category is less relevant under these shows’ specific forms of colorblindness, one common invisible figure across the board is the indigenous actor, who generally makes up no more than 0.4% of characters on primetime television and in popular film. These categories are not by

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24 For notable examples of the dominance of white men in superhero stories, see: Superman, Spiderman, Captain America, Iron Man, and others.

any means inherently fixed to specific identity categories, but the ways in which identity becomes attached to categories in specific shows offers a way of reading those shows for racialization.

The most central category under colorblindness, however, is the agent group. The agent character is of particular relevance in a colorblind framework because they offer some sort of false proof that creators are not racist. If the screen looks diverse, many viewers can look past the actual representations within that diversity. Within this thesis, I use it to inspect how agent characters in these shows are wielded both by the heroes of their shows and by the producers themselves.

If a show were indeed without racism, the representation of races would sweep across these categories, and there would be no correlation between each category and specific races, nor would any group within the show be explicitly racialized as Other in ways that reflect real world racial Otherness. Rather, there would be people of all identities in each category and none would function as racial objects.

**Looking Forward in this Thesis**

To track the evolution of colorblind racism in sci-fi shows, this thesis focuses on three specific shows as case studies: *Firefly*, *The 100*, and *Battlestar Galactica*. Though each of these shows is uniquely relevant to the questions of my thesis, they are not wholly separate from other shows of the genre, and throughout each chapter, I draw connections to wider genre conventions to situate these three shows as emblematic of broader themes.
To begin, *Firefly* paints a picture of a “Sino-American” future in which the global superpowers of China and the United States have taken the world into space. Hundreds of years later, after a brutalizing civil war between the Sino-American Alliance and the Independents, the story picks up on the edge of the ‘verse. *Firefly* centers on space cowboy Malcolm “Mal” Reynolds as he leads his racially diverse crew through numerous heists and raids. Given that this future is equally Chinese and American, a viewer could expect that Asian American actors would play a rather prominent role, but the opposite is true. They’re almost completely absent, while frontier imagery is front and center. Meanwhile, producer Joss Whedon utilizes a specific type of anti-Arab and anti-Asian racism called Orientalism, which offers a way for the West to organize and dominate non-Western countries and cultures. This chapter shows how Orientalism manifests in the use of codeswitching to draw specific areas of dominion for Asian and American imagery, and in the relationship between frontier hero Mal and his Asianized romantic foil Inara, who takes on an Orientalized agent role.

In the next chapter, I turn to *The 100*, the most contemporary of the shows I analyze herein. Again, the narrative takes its audience into space, to a world in which a nuclear apocalypse has made Earth uninhabitable. However, running out of air, the society in space—which is led by a conglomeration of twelve countries’ space stations similar to the Sino-American Alliance in *Firefly*—has no choice but to send a hundred juvenile delinquents to the ground. The hundred find themselves following Clarke, a young white woman among them and the heroine of this story, as they play out their own metaphorical frontier conquest of an Earth they are surprised to learn is
still inhabited. Throughout the show, Clarke’s decisions again and again bring violence upon characters of color, and through the use of violence, The 100 creates a distinct image of the ideal body. The show also utilizes specific acceptable models of queerness to further racialize certain queer bodies. By reading this through a frame of necropolitics, the right to exercise violence and inflict death becomes an expression of Clarke’s racial sovereignty. With clear racial boundaries drawn through this violence, several characters take on the agent role to cross this gap. Still, this chapter asserts that the show treats certain racially Other agent characters as more disposable to the narrative. In sharp contrast to the truth of his show, producer Jason Rothenberg describes The 100 in completely opposite terms, claiming that race is not a factor in its imagined world.

Finally, the next chapter analyzes Battlestar Galactica (BSG), which follows the last surviving humans in their fight for survival against the Cylons, a robot race living in space. As Cylon technology advances, they develop models that are able to pass for human, which becomes one of the central conflicts in the first season. Humans develop a growing anxiety for the metaphorical racial passing that some Cylons are able to maintain, particularly that of the Cylon Eight, played by Korean American actress Grace Park. The producers situate the Cylons as racial object in relation to the human heroes, and the different copies of the Eight model act as the agent characters between these two races. This chapter expands on themes of Orientalism and reads BSG for the formation of techno-orientalism, a newer form of racism that combines technological anxieties with Orientalist control. By using specific family models to construct racial inclusion, the show builds its own brand of
colorblindness that also exercises necropolitical dominance. Despite their famous choice to swap characters’ genders and races in their remake, producers Ronald Moore and David Eick still racialize the Cylons as Other and affirm *BSG*’s colorblind racism and that of sci/fi more generally.

In the conclusion of this thesis, I present several dilemmas facing the television industry as it moves forward. Omi and Winant suggest that, “we live in racial history.”26 My conclusion makes a call for television creators to see these shows as essential representations of the very history we are living. Understanding television’s unique power to shape culture requires a significant shift in the racial consciousness of American society. But, by understanding the specific messaging within these shows, a path for liberation just might emerge.

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26 Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 16.
“Take my love. Take my land. Take me where I cannot stand. I don’t care. I’m still free. You can’t take the sky from me. Take me out to the black. Tell ‘em I ain’t comin’ back. Burn the land and boil the sea. You can’t take the sky from me. There’s no place I can’t be since I found Serenity. But you can’t take the sky from me.”

— “The Ballad of Serenity” (Firefly opening theme)

From the moment the opening theme of *Firefly* cuts onto the screen, creator and executive producer Joss Whedon asserts the unique tone of his show: the viewer is about to embark on a western journey through space, one characterized by the desire for land, freedom, and frontier. “You can’t take the sky from me,” proclaim the lyrics of the theme song, penned by Whedon himself, announcing an inherent right to the space frontier. On the screen, a spaceship flies over a pasture of horses. Instantly the viewer knows that *Firefly* will mark a distinct hybrid. The narrative will contain a search for rugged freedom found only in the Wild Wild West, but instead of the actual West, it’s placed in an outer space equivalent. In doing this, *Firefly* portrays openly and with no shame one of sci/fi’s major themes: an American frontier imagining as both a mirror of and an ideal for American society.

This blended format (western and sci/fi) is central to how *Firefly* constructs itself, both aesthetically and in its narrative. The show’s story begins in space, years after the countries that were the United States and China led the population of Earth-That-Was into the sky. The two central planets, Londinium and Sihnon, the new America and China respectively, form the center of power in the Sino-American Alliance (the Alliance). The show’s pilot episode (“Serenity”) opens on the final

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battle of a civil war between the Alliance and a group of rebels, the “Independents,” in which the two sides are fighting over the fate of the ‘verse. The Alliance wants unification, centralized government, and military control, while the Independents want continued freedom and self-reliance. As the battle plays out, the audience watches on to see the dictatorial Alliance win out, and the Independents, with nowhere to go, scatter. Finding himself on the losing side of the war, the hero cowboy Malcolm “Mal” Reynolds forms a ragtag crew of displaced Independents that venture around the ‘verse together in the ship Serenity, as they each attempt to find their way in the Alliance-ruled space. They mostly stick to the outer rim, away from the central planets where the Alliance rules with an iron grip, and the crew takes on jobs to buy and sell stolen goods and to find freedom on the outskirts of the ‘verse.

Though the crew of Serenity tries to steer clear of the Alliance leadership, there is really no escaping the dominant culture that the Alliance propagates in the ‘verse. Even on the outer rim, the joint Chinese and American future is tangible. This idea of a Sino-American merging becomes central to the way in which colorblind racism functions in Firefly, centering multiculturalism and diversity in the discourse around the show. In the bonus features for the DVD of Firefly’s sequel movie Serenity, the commentary states that the two superpowers’ cultures, Chinese and American, have blended to form one new human culture by the start of the show. This

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28 “Serenity” was written originally as the pilot episode, and because network executives at Fox were concerned it wouldn’t land well with audiences, “Serenity” was cut and the second episode (“The Train Job”) aired instead. When the DVD of the series came out, Fox repackaged the episodes in the order in which they were written, including “Serenity” for viewers to see in order for the first time. This chapter refers to “Serenity” as the pilot episode.

29 After the early cancellation of Firefly following only one season, Whedon followed up the show with a movie sequel in 2005. The movie, Serenity, was able to tie up narrative loose ends, and in this thesis I am considering it as equally a part of the canon for analysis. In this paper, when italicized, Serenity refers to this movie, and when written with no italics, Serenity refers to the main spaceship in both Firefly and its companion movie.
chapter argues that *Firefly* uses the framework of a “blended” society to hide the ways in which the show utilizes a technique called Orientalism to position the Asian Other as an agent figure. Through the use of Mandarin and the portrayal of the character Inara as a sexualized, Asianized character, Whedon subverts the claims he makes about a joint future, and instead offers a frontier that follows usual conventions of domination and American whiteness.

The rhetoric of a singular human culture evokes a sense that the individualities of Chinese and American culture as the viewer might know them are lost and a new hybrid will emerge, not clearly of either culture, but instead of both. To many viewers, this may feel eerily reminiscent of language from American “melting pot” discourse, which has a long history in the United States. As early as 1782, M-G. Jean de Crèvecoeur wrote about the idea, stating about the country that, “here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men.”30 His idea was that immigrants could come to America and that their cultures would mix with American culture to become something completely new. About a century and a half after de Crèvecoeur put forth his theory, the exact terminology of “melting pot” emerged from Israel Zangwill’s 1908 play of the same name, *The Melting Pot*. Zangwill’s play celebrated the “reforming” of different races as a key part of immigration to the United States and suggested that America required new immigrants to assimilate—“melt” their difference away—to find acceptance within dominant (white) society.31

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Though the melting pot metaphor may seem like a positive invitation of racial blending, in actuality the reformation of culture in Zangwill’s time took on a much more insidious character, promoting cultural erasure over cultural inclusion. Dominant groups often utilize melting pot rhetoric now to convince marginalized people that assimilation is a viable tactic of survival and integration, and in many ways, it does offer safety and survival. However, history has shown that assimilation into American whiteness comes at the high cost of violent cultural erasure.

To clarify this steep cost, Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan argue that, given, “fear of white hostility and the white threat to the survival of the subject minority, it follows that embracing the acceptable stereotype is an expedient tactic of survival, as seeking out and accepting humiliation almost always are.” They position the choice of assimilation and “melting” as one of humiliation and self-belittling. Humiliation may not feel explicitly violent, but it is a tactic of domination, all part of the process of lowering the racial Other into an acceptable stereotype. Chin and Chan evoke virulent language of violence in much of their work, while in Firefly, much of the violence of assimilation feels gentle, particularly when played against a world full of guns and more overt physical violence. However, it is precisely the quiet and covert nature of this violence that makes it so harmful.

Though subtle, this violence manifests in Firefly’s rearticulation of the acceptable stereotype: the Oriental model minority. This model minority agent figure is created through the use of a colonialist tool of domination called Orientalism. Orientalism, a term coined by Edward Said, refers to a specific way of exoticizing.

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and generalizing Asia and the Middle East from a Western perspective. Western countries employ this imperialist tool to “represent the people of the countries they wish to colonise or otherwise exert authority over in order to justify and enhance that authority.” In other words, Orientalism seeks to frame the fictional “Orient” (i.e. Asia and the Middle East) so that colonial authorities can control it and maintain dominance over it.

This fiction emerges through portrayals of so-called “Orientals” in a number of stereotypical ways, and thus, American culture creates a cultural imaginary through the repetition of several salient images that emerge as Orientalist strategies of control. One such strategy of Orientalism is the conflation of many countries into one easily understandable fiction, or a compressing of specific national identities into one broad sweeping stereotype of a unified Asian identity. Another common Orientalist trope is the creation of the image of the docile, sexually pleasing Asian woman and the subsequent fetishization of that image. The rest of this chapter explores Firefly’s articulations of these images in specific sites of Orientalization to understand how exactly colorblindness emerges from them.

**Codeswitching and the Convergence of Wild West and Outer Space**

One way in which Firefly navigates the use of the melting pot analogy to forward Orientalism is through a technique called codeswitching. The term most specifically refers to “the alternation of two languages in the same conversation…”

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strategically to achieve specific communicative goals.”35 Thus, multilingual speakers can employ codeswitching to communicate specific things through the use of each language. For example, a common instance of codeswitching is the alternation between African American Vernacular (AAV)36 and Standard English as Black Americans move between their own communities and mainstream white society. The use of Standard English allows blacks to strategically relate to whites in a specific way by performing whiteness and respectability through dialect. In their own communities, African Americans can use AAV freely as a signal of personal identification and community belonging.37 Firefly uses codeswitching in both this literal use—referring to the use of languages within the show—and in a more broad sense by merging and alternating the language, rhetoric, and aesthetic of both frontier and sci/fi.

Literally, characters in the ‘verse codeswitch by changing back and forth between speaking English and Mandarin—and occasionally Cantonese, another Chinese dialect, though this is primarily because Firefly switched translators from episode to episode and not for any identifiable symbolic purposes.38 Lines of dialogue in Mandarin are not subtitled, and because of this, the narrative of any given episode does not rely on understanding these lines. Furthermore, the use of linguistic codeswitching is not delineated to any specific group with Firefly’s ‘verse; people of

36 AAV is also commonly referred to as African American Vernacular English (AAVE), African American Language (AAL), or colloquially, Blacklish.
all classes, professions, genders, and moral compasses use Mandarin within their speech.\(^{39}\)

The purpose of including Mandarin in this world, then, is not to establish class divides between groups such as the Alliance and the Independents. One probable theory is that the presence of codeswitching between the two languages can offer a false indication that Whedon’s society is actually blended in the way he claims. However, even with this literal codeswitching, the use of both languages represents surface level inclusion at best, reflective of Orientalist imaginings and therefore emblematic more of troublesome melting pot discourse than real acceptance. Another, more arbitrary, motivation for this codeswitching could be Whedon’s proclivity for appropriating Chinese culture as his own. In his two shows leading up to Firefly, Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997-2003) and Angel (1999-2004), Whedon incorporated minor character arcs that integrated Mandarin very lightly into the narratives. In fact, even his self-given name, “Joss,” is taken from Chinese, meaning “luck.”\(^{40}\) Clearly, there’s something appealing to Whedon about Chinese culture, and Firefly represents his best attempt at appropriating, rearticulating, and staking an Orientalist claim over it.

Upon closer inspection, the translated phrases of Mandarin often contain either terms of endearment, sexual innuendo, or familial teasing.\(^{41}\) For example, Mal several times refers to Kaylee, the young engineer on the ship, as xiao mei mei [little sister], and this reinforces the tight-knit family nature of the crew.\(^{42}\) The women on

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\(^{39}\) Mandala, “Representing the Future,” 32.

\(^{40}\) Sullivan, “Chinese Words in the ‘Verse,” 197.

\(^{41}\) Mandala, “Representing the Future,” 33-35.

\(^{42}\) Ibid., 33.
the ship later talk about their male love interests in Mandarin, and Kaylee uses the description *swai* [cute, handsome] to describe Simon, Serenity’s doctor (“Safe”). In both of these instances, there is something familial and private in their use of Mandarin, and the audience sees Whedon’s first strategic placement of intimacy as a distinctly Asian characteristic. Though the average viewer likely wouldn’t understand this from simply hearing the uncaptioned Mandarin, it does still reveal the intentions of the producers. Additionally, the very nature of not being able to understand these specific lines codes them as private and perhaps too intimate for the audience to hear. Characters express the majority of their lives in English; it is casual, primary, and therefore dominant. The switch to Mandarin for more personal moments codes Chinese language as more private and intimate, and therefore lesser to English, fitting neatly into the sexualized Asianness that Orientalism offers.

These distinctions are made clearer in the use of codeswitching as defined beyond its traditional meaning. In addition to the language, the aesthetic of the show moves continuously back and forth between frontier and an exoticized Asian imaginary. This switching occurs, as does most codeswitching, strategically in order to convey the show’s identification with both American and Chinese cultures. By looking at which aspects of the fictional society and the Alliance are delineated to which cultures, it becomes clear that again there is dominance and priority granted to Americanized images, while Asianness is objectified and sexualized. The visuals of the world are constantly in flux; one second the camera showcases horses and guns, and in the next scene there are paper lanterns and Chinese characters. Yet, this switching is not random. Shoot outs and other fight scenes are devoid of any Asian

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43 Ibid., 34.
symbols, while lanterns and silks comprise the majority of decorations in brothels and bars. Similarly, English constitutes the main language of plot and action, while Mandarin is tokenized and relegated to the status of object, appearing on props and costumes such as t-shirts and ship signs.  

This style of switching should be no surprise in a show attempting to emulate the western genre, as westerns have a long tradition of creating and upholding an Orientalist racial order. By using western imagery, Whedon undoes much of what he claimed to do with racial blending and inclusion. To establish the western feel of the show, Whedon utilizes a very specific aesthetic, created through characters’ costumes, their weapons (primarily guns), and the dust bowl deserts on many of the outer planets in the ‘verse. Beyond visuals, at the heart of the western genre is a traditional American morality, often characterized in opposition to the frontier savages (i.e. American Indians), as well as to the exoticized Orient. Firefly sets the theme of loyalty—in America, this value expresses itself as patriotism and nationalism—as central in its narrative, while it creates its savage other in the “Reavers.”

Reavers are brutally violent, and they roam the ‘verse looking for people to take captive, scalp, and eat—parallel to public perceptions of American Indians on the early frontier. Stereotypes commonly characterize American Indians as mad, uncivilized, and savage, often for the purpose of shaping a collective American

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identity as other than (and above) the savage.\textsuperscript{48} And just as the “savage redskin” can reveal a deeper morality in the American self-identity, the Reavers offer that for Mal. Mal is technically a criminal, but when set in the same world as the Reavers, his goodness shines. Mal even goes so far as to protect other characters from these savage enemies, and his moral distinction as above them, like the American cowboy over American Indians, emerges. Once Mal’s moral high ground becomes established, the subsequent Orientalism feels justified, because ultimately Mal is the good guy. Through the rearticulation of frontier savage in the Reavers, the western format and Mal’s superiority become affirmed within this new sci-fi context.

The establishment of traditional morals from the western is extremely important in \textit{Firefly} because Orientalism has always played a key role in these morals. In the days of America’s westward expansion, anti-Asian racism ran rampant as an influx of Chinese labor flooded into the United States.\textsuperscript{49} This fear of Asians and the subsequent need to assert American dominance over them is inherently connected to the frontier. On the one hand, Chinese labor was integral to building the first transcontinental railroad, which provided easy access for America to conquer the frontier and eliminate the native. At the same time, adverse racial perceptions of both American Indians and Chinese immigrants pitted the two groups against each other.\textsuperscript{50} As the western genre plays out these concerns of westward expansion through fiction, the fear of the Asian Other comes through and asserts the importance of Orientalism.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 9.
Thus, codeswitching operates not necessarily to separate the frontier from *Firefly*’s Orientalized Asian cultural touch points, but rather to highlight the similarities between the two. This comes through nowhere more than in the character of Inara Serra, whose portrayal the next section explores in depth.

**Romanticizing Orientalism: A Geisha on the Frontier**

While Orientalized codeswitching provides the backdrop for *Firefly*’s ‘verse, Inara acts as a crucial site of Orientalist embodiment. To set up this Orientalization, the show establishes a romantic relationship between Mal and Inara, two characters who are racialized in radically different ways. While Inara fills the role of the sexualized Oriental Other, Mal comes to occupy the place of the rugged frontier hero.

From the first episode the viewer is made to see Mal as the central hero and therefore the main subject of interest for the viewer. The opening shot in the pilot follows him in the last battle of the failed war against the Alliance, and the camera displays the battle from his point of view, instantly establishing for the audience an identification with Mal. Before viewers even come to know his character, they are made to root for him, sympathize with his cause, and position him as the hero. Mal is an easy sell as the hero: he’s white, he’s a man, and for all that the audience can tell, he’s readably American. The viewer buys into Mal’s hero status because, like the classic superhero, he represents the ideal image of Americanness that sci-fi—as well as the western frontier *Firefly* emulates—seeks to reproduce. His particular trope of hero traces back to early sci-fi, as Mal is essentially a rearticulation of his iconic sci-fi predecessor Buck Rogers, an early iteration of the space western hero and again the
perfect all-American image.

Throughout the series, Mal lives his life by a strict moral code, and even though he’s technically an enemy to the state, he still draws his line at unnecessary killing. This separates him from many of his Firefly counterparts, who aren’t turned off by the prospect of exercising deliberate and disgusting violence. Mal represents freedom and frontier, but not to the point of anarchy or chaos—or even madness, as the Reavers represent. His morality also places great importance on family and loyalty, two values important to American culture, and he runs his crew as such. Essentially, Mal is everything the melting pot aspires to be. Perhaps most importantly, he embodies the typical western morality that views sex and sex work as lowly and immoral.51 Each of these values is highly coded as American, and by taking them on, Mal becomes even more so the ideal hero figure and the perfect image of frontier in the Old West. With the Old West, there then comes a specific relationship to Asians, and the Chinese in particular, explained above. This becomes important in understanding Mal and Inara’s relationship; while Mal represents American identity, Firefly plays Inara off of him, Asianizing her in order to portray an Orientalist relationship.

Inara is a registered companion (a sex worker officially listed by the Alliance government), and much of her characterization as such draws on imagery of the geisha tradition. In fact, Whedon admits that he originally conceived of Inara’s character only as a whore, and his wife later encouraged him to take her story more in the direction of a geisha parallel.52 Her suggestion was crucial, as it established the

51 Lively, “Remapping the Feminine in Joss Whedon’s Firefly,” 189.
52 Whedon, Serenity: The Visual Companion, 11.
primary paradigm of Mal and Inara’s relationship. To accent the geisha parallel, Firefly dresses Inara in silk with stereotypically Asian designs and patterns. Her costumes deliberately emulate the obi, sari, and kimono, all classic clothing articles for Asian women. Inara is well read, and she trained for her line of work—including education in literature and the arts—in a communal house of girls, similar to the way in which geishas are trained and educated. It is important to note, though, that the geisha comes from Japanese tradition, while the primary Asian power on which Firefly is based is China. Inara’s geisha-like qualities are thus an example of Japanese tradition superimposed on a Chinese narrative and future. This compressing of identity acts as a restructuring of power and agency, giving the powers of organization and identification to the West, in this case Whedon, and taking autonomy and national identity from the Oriental object.

While the first layer of Inara’s Orientalization comes through in her generalized Asian identity, Firefly expands on that in the ways that it sexualizes Inara. For most of the episodes, Inara and other companions are the only explicit sites of sexuality, and sex is really the only prevalent part of Inara’s backstory. Because she also acts as the only consistent Asian imagery throughout the show, sex and Asianness become conflated through her. Sex is codified once more as part of the Asian codes brought into the supposedly merged culture. All of this is validated even more by the revelation that Inara is from Sihnon, one of the two major central planets in the ‘verse and one inhabited primarily by colonists from China.

While Inara is one of the show’s primary sites of Orientalism, she is not

53 Ibid., 108.
54 Lively, “Remapping the Feminine in Joss Whedon’s Firefly,” 189.
actually played by an Asian actress, but instead by Latina actress Morena Baccarin. Given that fact, a reading of Orientalism is still possible because *Firefly* utilizes a technique called yellowface. Yellowface is a close relative of blackface and is essentially an Asianized take on minstrelsy, in which non-Asian actors play Asian roles. Using costumes and caricature, these actors evoke stereotypical Asianness and often exaggerate and Orientalize their characters. Recent notable examples of yellowface include the almost entirely white cast in the film adaptation *The Last Airbender* (2010) and the casting of Scarlett Johansson as the title character in *Ghost in the Shell* (2017). Yellowface here is significant because it emphasizes stereotypes of Asians, while asserting that Asian actors are not necessary to tell their own stories, essentially making them invisible. That both of these movies are adaptations leaves no way around the fact that these were originally Asian roles, now recast in yellowface.

The use of yellowface in *Firefly* is not as obvious initially as in these two adaptations, but upon a close reading, most features of Inara’s character indicate that Whedon drew her from Orientalist tropes of the Asian woman. The fact that Baccarin looks somewhat racially ambiguous allows her to easily “racebend” and fill the role of the Asian seductress without too much questioning. Inara is from the planet coded as Chinese, her costumes and sets evoke stereotypical Asian imagery, and her lifestyle is modeled after that of a Japanese geisha; all of these pieces together code Inara as Asian, and Baccarin’s race means that she is conveniently able to pass for something relatively close to that, via yellowface.

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As such, Mal and Inara’s relationship holds many aspects of the classic relationship of Oriental domination, as portrayed in early films such as *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960) and *Sayonara* (1957). However, Whedon adds layers to this relationship by providing limited amounts of agency to Inara, allowing her to become the perfect character to take on an agent role. The agent figure is someone with small amounts of autonomy and power that the hero ultimately determines and wields, and the agent acts as a model minority by which to subjugate and discipline other groups more explicitly. Another central tenet of the agent category is the character’s dual allegiance to two groups, her own and the hero’s. Inara embodies many traits of the agent, particularly the latter point. While narratively, Inara’s dual allegiance can be understood as torn between Mal and the Alliance, we can also read her alliances as split racially between white and Asian.

Inara holds a unique place in the crew of Serenity and the cast of *Firefly*, as she is both in the crew and not. Even physically, her quarters are somewhat separate, as she lives and conducts her business on a shuttle that is able to launch off and dock again on the larger ship. Inara’s outsider/insider status is in part due to her line of work—she only works directly with her clients, and rarely participates in the crew’s heists—and in other part due simply to her politics and view on the world. Though she works separately from the rest of her crewmates, her position and connections within the Alliance-ruled space provide use time and time again to Mal and the rest of Serenity. In one episode, Inara is able to simply walk into the sheriff’s office and set Mal and another crewmember free with a few words (“The Train Job”).

Later, in another episode, Inara takes on a client named Atherton Wing, a rival
of Mal’s (“Shindig”). Throughout the episode, Atherton and Mal attempt to thwart each other, and repeatedly they center Inara and her virtue as central in their verbal slings at each other. Near the end of the episode, Inara helps Mal to set up a trap for Atherton, and this dialogue demonstrates the extent of Inara’s sway:

ATHERTON: You set this up, *whore*, after I bought and paid for you. I should’ve beat you up good, so no one would want you.
MAL: See how I’m not punching him. I think I’ve grown.
ATHERTON: Get ready to starve. I’ll see to it you never work again.
INARA: Actually, that’s not how it works. You see, you’ve earned a black mark in the client registry. No companion is going to contract with you ever again.

Through her position, which commands at least some level of respect, Inara can essentially blacklist any client, which ultimately puts that client out of favor with many of the Alliance’s allies. That Atherton is Mal’s enemy proves where Inara’s loyalty lies. But, at the same time, this scene reminds the audience of Inara’s profession, and though Mal isn’t the one saying it, the dialogue reaffirms the lowly moral status that comes with the title “whore.” In earlier episodes, Inara admonishes characters for using the word “whore,” rather than “companion,” because of the moral implications of each. The use of “whore” here therefore evokes the lowly nature of Inara’s position. Thus, this scene establishes Inara’s loyalty to Mal, while simultaneously affirming the distinction between the two, and thereby validating her unique role as agent.

Why and how Inara comes to occupy this unique place is not entirely clear. The show’s narrative never articulates why precisely Inara left the comfort of her companion house to join a group of wandering Independents. Whedon is so insistent on keeping this secret—he is extremely evasive on this point in all bonus materials,
including DVD commentary and the series of companion books published to supplement the show—that one has to wonder if it’s only because he didn’t actually write a fully fleshed out character for Inara. In fact, it’s particularly surprising that she would side with Mal, given that Inara herself, or at least the house of companions where she was trained, allied itself with the Alliance during the war, having been on Sihnon. Thus, it works well to promote the frontier to have the well-educated and respected Inara defect and choose the freedom and family that come with joining the crew of Serenity. She represents the good minority, siding with the hero and proving Mal’s goodness.

Inara certainly isn’t docile or submissive, as blatant Orientalism would make her out to be, but even so, simply her presence and allegiance to Mal is significant. Though she and Mal are constantly bickering, Inara chooses to align with him anyway, symbolically submitting the Orient to the will of the frontier. Mal even refers to Inara as “The Ambassador” in the pilot episode, positioning Inara as a crucial instrument of Serenity’s crew, an arm of the machine with a highly specific purpose. Yet, again and again she is denied actual agency in the crew’s decisions. This positionality between Orient and frontier allows Inara to become an expression of the dual nature of Whedon’s ‘verse, and subtly reveals its true racial codes. Her place straddling civilized society and Mal’s world allows her the small amount of power and influence that comes with agent status, but ultimately, she is wielded as an asset for Serenity and thus a tool of the frontier hero. By utilizing the trope of Asian

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58 Lively, “Remapping the Feminine in Joss Whedon’s Firefly,” 188.
women as white men’s fantasy and layering on the added exploitation of the agent role, Inara becomes another way in which whiteness and American identity can assert control over the fictional Orient of Firefly.

**Colorblindness in a Bold New Frontier**

It is no argument that *Firefly* offers at least somewhat of a racially varied cast. Famously, there is an interracial marriage among the starring characters that was handled with tact and ambivalence. There are, however, almost no Asian American actors, and none at all in the recurring cast, but it seems that Whedon means to have viewers look past that fact because of other points of diversity. Though the show looks diverse on the screen, Whedon really is projecting white values and ideals onto the entire world. In the documentary *Slaying the Dragon: Reloaded*, Professor Robin Kelley says that in recent film there has been “a browning of faces but a continuing whitening of character.”59 Kelley’s suggestion that actors of color become tokens of inclusion accurately characterizes the promotion of assimilation in *Firefly*. Though the starring cast has a select few non-white actors, the story and the world of the show create a culturally hybrid future that takes on whiteness and the ideals of the American frontier more than anything else.

With the show’s reality then so separate from Whedon’s claims of diversity and multiculturalism, colorblindness reigns. Whedon utilizes the colorblind framework of abstract liberalism when *Firefly* creates a meritocratic melting pot, echoing the ways in which this metaphor operates in our own society. Abstract

liberalism deflects the responsibility from Whedon onto specific characters, and if they feel the effects of racism, it is because of personal situations and actions, rather than systemic problems within the ‘verse.

To counteract this reading, Whedon does have something of an answer. He explains away his Orientalist writing with the acknowledgement that “cultures inevitably blend, even if it happens through conquest and violence,” though he didn’t make even this concession until publicly challenged by an Asian American viewer at a Firefly reunion and talk back. Whedon’s standard line up until this point was to highlight the forward thinking of the hybridity in Firefly, but here he seems to point out that something might be amiss. Still, the quote capitalizes on the colorblind strategy of minimization, downplaying the actual effects of frontier conquest. It reads more like a deflection of responsibility and an acknowledgement of racism than anything else, seemingly absolving Whedon from the title of racist himself. Indeed, this personal distancing from racism is precisely what sits at the core of colorblindness.

By utilizing the techniques of both abstract liberalism and minimization, Whedon seals Firefly’s fate. His quick deflections minimize the actual consequences of conquest, instead of truly digging into the violence of assimilation so present in Firefly. In the end, colorblindness is all too present in Mal and Inara’s world, and the frontier on the ‘verse fails to be a world all that different from the world in which it was created.

Chapter Two
Where We Meet Again: Necropolitics and *The 100*

“Twelve nations had operational space stations at the time of the bombs. There is now only the Ark, one station forged from the many.”
—Opening Sequence from *The 100*, “Pilot”

In *The 100*, a different and less obvious frontier emerges than in *Firefly*. Over a hundred years have passed since a nuclear apocalypse supposedly made the Earth uninhabitable. Forged from the remaining space stations, a new society has emerged. Twelve nations have come together to form a single people. Enter the world of *The 100* and its colonizers, where the surviving members of the human race live in space, until they discover that their space station, the Ark, is running out of oxygen. Faced with the choice of going back to Earth or dying in the sky, the people of the Ark send one hundred juvenile delinquents to the ground to test its survivability. Once on the ground, the kids discover that some humans, who take on the title of “grounders,” were able to survive. As the hundred attempt to make their new life on the ground, settling on the new frontier of their old Earth—and with the other “sky people” when they follow down to Earth in the second season—they are forced to contend with the other populations that survived. It becomes a battle of conquest, colonialism, and control, marked by an onslaught of violence. This violence acts on characters in strategic patterns to form the bulk of *The 100*’s racism, by attacking and disciplining very specific bodies.

The producers would have their audiences believe that this violence is a universal fact in their world, not utilized for any purpose beyond creating a compelling story. In an interview for a *TV Guide* article published July 7, 2015, Jason Rothenberg, creator and executive producer of *The 100*, explains:
We are definitely dealing in a universe where [the characters] have bigger things to worry about than who is having sex with whom or who you’re attracted to. Survival becomes more important than that. Same thing with gender and race. None of these things matter. It’s just whether you’re weak or strong.\(^6\)

Rothenberg uses the classic language of meritocracy and social Darwinism here: those who are able to survive do, and there is no regard for identity as a factor in survival. By placing the onus of survival on characters’ personal strength and not his own world building, Rothenberg utilizes Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s strategy of abstract liberalism. Rather than focus on the elements of the world of The 100 that make survival easier or harder for specific groups of people, Rothenberg moves the responsibility to the individual characters.

In actuality, however, the use of violence and death on The 100 follows a carefully crafted strategy to create an ideal human that is worthy of life, reflecting strategic violence in American society. In this chapter, I argue that The 100 creates a model white body that is allowed to live, while disciplining Othered bodies through the use of violence and death. This is in contrast to Rothenberg’s claims about the unimportance of race in the show. Using the fictional relationships between Octavia and Lincoln and between Clarke and Lexa, this chapter looks at how the racialized Other is made to serve the white heroes, while ultimately maintaining the American racial order.

**Being Nobody and the Worth of Life in The 100**

One central construct in The 100 is what Eddie Glaude names as a “value

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gap"\textsuperscript{62} in the value of life for different races: certain lives are worth more than others and thus hold a greater societal value. In America, these lives are white lives—the most valued white lives of course being straight and able-bodied—and this pattern replicates itself within \textit{The 100}. There is no doubt that in general the show portrays an incredible amount of violence, but more often than not, the bodies the viewer sees disciplined on screen, either through torture or death, are queer, black, and/or brown. The use of violence against these bodies constructs worthy life in opposition to those bodies that are essentially “Nobody,” at least in their value. Marc Lamont Hill explains that,

\textit{To be Nobody is to be considered disposable… [There is] a prevailing belief that the vulnerable are unworthy of investment, protection, or even the most fundamental provisions of the social contract. As a result, they can be erased, abandoned, and even left to die.}\textsuperscript{63}

Once a body is determined to be on the wrong side of the value gap, systems of government and society as a whole become financially and emotionally uninvested in supporting said body. This denial of care and services leaves people to experience both social and literal death, the consequence of having no value in the eyes of the dominant culture. Applied to television, to be “Nobody” is to be disposable within the narrative, and thus to be easily subject to violence and even death. Like Rothenberg says, his is a show about survival, and so characters die often—the narrative making them into “Nobody”—and it becomes a question of who and for what purposes.

This idea of Nobody-ness fits within the larger theoretical framework of necropolitics, a theory explained originally by Achille Mbembé. The system of

\textsuperscript{63} Marc Lamont Hill, \textit{Nobody: Casualties of America’s War on the Vulnerable, from Ferguson to Flint and Beyond} (New York: Atria, 2016), XVI.
necropolitics operates on the premise that “the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die.” While Lamont Hill’s theory of “Nobody” tells us something about the bodies being disciplined, Mbembé’s necropolitical theory offers a crucial characterization of the subject enacting this violence. Necropolitics suppose that the subject exercises violence as a means of exerting power over other bodies. Or rather, in television terms, the hero of the story uses violence to subjugate other characters. Because of the nature of this violence—that it has the ultimate purpose of control—necropolitics often manifest through narratives of settler colonialism and conquest, as settler colonialism is at its core an absolute assertion of control and dominance.

To understand precisely how necropolitics play out in The 100, it requires first a clarification of who the hero is specifically. Though it functions mainly as an ensemble show, The 100 focuses much of its action on Clarke Griffin, one of the original hundred delinquents sent down to Earth. Clarke is instantly established as the central protagonist in the opening of the pilot, in which her voice-over narrates and the camera uses her viewpoint to show the audience its first view of this world. After this initial identification, the narrative places Clarke as separate from the other kids first and foremost because she is from the Ark’s upper class. Within the first episode, the other delinquents nickname Clarke, “Princess,” some meaning it as an insult and others as a flirtatious joke. Either way, it establishes a separation between Clarke and the others. Additionally, while many of the hundred’s crimes were theft or assault, Clarke’s crime is simply having knowledge beyond her clearance level. She is also

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white, classically feminine, and again, readably American. In fact, Eliza Taylor, the actress who plays Clarke, is Australian, so the show made an active choice to have her perform in an American accent. Like Mal in *Firefly*, Clarke resembles a classic American hero, though she is a different take than Mal’s rugged frontier hero.

It is worth noting that, despite the fact that the Ark is a conglomeration of space stations from twelve different countries, each of the sky people is distinctly American. Within different visual shots of the Ark, the viewer can spot the flags of at least Brazil, Canada, and China, in addition to the United States. Yet no characters take on these nationalities. Given that the target audience is composed of American viewers, the writers have much to gain from this Americanization, but even so, the Ark’s supposed multiculturalism is brushed over in much the same way the dual culture is handled in *Firefly*. It works to hide the racist undertones of the necropolitics in *The 100*. Clarke becomes a symbol of this multiculturalism in an episode that features a flashback to her childhood celebration of “Unity Day,” the commemoration of the twelve nations coming together. In this scene, Clarke performs as the star of the Ark’s presentation, giving a speech on togetherness and interracial harmony, and therefore marking herself as a symbol of the sky people’s multiculturalism.

Once on the ground, Clarke takes charge and attempts to organize the hundred for survival, though she faces off against Bellamy, the white-passing antihero played by half-Filipino actor Bob Morley. Together Clarke and Bellamy attempt to create order amongst the delinquents, in order to present a united front against the grounders. The grounders easily fill the position of frontier savage in *The 100*, and their position as Other helps to affirm the unity of the hundred in opposition to
Thus, with a rearticulated savage, the necropolitical framework begins to take shape.

At the heart of this framework, Mbembé establishes settler colonialism as a critical piece of necropolitics, and Clarke and her sky people fit into exactly such a narrative as they attempt to conquer the grounders. The story of *The 100*, particularly in its first season, tracks the sky people’s attempts at survival; it centers them, and so while the hundred’s early character development soars, no grounder character even speaks until seven episodes in. Until then, and for a while after, the grounders’ characterization is mainly through mythology and generalization. The grounders become a silent obstacle in the sky people’s path, an easy enemy for the audience to root against. The viewer watches on as the sky people try to colonize and assert violence over the brutal grounders, who become, like the Reavers in *Firefly*, the perfect frontier savage, and an almost too direct metaphor for American Indians.

One way in which the grounders are framed as parallel to American Indians is in their fear of guns and technology, a trope which pop culture often utilizes. The most salient example is that of Disney’s *Pocahontas*, in which the Indians see guns as mystical, foreign, and not to be touched. In both *Pocahontas* and *The 100*, this fear situates the natives as primitive and uncivilized. Their fear of technology highlights their savage nature and therefore what they might have to gain from the supposedly forward-thinking high culture of America, at least through the eyes of the American oppressors. If colonizers can justify that they have something to offer the savage

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natives, then that can serve as a rationalization of the colonizers’ right to the land and the subsequent violence that comes with it.

The casting of *The 100* also accentuates the grounders’ racialization. Most of the main sky people are white or white-passing—again, Bellamy is played by a half-Filipino actor, though audiences have tended to read him as white.\(^6^7\) The only real exceptions to this whiteness are Wells, a black character among the hundred who is killed off within three episodes (yes, apparently the black guy does always die first); Monty, a tech-savvy Asian American delinquent who comes to fill the role of model minority; and Theolonius Jaha, Wells’ dad and the Chancellor of the Ark. These three exceptions stand out particularly in the first season, when whiteness reigns among the sky people. On the converse, the two primary grounders introduced to audiences in the first season are both people of color: Lincoln, played by a black actor, and Anya, played by a half-Tibetan actress. In season two, dark-skinned Indra joins the recurring cast of grounders. Thus, the producers of *The 100* make a strategic conflation in their casting by putting people of color in roles racialized as indigenous. None of the grounder actors are indigenous themselves; instead, actual American Indians take on the place of the invisible figure, while other people of color are fitted into their role.

These racial lines imitate the real life racial divide of American society, and the employment of necropolitics emphasizes that same value gap: white lives in *The 100* are more valuable, and people of color are to be conquered, controlled, and colonized, using strategies of necropolitics central to Mbembé’s theory. For example, the sky people attempt to assert dominance over the grounders through necropolitical

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methods of land occupation and controlling movement. Similarly, Mbembé describes that, “colossal occupation itself was a matter of seizing, delimiting, and asserting control over a physical geographical area—of writing on the ground a new set of social and spatial relations.”

Mbembé articulates that sovereign groups map and uphold power relations by land occupation and order. So, not only is necropolitics concerned with control over life, but it also utilizes control over land as an assertion of power. After all, the two are inextricably linked; according to Patrick Wolfe, “land is life.”

Land has the power to sustain and provide, and thus, controlling it is controlling that power. From the moment the hundred land on the ground, they are on land no longer indigenous to them; they have become an invading party, and they assert their sovereignty over the grounders by conquering the land itself and learning its secrets, a major narrative theme of the first season. Additionally, the hundred come to the ground under the assumption that Earth is uninhabited and thus a vast and open frontier for them to settle. Just as early European settlers in America believed the continent to be unoccupied, the sky people use this same justification to establish their right to the land and exploit the native grounders.

Ultimately, the expression of discipline over grounders’ bodies of color works for the show only because violence against people of color and queer bodies is already so normalized to most American viewers. Because violence against whites is supposedly more wrong—because these lives are the opposite of being “Nobody”—that violence in The 100 almost never happens on screen. The producers are somewhat true to their word that characters across the board experience violence in

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the narrative, but again and again, torture scenes and deaths involving white characters happen off camera, while viewers are forced to watch violence enacted on bodies of color.

The show also emphasizes the importance of white life by mourning these deaths over the course of story arcs that last several episodes. For example, when Clarke mercy kills her white lover Finn in the second season (“Spacewalker”), the aftermath of his death pushes forward much of Clarke’s characterization moving through the rest of the season. His life, along with other white lives, becomes a loss to other characters and to the show itself. On the converse, the audience sees Lincoln tied up and whipped, Raven (played by a Latina actress) tied up and cut, Anya shot by an arrow and killed, Lincoln later shot in the head, and more, all with little hesitation or regret. When white characters experience violence, the story centers on their healing and recovery, while characters of color experience story arcs interested in only the violence itself—violence that is portrayed graphically and gruesomely. However, these portrayals of violence are not so shocking to watch because society has already created these bodies as criminalized and deserving of violence.

This normalization stems from what Lisa Marie Cacho labels the de facto crime status of being a person of color. Cacho explains:

De facto status crimes can be defined as specific activities that are only transparently recognized as “criminal” when they are attached to statuses that invoke race (gang member), ethnicity (“illegal alien”), and/or national origin (suspected terrorist). Hence, to be an “illegal alien” would not be technically or legally considered a status crime, but because undocumented immigrants are treated as if they are always already criminal, illegal, and fraudulent, “being” an “illegal alien” is essentially a de facto status crime.70

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A de facto status crime is the crime of simply being, or rather, it is being “Nobody.” When a body is inherently criminalized, necropolitics can work more subtly to discipline that body. After all, American society cares very little for the wellbeing of criminals; they are routinely and violently disciplined, imprisoned, and forgotten by larger society. The same is true in *The 100*. The act of being a grounder becomes a de facto status crime, as the narrative centers itself around Clarke as the hero.

Additionally, because being a person of color is already perceived as a de facto status crime for the average viewer, when the statuses of grounder and person of color overlap and intersect so directly in the show, they become one and the same, the ultimate de facto status crime.

Certainly, violence itself is not the crime in *The 100*. Again and again, Clarke and other sky people take violent action “for their people.” In the particularly gruesome season one finale (“We Are Grounders, Part I”), the hundred use their spaceship to set three hundred grounders on fire, incinerating them. However, this act of violence is acceptable because it is an exercise of sovereignty, which, again, Mbembé has framed as the right to kill. The sky people see the land as their frontier to resettle, so they become vested with the ultimate sovereignty over it. Additionally, “violence constituted the original form of the right, and exception provided the structure of sovereignty.”71 It is this emphasis on exceptionality that is so crucial for the sky people to be able to operate as sovereign. They are not all that different from the grounders, in that both groups exercise violence in significant ways. The difference lies in their modes of violence—“primitive” weapons such as arrows and

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spears for the grounders and militarized technology for the sky people—and thus the way they are racialized and offered exceptionality. The utilization of de facto status crimes throughout *The 100* grants sky people this right to kill, while positioning the grounders as racially Other, and therefore as deserving of death. The next two sections will analyze more closely two specific relationships within the show, each ending in death, as case studies for how precisely necropolitics play out on screen for characters “guilty” of de facto status crimes.

**Playing the Agent in Narratives of Captivity**

The first crucial plot line is between the grounder Lincoln and the (white) sky person Octavia. Lincoln is the first grounder the audience encounters, and though in the first few episodes he watches the delinquents’ camp from afar, he soon makes contact with Octavia, eventually taking her captive (“Twilight’s Last Gleaming”). Up until this point, Lincoln’s character is completely silent, making him a sort of invisible figure. All that the audience can see from his initial entrance is that he is big, black, muscular, and a distinctly masculine threat.

His arc of captivity resembles closely a classic trope of American Indian representation that has its roots in early American history. As early as the 1600s, white European settlers in colonial America created a framework and rhetoric by which to relate to the natives. In 1699, a prominent minister from Boston, Cotton Mather, gave what was to become a famous sermon, asking “How many a *Fearful Thing* has been suffered by the *Fearful Sex*, from those *men*, that one would *Fear* as *Devils* rather than *men*?” and again in the same sermon, “How many *Women* have
been made a prey to those Brutish men, that are Skilful to Destroy?"\textsuperscript{72} Both of these questions articulate a specific anxiety: the savage red man is coming to take away the weak, frail, “fearful” white woman, thereby exerting dominance over the white man, and thus white society, through captivity. Implicit in this fear is the assumption that women in some capacity represent the property of a people, and that the possession of the white woman is an unacceptable exertion of power. Octavia functions in The 100 as this captive white woman; once taken captive by Lincoln, despite her previous characterization as fierce and rebellious, she becomes helpless and unable to escape on her own, representing the supposed threat that the grounders present as an indigenous people to the sky people.

However, in this captivity complex, a white captive cannot be read as a symbol that Red can overcome White. Instead, this offers an opportunity narratively for the white man to assert dominance, and effectively earn back his power through the act of reclaiming his woman. Again, The 100 follows this parallel perfectly. Bellamy, with the help of a mainly white group of boys from the hundred, rallies to find Octavia, and to reassert the dominance of the sky people as colonists. In doing so, as described by Pauline Turner Strong, “the White male redeemer… through a violence that is both heroic and redemptive, reestablishes the dominance of White over Red.”\textsuperscript{73} Again, there is an exceptionality to this violence because the sky people are the ones enacting it; the viewer can read this violence as redemptive, rather than savage. It sets the order of power back as it should be, and it feels acceptable because


\textsuperscript{73} Turner Strong, American Indians and the American Imaginary, 73.
this episode characterizes the violence as a way of protecting the frail white woman and her innocent femininity.

Upon the safe and happy return of Octavia, the narrative of captivity flips on its head. The delinquents bring Lincoln back to their camp, tie him up, and later torture him for information (“Contents Under Pressure”). Lincoln’s torture scene is gruesome and one of few scenes of torture the producers feature explicitly on screen. Whereas the torture of Murphy, another white delinquent, is only ever mentioned, and even the after effects are barely visible on his body, this is not so with Lincoln’s torture. Objectively, watching the scene evokes feelings of wrongness and moral ambiguity as the viewer is forced to watch Clarke and Bellamy whip, cut, and even electrocute Lincoln’s half naked body. At the heart of the sequence, however, Clarke and Bellamy’s violence against Lincoln is in an attempt to save the life of their friend Finn, who also happens to be Clarke’s love interest at this point. Thus, torturing Lincoln and gaining his information directly benefits Clarke. This factor works “to ‘civilize’ the ways of killing and to attribute rational objectives to the very act of killing.”74 Again, there is a rationalization of the colonizing violence, and The 100 draws a line between Octavia’s captivity and Lincoln’s. Octavia’s captivity represents a demasculinization of the sky people, which is unacceptable in a colonialist framework. On the converse, however, Lincoln’s captivity represents a supposedly rational reassertion of that lost masculinity and a disciplining of the indigenous presence in this new Earth. Once again, the sky people’s violence has a distinct exceptionality to it.

The importance of Lincoln and Octavia’s relationship and the exact role it will

74 Mbembé, “Necropolitics,” 23.
play also becomes established in this same episode. After the torture scene, Octavia comes to Lincoln and apologizes; in a way, the viewer sees that she is still somewhat captive, even though Lincoln is now the one in chains. Though Bellamy repeatedly warns Octavia about the dangers of being in a relationship with Lincoln, she continues to defy his wishes. As the season progresses, and Lincoln and Octavia’s relationship moves from the theoretical to the romantic, Lincoln begins to embody more and more the role of agent. The sky people have used violent torture to establish the colonialist power dynamics between them and Lincoln, and he can therefore be utilized for their gain now. Again, there are clear historical parallels. Lincoln comes to represent in many ways a rearticulated version of the prominent American Indian Squanto (whose Algonquin name was Tisquantum). Tisquantum was also a victim of repeated captivity by European colonists, and he later facilitated contact between his nation and the settlers, becoming subjugated to play a similar agent role. In return, Tisquantum gained for himself a small bit of power and recognition; to this day, he is one of few American Indians whose name and story is at least somewhat in the American cultural lexicon.

Post-captivity, Tisquantum attempted to settle an alliance between the colonists and the colonized American Indians, and again, Lincoln takes on a similar role. He brings together Clarke and the grounder leader, Anya, to settle a peace agreement, but Anya refuses, citing the repeated offenses of the sky people against her own people (“Unity Day”). As peace seems less and less possible, Lincoln continues to bridge the gap between the grounders and the sky people, repeatedly helping them to come together and attempt peace.

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Through the development of the relationship between Lincoln and Octavia, the pair slowly become co-agents for the sky people. As Octavia trains to be a grounder warrior, she gains intimate knowledge of the grounders, and she brings the sky people into their good graces. Eventually her status as agent eclipses that of Lincoln, and therefore Lincoln begins to no longer serve a narrative purpose. Thus, necropolitics take center stage once more. Though Lincoln and Octavia both act as agents situated between the two peoples, Lincoln as a black man cannot escape his positionality as “Nobody,” just as black men cannot escape it in American society. Recall that, “without question, Nobody-ness is largely indebted to race, as White supremacy is foundational to the American democratic experiment. The belief [is] that White lives are worth more than others.” Thus, because she is a white colonist, Octavia is more valuable, and Rothenberg can stand to easily kill off Lincoln. This is precisely what he does, forcing the audience to watch as another sky person shoots a chained Lincoln in the head as he kneels in the mud (“Stealing Fire”). It is the most humiliating death yet in The 100, and with it, Rothenberg affirms the superiority of whiteness once more.

Racializing Queerness through Clarke and Lexa

Another important relationship emerges in the second season and becomes a crucial site of necropolitical discipline. Near the season’s end, there is a rather large revelation that Clarke is bisexual, when after almost two seasons of romance with Finn, she kisses the grounder commander Lexa (“Bodyguard of Lies”). Because of the immense positive feedback from viewers, the writers of The 100 were eager to

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76 Lamont Hill, Nobody, XVIV.
promote Lexa and Clarke’s relationship for the third season. On the show’s Instagram and Rothenberg’s personal Twitter account, creators of *The 100* capitalized on the positive publicity that having a queer protagonist provided for the show. But yet again, they fell into a pattern of necropolitics and reminded the viewer exactly which bodies had value, and which did not.

Clarke and Lexa’s relationship represents a manifestation of what Jasbir K. Puar calls homonationalism, which is “a form of sexual exceptionalism,” and a specific “brand of homosexuality [that] operates as a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects.”77 In other words, homonationalism is the convergence of nationalist identity and homonormativity, a type of queer inclusion that draws a line between acceptable homosexuality and terrorist queerness. Just as homonormativity attempts to draw an ideal, “normative” queer body, homonationalism works similarly to create a regulatory image of the ideal national subject. By using homonormativity to allow exceptional queerness into the fold of American identity, dominant culture is able to perform inclusion while actually tightening its national identity.

Puar’s theory is particularly relevant to *The 100* because of the way it relates queerness and race. She looks at their intersection to investigate how queerness becomes folded into racialization in “specific social formations and processes that are not necessarily or only tied to what has been historically theorized as ‘race.’”78 Essentially, queerness helps to racialize someone as Other, and non-whiteness makes

78 Ibid., xii.
queerness less acceptable. Because homonationalism operates on and through Lexa, *The 100* uses her relationship with Clarke to draw a clear line of allowable racialized sexuality between the two characters.

Lexa is played by white actress Alycia Debnam-Carey, and in the most literal sense, Lexa is undeniably white. Aspects of her character, however, pull her further from acceptable whiteness. First and foremost, she is a grounder, and not only that, she is their highest ranking commander. More so than her people, she is ruthless and brutal, subscribing to the policy that “blood must have blood.” She dresses like a warrior, complete with distinctive war paint and an ornamental bindi. The bindi, while a cultural icon from India and not American Indians, still serves to exoticize Lexa as Other by drawing on the related fear of the Orient. *The 100* associates many typical notions of indigeneity with Lexa: she is wild, she is brutal, her tribalness is highly emphasized.\(^\text{79}\) Lexa becomes the site through which the audience learns about the tribal identities within the grounders, making her a sort of gatekeeper to knowledge of indigenous nationhood. Finally, Lexa is queer, placing her even further from acceptable white American identity.

However, Lexa is able to obtain some amount of respectability, due to both her actual whiteness and Clarke’s interest in her. In a homonationalist framework, certain queer bodies may be brought into the fold of Americanness, in order to further draw the line between the acceptable white body and the unacceptable queered body of color. By drawing Lexa into Clarke’s acceptance—remember, Clarke is our hero—a delineation occurs between good grounders and bad grounders. Lexa in this way functions somewhat as an agent figure, one whose exceptionality is held up to further

oppress other, less exceptional grounders. Even so, there still lies a distinction
between Lexa and Clarke’s queer identities. Clarke’s previous relationship with Finn
marks her as only bisexual, which American culture has often perceived as an
impermanent phase of experimentation for white women. Clarke always has the
possibility to return to the supposed safety of a heterosexual relationship, whereas
Lexa—racialized as she is, and “fully” lesbian—becomes harder to rationalize as an
acceptable national subject.

Thus, in the end even this homonormative (i.e. white and monogamous)
lesbian relationship is too risky for Clarke’s hero status. It also represents a kind of
 interracial relationship, grounder to sky person, because Lexa’s racialization is as part
of a savage Other. She is therefore disqualified from homonationalist inclusion.
Perhaps most upsetting is that her death occurs right at the peak of her relationship
with Clarke, just after they have sex for the first time. While Clarke could maintain
respectability and American whiteness as the relationship progressed, by the time it
reached full consummation, this sort of female sexuality was too vulgar and had the
potential to mark the show’s hero as Other. So, Lexa is shot, bleeds out, and dies. Her
death is not in vain, though, as she takes a bullet that was intended for Clarke. By
saving Clarke, Lexa’s agent status reaches fulfillment and the show provides a
rational justification for killing Lexa. The settler colonialist dynamics are affirmed
and necropolitics take another victim.

It is not insignificant that Lexa’s death participates in a particular media cliché
of lesbian relationships: the “bury your gays” trope. After the shocking death scene

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aired on television, the #buryyourgays hashtag emerged on Twitter, claiming that most times bisexual or lesbian characters exist on television, they only live so long before they’re killed off.\textsuperscript{81} The 2016-2017 GLAAD report on LGBTQ inclusion had similar findings, stating that upwards of 25 lesbian and bisexual women died on network television this year alone.\textsuperscript{82} Thus, it seems being a lesbian on television is on par with many other identities as a de facto status crime, just as being a racialized grounder. When these two levels of criminality converge within Lexa’s character, they go far beyond the bounds of acceptability within homonationalism, and so \textit{The 100} utilizes necropolitics as a mode of discipline once more. After all of the promotion of Clarke and Lexa’s relationship, viewers might have hoped that Lexa would not be subject to the chopping block, but particularly when considering the settler colonialism so central to necropolitics, Clarke could not have maintained her hero status as colonizer while being so closely associated with Lexa.

\textbf{Colorblindness and the “Commander of Death”}

By the opening of \textit{The 100}’s third season, there has been so much death and killing at Clarke’s hand that the grounders dub her “Wanheda,” which is grounder speak for “Commander of Death.” There is no hiding that Clarke is ultimately in control of the necropolitics of this world, and the sky people around her represent whiteness and American identity in contrast to the savage “Nobody” grounders. Survival is the core theme of \textit{The 100}, but Rothenberg is incorrect to claim that


\textsuperscript{82} GLAAD, \textit{Where We Are On TV ’16–’17}, 2016, 3.
nothing else is at play. If race—not to mention sexuality—doesn’t matter, then Rothenberg must account for the stark difference in deaths between white characters and non-white characters. The fact that he does not creates a contradiction that marks the cornerstone of colorblind racism. Colorblindness in *The 100* provides a false illusion of inclusion through its diverse cast, while contradicting that inclusion through violent settler colonialism with no self-awareness. Ashley “Woody” Doane explains that, “one of the purposes of ideologies is to manage contradictions, most notably conflicts between ideological claims and gaps between ideological claims and material conditions.” That’s precisely what’s happening with colorblind ideology in *The 100*: as proven in this chapter, the material conditions of the show are necropolitics and discipline enacted on characters racialized as indigenous and Other, and the ideological claims are that these characters and their world are beyond race, gender, and sexuality. Ultimately, racial and national exceptionality allows the sky people, and particularly Clarke, to rationalize their violence and portray it as redemptive, rather than problematic.

The reality here, like in *Firefly*, is that a diverse screen does not necessarily mean the show is a shining beacon of representation. As Doane argues, “the inclusion and upward mobility of ‘diverse’ individuals do not necessarily challenge the logic and the structure of an unequal racial order.” Rather, in *The 100*, the inclusion of “diverse” individuals exists mainly to *uphold* the unequal racial order. Even when the narrative arc seems to bend towards cooperation between the grounders and the sky

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84 Ibid., 19.
people, ultimately the writers portray the grounders as too savage and too transgressive—essentially too indigenized—to be deserving of life.

Throughout these arcs of cooperation and coalition, the sky people again and again attempt to indigenize themselves to the land, to further subjugate and control it, as well as to assert their ultimate right to it. They attempt to become another clan, another tribe, within the grounders, and on its own this story line might read as an attempt at interracial acceptance and cooperation. But, because this self-indigenization happens amidst a larger context of settler colonialism and necropolitics, it must be read as a parallel to America’s own tendency to indigenize the settler as a means of rationalizing conquest.85

Rothenberg’s abstract liberalist framing of the world in *The 100* is just that: a claim of racial utopia in which meritocracy rules. Rather than create a sci-fi dream of what might be, the show places an unintentional mirror on American society, recreating the very real racial value gap, with Clarke as Commander of Death presiding over and ultimately regulating that gap. The next chapter once again looks at how a show racializes an Other as object, as a part of a similar search for Earth and ultimately, salvation for a white nation.

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Chapter Three
So Say We All: Race and Family in *Battlestar Galactica*

“All this has happened before, and all this will happen again.”
— The Book of Pythia (a religious text), *Battlestar Galactica*

The 2003 remake of *Battlestar Galactica (BSG)*, by executive producers Ronald D. Moore and David Eick, offers the viewer a look at white America’s deepest anxiety: that the Other is alive, well, living among us, and absolutely lethal. The show does not portray this through literal race or gender, though; in fact, *BSG* was proud to herald in a new kind of remake, one that flipped many characters’ genders and was able to boast a fairly racially diverse cast.\(^86\) The show does present a unified human race facing the threat of Cylons, manmade robots that have turned on their creators. It is this threat of a new Other, the Cylons, that allows the show to portray the humans as unified across divides of race, gender, or class.\(^87\) This unification marks a colorblind attempt to mask the ways in which the Cylons themselves are racially coded through the very actors of color of which the new, revamped, “colorblind” show is so proud.

When *BSG*’s story begins, there has been no contact between the Cylons and humans for forty years, yet every year the humans send an ambassador to a designated meeting spot, in the hopes that the Cylons will finally appear and make peace. They never do, until the opening scene of the mini-series,\(^88\) in which the Cylons send their newest model: a humanoid robot, indistinguishable from a regular person, who comes to warn the humans that the Cylons are coming to attack. And so

\(^{87}\) Deis, “Erasing Difference,” 158.  
\(^{88}\) The mini-series was a two episode series that premiered in 2003 with the hopes that it would garner interest in a longer show. The official “first” season premiered a year later as a continuation of the story from the mini-series. Now, the two mini-series episodes are packaged as a part of the first season.
the war begins. The Cylon’s surprise attack leaves the human race decimated, save for a single warship, Galactica, and its fleet. However, even Galactica may not be safe, now that the Cylons have twelve different humanoid models whose copies could be living among the humans. This becomes the central anxiety in season one: who is human, and who is only passing?

At the center of this question is the story arc surrounding the Cylon model Eight, the copies of which are all played by Korean American actress Grace Park. Throughout *BSG*, there are two central Eights, both named Sharon Valerii, to whom I will refer in this chapter by their pilot call signs, Boomer and Athena. While the audience sees the revelation of Sharon as Cylon in the last minutes of the mini-series, almost none of the characters learn the truth until the first season finale. This dramatic irony fuels an anxiety in viewers that keeps them on the edge of their seats needing to know what happens next. If Sharon can be allowed to pass as human, then the sanctity and value of humanity itself becomes diminished. The viewer can only hope that the truth of her Otherness will be revealed.

Because Boomer and Athena are both played by the same Asian American actress, *BSG* is able to explore explicitly the duality inherent in a model minority status. As the show develops, Boomer and Athena each come to play out one side of this duality: transgressive difference and exemplary assimilability, respectively. At once, Boomer plays an agent loyal to the Cylons, and Athena plays one loyal to the human heroes, though their allegiances are not always entirely clear throughout. Still, the two form the roles an agent can take, one to be feared and one that is everything a dominant group could wish for. But, throughout it all, the two characters are
inextricably tied to each other as two parts of the same whole. By centering Boomer and Athena’s narratives on different versions of the multiracial family, \textit{BSG} expands on themes of the melting pot and model minority to ultimately present the idea that nobody can ever truly escape their Otherness and racially pass—or if they do, it comes at the extremely high and humiliating cost of self-erasure. In this chapter, I argue that, despite the appearance of a unified human race in the show, \textit{BSG} actually undermines this narrative by using a new kind of Orientalism (techno-orientalism) with which to relate to the Cylon Eights. The rest of this chapter reads closely the arcs of Boomer and Athena to explore the duality in their portrayals, and ultimately how the notion of a multiracial family marks their Asianness as irreparably Other.\footnote{This chapter focuses almost solely on the Eight model, though several other models feature heavily on the show, including Simon/Four, a black man. While the Fours are not as explicitly techno-orientalized, \textit{BSG} capitalizes on a problematized black masculinity in their portrayal, leading to a new wealth of representation problems. For more specific analysis, see Huh (2014) and Deis (2008).}

\textbf{Techno-orientalism and Boomer as the Eight’s Othered half}

In order to portray the Cylons’ duality as non-human humans, first \textit{BSG} must create them as Other, and to do this, producers Moore and Eick both utilize and adapt the tools of Edward Said’s Orientalism, as defined in chapter one. Because the Cylon model Eight is both a central Cylon narratively and the most prominent person of color in the starring cast, her identity as Asian American is highly on display. Sharon thus becomes a site upon which Cylon Otherness and a real world racial Other converge—the metaphorical inscribed onto the literal. Despite all that sci-fi tries to accomplish through metaphor while avoiding reality, with Park’s characters, the two are difficult to differentiate. Because of the way reality and metaphor converge in the
Eights, the producers have put a large amount of pressure on their representation. Unfortunately, they fall into a similar trap as does Whedon with *Firefly* and do more to Orientalize Park’s character than to offer her actual inclusion.

*BSG* characterizes the humans’ relationship to the Cylons first and foremost through Said’s idea of an “imperial perspective,” as the humans attempt to categorize and detect their enemy. The viewer sees exactly how the humans manage the Cylon as Orient through the character of Dr. Gaius Baltar, the scientist who serves as intellectual authority, “mak[ing] him comparable to the ‘Orientalists’ Said describes. Dr. Baltar is a man whose designated function is to do for the Cylon race what eighteenth and nineteenth-century Orientalists did for the Orient.”

He researches the Cylons and attempts to make them biologically detectable, just as Western scientists have attempted to manage difference through science in order to expose the Orient’s mysteries to “the civilization that seeks to wield power over it.” In the first season, this research manifests in Dr. Baltar’s development of a machine that can deduce if someone is a Cylon through blood testing, and the story strongly echoes historical racial science that has attempted to track biological racial difference. This parallel helps to establish the Eights, along with other Cylons, as Orientalist objects.

In addition, *BSG*’s Orientalism capitalizes on cultural myths and anxiety that surround Asian success, particularly in the field of technology in Japan. This new sort of Orientalism is what David Morley and Kevin Robins have coined as “techno-orientalism,” in which “the techno-mythology is centred around the idea of some kind

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91 Ibid.
of postmodern mutation of human experience.”

In *BSG*, this mutation of human experience is literal: Cylons are robots passing as human, mutating what it means to actually live a human life. This inhumanity is a central element of Boomer’s characterization in season one. In the episode “Litmus,” there is one scene in which Galactica takes on board a damaged Cylon raider. At the end of the sequence, Boomer is left alone with the raider and goes into a sort of trance, utterly captivated by the Cylon ship, becoming robotic in her own motions. Another character watches on, and in that moment, he sees her differently. She becomes more machine to him than human, and the revelation that Boomer may be a Cylon—and that this fact comes with a high cost to the humans—begins to take hold.

A later episode emphasizes this view of Boomer, and of all the Eight models. For much of the first season, Boomer is able to convince herself that she is not a Cylon, but she is confronted with the truth in the first season finale (“Kobol’s Last Gleaming, Part II”), when she boards a Cylon basestar (essentially a central base of operations for the Cylons). In this scene, as Boomer explores the basestar, other Eights appear, whispering, “Sharon,” again and again. The Eights are entirely naked, and all completely identical. There is an eeriness to the scene, and like the other scene, it codes Boomer as impersonal and inhuman. This scene quite directly calls attention to another techno-orientalist parallel from American history. Morley and Robins explain, “the association of technology and Japaneseness now serves to reinforce the image of a culture that is cold, impersonal and machine-like, an

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authoritarian culture lacking emotional connection to the rest of the world.”\footnote{Ibid., 169.} Just as technological fear and anxiety over Japanese progress operated in the second half of the twentieth century (and continues to operate now), this same anxiety still manifests in the portrayal of Boomer, and more generally all of the Cylons. This scene reminds the viewer that the Eights are copies of each other, calling into question any emotional connection human characters may appear to have with any of the copies. Once more, Boomer is made more and more machine. This is highlighted most in the continual use of this scene in the opening sequence throughout all the seasons, in which the words, “THERE ARE MANY COPIES,” are superimposed over the image of the Eights, constantly reminding the viewers that the two Sharons they are watching are nothing more than copies of the same machine and not true humans.

However, despite their machine-like qualities, the Eights still act as highly sexual objects of desire for their white male counterparts. In the first season, Boomer becomes sexually and romantically involved with Chief Galen Tyrol (Tyrol), who is her supervisor on Galactica. Similarly, while Athena is stranded on the annihilated planet Caprica, the Cylons task her with seducing Galactica pilot Karl “Helo” Agathon (Helo). Both Tyrol and Helo are white men, well respected for their positions on Galactica, and Boomer and Athena threaten that respectability for the viewer with their sexuality and transgressive Otherness. Their sexual desirability becomes a central point in their narrative arcs and in many ways a central anxiety for the viewers. The audience, watching both copies of Sharon in different scenes, is made constantly aware that they are not actually human, so when the story becomes about sex and reproduction—something very intimate and human—the concern over
these interracial relationships grows. These relationships exemplify the threat to whiteness that the Other represents, and the Eight’s sexuality thus becomes their most dangerous weapon, because it can seduce these respectable men.

To emphasize the importance of the Eights’ sexuality, the recurring scene in the title sequence (described above) portrays the copies as naked, and the producers never clarify why they made the choice to film Park naked in that particular scene, except perhaps for shock value—and thus to place on Park an Oriental male gaze and make her an exotic object of sexual desire. As another example, in an early episode in the first season, Athena’s sexuality converges with her portrayal as technology when she and Helo first have sex (“Six Degrees of Separation”). The camera focuses on the consummation of their relationship by featuring Park’s naked body prominently, while Helo remains clothed and less central on camera. The scene primarily features Athena’s body in order to highlight it as Other; while they are having sex, the machinery in her spine glows a bright and mechanical red. This scene accentuates perfectly what Morley and Robins describe as “the projection of exotic (and erotic) fantasies onto this high-tech delirium.”94 In this particular scene, BSG’s techno-orientalism is at its peak, converging in sexualization and eroticization, and in the emphasis on Athena’s machine-ness.

With the Cylon Eights, and predominantly Boomer, established as Other, the different copies of Sharon have the potential to represent the possibility of positive assimilation into human society; they are clear outsiders, but the narrative could allow them to become loyal to the humans in spite of that. In fact, that would have happened if BSG were as racially progressive as it claims to be. In many ways,

94 Ibid., 169.
Athena does offer that option, as I will explore later, but Boomer becomes the exact opposite. In the episode “Litmus,” Boomer leaves a door on Galactica open, allowing a different Cylon model to board the ship and detonate a bomb there. Though Boomer doesn’t remember having done this, the audience begins to see the risk that her passing poses to the humans. Eve Bennett states, “Boomer thus represents an enemy who works from within, carefully infiltrating the very heart of society in order to attack it.” Boomer establishes the racially passing Other as a dangerous and undetectable threat against dominant society.

As the season progresses and Boomer’s loyalty comes further into question, the tension climaxes in the ultimate betrayal: In “Kobol’s Last Gleaming, Part II,” Boomer shoots Commander William Adama, who has until this point been a father figure to her. That she has gone so long undetected, allowing her to reach this point, elevates the concern over her passing. She has been until now an unpoliceable danger, an inhuman Oriental passing for loyal. In this moment, the Eights’ unacceptability becomes legible, and Boomer is cemented in as unforgivably Other.

**Baby on Board: Assimilation through Family**

While the first season sets up the Eights, and primarily Boomer, as Other, the later seasons develop the two different sides of the agent figure that each Eight model embodies. The agent holds allegiance to both its own identity group and the dominant identity group, and in the context of *BSG*, Boomer and Athena are torn between both

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Cylons and humans. Each version of Sharon handles this dual allegiance differently, as shown through their positionality as un/acceptable family figures.

Leilani Nishime asserts that the family must be read as a stand in for the nation and that “transnational adoption narratives are a way to imaginatively rewrite U.S. global relations as familial ones.” Particularly in a colorblind framework, interpersonal interracial relationships become the main sites of racialization and racist imagining, because this racialization can be more easily distanced from structural racism. Thus, Athena and Boomer’s storylines around family and childbearing become central to reading colorblind racism in BSG. In each of the Eights’ relationships, Eick and Moore offer different family models, suggesting that these integrated multiracial family units mark successful racial inclusion. However, anxieties over human-passing Cylons’ true nature lead the characters’ relationships to very different ends. The next several pages walk through Boomer and Athena’s individual relationships—with an eye for how each one’s relationships can never truly be read independently from those of the other—to see what the cost of each relationship is. Within this, the function of BSG’s colorblindness becomes clear.

In the mini-series, Sharon—presumed to be the only one at this point—gets stranded on Caprica, but the episode ends with the revelation that she is a Cylon, setting the stage for the first season to follow two copies of Sharon: Boomer back on Galactica, and Athena on the Cylon-occupied planet Caprica. In the first season, Boomer engages in an illicit relationship with Chief Tyrol, and through their interactions, Tyrol begins to realize Boomer might be a Cylon. The very nature of

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their relationship—between Boomer and her supervisor—marks their relationship as inappropriate and transgressive. Inscribed onto this transgressiveness are both the interspecies dynamics of Cylon and human, and the literal interracial dynamics between white and Asian. The viewer might question this relationship because of its unprofessional nature, but that disapproval becomes wrapped up in disapproval over an interracial relationship and concern that Boomer, as a Cylon, poses harm to Tyrol. In fact, it is this very relationship that protects Boomer for so long, even as Tyrol begins to realize her true identity, and so the idea of an interracial relationship such as this becomes problematic, as it allows Boomer’s dangerous Otherness to go undetected for far too long.

Boomer is finally confronted with her Cylon identity aboard the Cylon basestar in the techno-orientalist scene described above, as copies of Eights implore her to actively work with them to take down the humans. Upon her realization as Cylon, Boomer returns to Galactica, shoots Commander Adama, and is subsequently imprisoned. Even her relationship with Tyrol is not enough to redeem her anymore, especially in an episode in which Boomer is coded more as racially Other than ever before (having just seen all of the techno-orientalist copies of herself). For BSG to choose this exact moment for Boomer to complete what Eve Bennett refers to as “arguably the most shocking thing we ever see an individual Cylon do,”98 reminds the viewer that Otherness is extremely dangerous to the human heroes, particularly when the Other can go undetected amongst them. Once the crew of Galactica discovers that Boomer is a Cylon, BSG employs necropolitical discipline similar to that in The 100. Colonel Tigh, a white man, interrogates and brutally beats Boomer, reminding the

audience that Otherness is worthy of punishment. Finally, like in *The 100*, the violent
discipline climaxes in making Boomer invisible through death, when Cally, another
crewmember and Tyrol’s soon-to-be love interest, kills Boomer (“Resistance”). For
now, at least.

Simultaneously as Boomer is learning her identity, Athena already knows she
is a Cylon, tasked to get close to Helo and produce a child with him. Throughout her
first season arc, however, she falls in love with Helo and then begins to question her
allegiance to the Cylons. Because of her wavering loyalty, Athena experiences brutal
violence from the other Cylon models. This plot point serves the greater purpose of
reminding the audience just how violent the Cylon threat to humanity is; even as
Athena begins to align herself with Helo and the humans, the viewer can still see
through her story arc how deadly the Cylons are. It comes as no surprise, then, that
when Helo discovers Athena’s Cylon identity, he plans to kill her, until Athena
reveals that she is pregnant with his child. The possibility of a baby provides the link
to create a potential family unit between Helo and Athena, so Helo now bears a
responsibility to this family. Nishime explains:

> The old symbol of the helpless, biracial, easily assimilated child taken
into the care of a benevolent West may not be adequate for contemporary migration. Instead, *BSG* layers another image over the
earlier one so the Asian mother also joins in the migratory flow, accepting and even embracing her partial citizenship in exchange for
her multiracial child’s complete integration into the human race.100

Where in some forms of Orientalism, white parents can substitute in wholly, perform
transnational adoption, and assimilate an Asian child, *BSG* allows Athena to

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assimilate alongside her child. Particularly because the role of mother offers acceptably white feminine domesticity, this model of assimilation through family works. Athena and Helo’s future child offers this possibility for Athena, and so Helo does not kill her, and in fact quickly turns to defending both mother and child. In season two, Helo brings the pregnant Athena back to Galactica and has to grapple with what it means to be in love with a Cylon—a plot point that reminds the viewer once again of the Eights’ Otherness. When Athena and Helo return to Galactica, it is again her pregnancy that saves her.

The fascination with Asian mothers as sites of colonialist domination is nothing new, taking hold most prominently in *Madame Butterfly* (1903) and its more recent adaptation, *Miss Saigon* (1989). The classic Madame Butterfly trope follows an Asian woman who bears a child with a white American man, only to later commit suicide and leave the baby in the care of the man’s new (white) wife.\(^{101}\) *Miss Saigon* takes this same story and inscribes onto it the explicitly nationalist theme of war. In this new iteration, the man is an American soldier fighting in the Vietnam War, who falls in love and has a child with a Vietnamese prostitute, and the central question of the second act asks who might be the most fit parent for the couple’s daughter. In the end, it is the soldier’s new, fully American family who takes the baby, and the Vietnamese “Miss Saigon” kills herself, narratively marking herself as an unfit mother and therefore an unfit national subject. She essentially is performing necropolitics on herself. This narrative plays out in a new way through Boomer and Athena, and Athena’s pregnancy here plants the seeds for this trope to take shape as the child’s story unfolds.

\(^{101}\) Bennett, “Techno-butterfly,” 35.
Later, the connection between Athena and her child grows stronger when the humans learn that Athena is immune to a Cylon disease only because of the human blood in the fetus she is carrying at the time (“A Measure of Salvation”). Though Athena is still fully Cylon, her biological connection to her biracial child protects her, and “the baby literalizes a blood tie that links Athena to the humans.”\(^{102}\) Because her baby is part human, it is acceptably assimilable and Athena’s salvation becomes wrapped up in the baby’s. This use of reproduction as assimilation calls to mind the field of blood quantum politics, a field concerning the marriage of scientific racism and legally forced assimilation.\(^{103}\) Blood quantum marks a way of measuring race through the scientifically detectable, and one of its main goals is presumably to make something as amorphous as race into something fixed and legible, which is similar to the goals of Dr. Baltar and his Cylon detection machine in \textit{BSG}.

Initially, the idea of blood quantum politics appeared in 1705 in the Commonwealth of Virginia, enacted through a set of laws that denied civil liberties to Negroes, Mulattos, and American Indians on the basis of blood and ancestry.\(^{104}\) In the case of African Americans, society often favored the “One Drop Rule,” which informally decreed that anyone with even one drop of “black blood” anywhere in their genealogy must be read as black. On the converse, blood quantum politics allowed for the erasure of indigenous Americans, as most American Indians were considered white as soon as there was any “white blood” in their line. \textit{BSG} takes the latter route in its application of blood quantum, and marks the hybrid human-Cylon

\(^{102}\) Nishime, “Aliens,” 460.
\(^{104}\) Ibid.
child as acceptably and biologically human enough for assimilation. Of course, this idea of blood and biology holding color at all emerged only to bolster the racism of the time through fictional science.

Nevertheless, these ideas are rearticulated and made salient in *BSG*’s narrative on racial passing, particularly because so much of the anxiety around passing comes from the inability to visually mark people as Other. Blood quantum calms the anxiety of undetection and manages Otherness to determine under what circumstances someone is assimilable. Thus, introducing blood quantum politics subtly into Athena’s arc allows the audience to consider acceptance for her, despite her racial Otherness as Cylon. Or, at the very least, if Athena remains unacceptable, her child could represent a cleansed Other, human enough to be allowed into the fold of humanity. Perhaps Boomer, having no child and therefore no blood ties to humanity, was irreparably Other in a way that Athena was not, and so became a site upon which the producers enacted necropolitics.

**Athena and Boomer’s Opposing Family Models**

In a surprise twist near the end of the second season, Boomer resurrects when the Cylons download that particular Eight’s consciousness to a new Cylon body (“Downloaded”). Whereas death is a reality that true humans cannot escape, it will not thwart Boomer, marking her again as different, more machine than person. In this same episode, Athena finally gives birth to her hybrid child, Hera.

Galactica President Laura Roslin then kidnaps Hera to bring to the Cylons for research (“Exodus, Part I”). Much of Athena, Helo, and Hera’s story to this point has
begun to establish them as the ideal interracial family model, and Roslin violates this because she believes she is saving the entire human race. Roslin thus serves as a validation of the colorblind morality set forth by the producers, offering the multiracial family as a stand in and example of national identity building. Hera represents a literal melting pot in one (hybrid) person, and positioning her as a potential savior for humankind affirms her signification as the colorblind ideal, a possible hope for humanity. However, several episodes later, Athena rescues Hera, undoing the symbolic work of centering her as a potential saving grace (“Rapture”). Thus, “the initial decision by the state, embodied by Roslin, to ignore affective and familial ties in favor of abstract ideals, is unambiguously condemned as the series progresses,” and Hera’s positionality and significance is brought into question again.

It is not new for kidnapping to become a central theme in narratives of transnational or transracial adoption. Often, black mothers will condemn the adoption of their babies by white families as a nationalist kidnapping and cultural erasure. This supposed wrongdoing becomes acceptable, however, because of the cultural perceptions that white people will make more civilized or suitable parents for children than black people could. Thus, the kidnapping narrative as applied to adoption and the family model works best when the adoptive family can be read as redemptive for the child. Because the Cylons represent such a dangerous Other, ultimately they cannot be seen as redemptive for Hera or for humankind, and thus Roslin’s intentions

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107 Ibid.
are undone. By subverting the theme of adoptive kidnapping as redemptive, and allowing Hera to return home to Athena and Helo, Eick and Moore attempt to position these parents as the actual ideal, and therefore deproblematize the racial domination in the Athena/Hera/Helo family unit. If the alternative for Hera is to be taken to the Cylons, then any costs of the techno-orientalized relationship between her parents is worth it in the end.

Though Athena does rescue Hera, the resurrected Boomer seduces Helo and kidnaps Hera again, hoping to create an alternative family unit. This is a crucial moment that reminds the viewer of Athena and Boomer’s Otherness, as Helo cannot differentiate between the two ("Someone to Watch Over Me"). Even though motherhood and assimilation have almost completely redeemed Athena by now, at the end of the fourth season, this scene serves to remind the viewer of the techno-orientalist imagining from which the Eights are drawn. This moment is also important because it sets Boomer up as an alternative family member to Athena. Though at times they are coded as almost the same, in this moment, their differences become clear: Boomer, upon learning her Cylon identity, comes into her consciousness as a racialized subject and rejects the idea of assimilation, wanting to bring her full Othered identity into this imagined family unit. Athena represents the absolute model of assimilation, one that stands on the merits of racial passing and blood quantum-based inclusion. Whereas Boomer’s allegiance is to the Cylons, Athena is the perfect assimilated agent for the humans.

When Athena goes to rescue her daughter two episodes later, she shoots Boomer, and because the Cylon technology that allows Cylons to resurrect is disabled
at this moment, Boomer’s death is permanent (“Daybreak”). In this moment, the Madame Butterfly story is twisted into a new form. While this is not a literal suicide, because they are clones of each other, Athena killing Boomer is in a way her killing a part of herself. Because this part of her is the most Asianized version of the Eights that BSG portrays, this scene takes on the feeling that it is Athena’s final step to prove her assimilability by killing all that is Other about herself. She is no longer just passing; by killing Boomer, she fully assimilates.

This also distorts the Madame Butterfly trope in that Hera eventually goes home to a restored family with Athena, her Asian mother, rather than going home to a white mother. However, this does not necessarily mean that Athena is allowed to bring her full self into this family; she has to completely destroy her Otherness before returning home. Once BSG has created this family unit as acceptable, it turns to portraying Athena as the ideal mother; though she becomes a fighter pilot, most of her scenes aboard Galactica portray her taking care of Hera and doing domestic chores, and very few portray her actually being a pilot. Nishime explains that, “the ultimate valorization of an interracial and interspecies couple over any adoptive family rewrites the familial story of the U.S. and Asia from benevolent paternalism to one of patriarchal domestication.”

108 This relationship, then, doesn’t offer inclusion; instead, it offers a more subtle form of domination between Helo and his new wife by domesticating Athena.

BSG’s emphasis on family helps the show to rearticulate the colorblind framework of cultural racism. Because family models and relationships are highly personal, it is easy for the audience to read them as separate from the larger racial

system of techno-orientalism. This allows for *BSG* to portray Cylons as unfit parents
in a similar fashion to how cultural racism forwards perceptions that family values
within specific races are naturally a product of cultural differences. However, because
Hera exists as a site of possible transracial adoption/kidnapping (by Roslin, the
Cylons, and Boomer), she comes to signify much more than just a single child. Her
positionality as a tie between Athena as Asianized Cylon and Helo’s humanity marks
her as a narrative stand in for nation and the different national identities that each of
her parents holds. By openly reading Hera in this way, the show’s colorblind
motives become clearer. But, because Hera’s symbolic meaning becomes disguised
through the family narratives, *BSG* is able to highlight other aspects of the show, such
as the racially diverse cast. Hidden by their progressive gender swaps and colorblind
casting, Moore and Eick still propagate insidious techno-orientalism under the guise
of diversity and the multiracial family. Their ideal family model, though, is
inextricably linked to the problematic melting pot metaphor, and like in both *Firefly*
and *The 100*, the melting pot connection ultimately marks *BSG* as colorblind racist.

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109 Ibid.
Conclusion
To Infinity and Beyond: Anti-Racism and a New Hope

Sci-fi has long been a site of speculation and exploration for society. Even though the genre attempts to paint pictures of the far-off future, more often than not its stories say just as much about the past and the present as well. This thesis has shown that because of this, a unique quality of sci-fi emerges: a work of sci-fi cannot exist separate from the real world, and it must always be read in relation to the world outside of its narrative. Indeed, Darko Suvin’s definition of sci-fi becomes useful again here. Suvin supposes that sci-fi operates by utilizing “an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment.” His use of the word “alternative” calls attention to the very nature of sci-fi as one characterized by a relationship between two elements (fiction and reality), rather than a genre that exists individually and in a vacuum.

The idea of alternative has potential to work in several ways. It often refers to alternative planets or technologies. Or, as this thesis has demonstrated, many sci-fi creators utilize the idea of alternative to present themselves as idealists who are perhaps superior to the rest of society in their ability to build a just world. However, I am supposing here a challenge to the very nature of Suvin’s definition. Fictional worlds and beings are the closest things to true alternatives in sci-fi, and even these reflect the nature of our own world, calling into question their own alternativeness.

This analysis of sci-fi is particularly salient in the context of television, where the rise of commercial television was timed so perfectly with the rise of space

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110 Suvin, Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction, 37, quoted in Roberts, The History of Science Fiction, 1.
exploration as a national interest. American discourse around space has often echoed
frontier rhetoric, and this discourse was so prevalent that it became entrenched even
in America’s sci-fi imaginings. This correlation furthers the connection between sci-fi
and the real world, blurring the distinctions of alternativeness between the two.

Though the final frontier of space was central in the American consciousness
at the time of sci-fi’s rise on television, blatant frontier imagery and overt settler
colonialism have since drifted from the public eye, manifesting now in more
colorblind forms of racism. So too have they drifted in sci-fi, making way for more
concealed racism there as well. This has been reflected in the public’s perceptions of
sci-fi television, which originally elicited criticism of its blatant and morally directed
storytelling and now receives accolades for its complex narrative work.\(^{111}\)

Whereas obvious moral positioning in early sci-fi felt cheap, something in the new
colorblindness stuck with audiences. Perhaps the viewers, like creators, preferred the
way in which more complex and deceptive racial and narrative frameworks provided
an absence of racist guilt. Nevertheless, this marks a unique correlation between shifts
in sci-fi and shifts in society, and the truth of the genre’s alternativeness becomes
questionable.

This tension becomes a deep connection between sci-fi and colorblindness, as
throughout this thesis, I have shown the overlap between what sci-fi aims to do and
the ways in which colorblind racism operates. Colorblindness allows an exemption
from responsibility for those implicated in racist structures. Its ideology asserts that

\(^{111}\) Siegel, “Science Fiction and Fantasy TV,” 93.

\(^{112}\) Episodes of sci-fi shows *Westworld*, *Stranger Things*, and *Black Mirror* each appeared on several
Reporter*, and *Entertainment Weekly*. 
since the “completion” of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the United States has achieved complete and total racial inclusion and that any call outs of subtler forms of racism are themselves racist against white people. Instead, claims of diversity and multiculturalism, coated in rainbows and peace signs, conceal the violence of assimilation inherent in this type of inclusion. The tension between claim and reality is at the heart of what colorblindness attempts to do; racists say one thing, and thus earn the ability to get away with doing another. By claiming not to see race, those who utilize colorblindness create a strong hypocrisy that is, not coincidentally, reminiscent of how many sci-fi creators relate to their genre. In both instances, a gap exists, and the shows *Firefly*, *The 100*, and *BSG* each embody and expand on this gap.

All three shows undermine their producers’ attempts to paint inclusive alternatives to American society, by presenting visually diverse casts under the guise of post-race storytelling. However, the very nature of a melting pot society—which is an image this thesis has demonstrated is present to varying degrees in each of these shows—is biased and encourages an erasure of difference rather than a celebration of it, let alone reparations for still lingering inequality. Because the melting pot model encourages cultural erasure, in utilizing this rhetoric, each of these shows undermines the positive nature of unity and assimilation that sci-fi attempts to rearticulate.

In *Firefly*, executive producer Joss Whedon offers a futuristic society with two major super powers: China and the United States. His show claims to create a universal human culture through a blending of these two countries’ individual cultures. Whedon invokes abstract liberal language, which states that he has created a blended world and that any disparity within it is not from any fault of his own. In
doing so, Whedon allows his world to Orientalize the Chinese aspects of *Firefly’s* ‘verse, thus subverting his claims about a joint future and instead offering an American frontier narrative of white dominance and violent forced assimilation. Within this world, he positions the Orient as an agent to the frontier through codeswitching and by establishing the Asianized Inara as an asset to the hero Mal.

Elsewhere, in *The 100*, the cast is more diverse than that of many of its peer shows, offering characters of many varying racial identities. With so much of the narrative focused on survival and tribal/national identity, executive producer Jason Rothenberg invokes similar themes of a unified humanity. Simultaneously, he employs necropolitics to offer sovereignty to white characters over the deliberately racialized grounders. Though all bodies are cast into the show, setting up Rothenberg’s claims, he undoes his racial inclusion by killing and thus making invisible countless characters of color. At the same time, Rothenberg also utilizes transgressive queerness to further Other his racialized characters and emphasize the grounders as deserving of death. Within the binary of grounders and the white heroine Clarke, several characters fill the role of agent, which allows some to escape the knife of necropolitics, until even they are deemed unacceptable by the narrative.

In my next chapter, I demonstrated how *BSG* uses techno-orientalism to mark the Cylons, and specifically Boomer, as racially Other, in order to breed anxieties over metaphorical racial passing. Though *BSG* offers the family as a possible site for racial integration into a national identity, it later undermines the possibility of inclusion even in the family by utilizing necropolitics in a new way, having Athena kill her Other half. Thus, *BSG* actually asserts that racial inclusion comes at the cost
of cultural death, making invisible all the specificity of being non-white and racially Other.

In each case study, the producers keep a strong bent toward multiculturalism and unity, emphasizing previously successful colorblind rhetoric. Yet, *BSG* more than once explicitly states “All this has happened before, and all this will happen again,” and nowhere is that more true than in how colorblind narratives play out through sci-fi tropes in *BSG* itself, as well as in *Firefly* and *The 100*. This thesis has analyzed how the frontier is inscribed onto the narratives of all three shows and how racism is recreated in each of them because of it. Othered characters come to fill the role of agent for their white heroes, and their small semblance of autonomy hides the ways in which they are racialized negatively as a dangerous Other. The producer’s emphasis on colorblindness simply hides that this racism is happening because the specific articulations of racism look slightly different than their earlier, more obvious, forms.

Despite this, there is perhaps still hope for truly just worlds in sci-fi. To stop the endless repetition of “all that has happened before” (i.e. colorblindness), television creators must develop in themselves and their shows a different sort of race consciousness. To tackle the sort of problems in representation that this thesis has laid out, shows must move from attitudes of post-racism to those of anti-racism. Post-racism refers to colorblind rhetoric, as explored in this thesis, which argues for moving beyond race and toward a unity that masks still lingering structural racism. Anti-racism, however, fully acknowledges the complexities that come with representing race on the screen. Rather than ignoring race altogether, anti-racism

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113 Various characters quote this line of scripture from the Book of Pythia in at least three episodes from the first season: “Flesh and Bone,” “The Hand of God,” and “Kobol’s Last Gleaming, Part I.”
makes a demand that creators take a stance toward liberation and justice, coming from a place of genuine acknowledgement of the current racial realities.

Walidah Imarisha offers a new perspective and a useful solution for the role of sci/fi, centered on anti-racist organizing. She says:

Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction. All organizing is science fiction. Organizers and activists dedicate their lives to creating and envisioning another world, or many other worlds—so what better venue for organizers to explore their work than science fiction stories?  

Imarisha suggests that anti-racist work is inherently its own imaginative world, and so there is an obvious place for just world building in sci/fi. To do this kind of world building, an anti-racist show would have to begin by portraying the racial reality—which admittedly is what most shows currently do. However, discourse surrounding the show would have to acknowledge the intent to create honest racial portrayals, with no pretense of idealism. Then the show would have to chart a potential path for liberation, neither through metaphor nor miracle. This is where the true alternative storytelling of sci/fi could really shine. Of course, this presents a particular challenge for sci/fi, whose main tools as a genre are make believe and metaphor. The unique demand on sci/fi, then, is to use the unreal as a backdrop and a catalyst, rather than the focal point.

One specific way to tell an alternative story is to center marginalized voices as protagonists, and thereby portray a new world from their eyes. The very nature of centering non-white voices—as well as voices that are non-dominant in other ways—is a true alternative to the vast wealth of normative stories that abound. These stories

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would have to be conscious of identity and power dynamics, building liberation from the needs and desires of those marginalized voices. adrienne maree brown calls art that reflects this model “visionary fiction,” and demands that “its purpose [be] social change and societal transformation.”\(^\text{115}\) And while visionary fiction like brown describes has found a small but thriving home in literature—notable examples include Octavia Butler, Walter Mosley, Nnedi Okorafor, and Walidah Imarisha—the world of sci-fi television has a much bigger void to fill.

One clear solution to solve this problem is to diversify the writers’ rooms for these shows. In order to tell stories accurate to a wider swath of narratives, the people telling those stories must bring different life experiences to the table. Currently, a majority of television writers are white men,\(^\text{116}\) and in shows written by people of other identities, the difference in their ability to do visionary fiction is obvious. One notable example is television giant Shonda Rhimes, a black woman with an empire of shows—including *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Scandal*, and *How To Get Away With Murder*, to name only a few—and an entire night of television dedicated to her (ABC’s TGIT promotion on Thursday nights). In recent years, Rhimes’ shows have explored themes such as police brutality and dog whistle politics, blatantly calling them out in her writing. It is worth noting, however, that Rhimes’ writing did not start out this way. In the early season of her first show, *Grey’s Anatomy*, Rhimes received critiques that she was portraying “a black fantasy of fully integrated black doctors,” which “[did]
not accurately represent the racial reality of twentieth-century America.”¹¹⁷ This suggests that to even get her foot in the door, Rhimes had to sanitize most racial drama in *Grey’s Anatomy*, for at least a few seasons while making a name for herself.¹¹⁸ Still, very few of her white peers now actively and blatantly address these issues. This thesis has not directly addressed the correlation between creator and content—though white men head up all of the shows I use as case studies within this thesis—but this seems a promising direction and is likely a question that deserves further research.

As well, another question to expand upon would be the impact of the market on viable racial portrayals. Why is it that *The Wire*, whose honest writing portrayed the truth of being black in Baltimore, struggled to gain popularity with audiences¹¹⁹ while shows such as the ones analyzed herein see great success? Rhimes’ shows are also hugely successful, so how does she maintain popularity while digging into deep racial issues? Television executives seem convinced that diversity does not sell well, so a next step would be to (dis)prove that claim. A deeper study into the kinds of race representation audiences will support—essentially how viable shows might be financially—will be crucial in further study of colorblindness and television. Though not sci-fi, recent shows such as *black-ish* (2014—), *Empire* (2015—), and *Superstore* (2015—) could offer positive examples of diverse shows that do well with critics and audiences.

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Nevertheless, sci-fi has a long way to go before it can truly become the racial ideal it suggests that it is. Until then, the post-racial picture of a unified human race will persist on television, and therefore also in America’s race consciousness, and what has happened before will continue to happen again and again and again. But, if diverse writers can create truly alternative and visionary science fiction, the genre just might have found its new hope.
## Episode List

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#### The 100

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**Battlestar Galactica**

**Mini-Series**

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References


