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Race, Nation, and Sexuality in Contemporary Film and Television



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Race, Nation, and Sexuality in Contemporary Film and Television



Cynthia Baron

The winter 2017 issue of *The Projector* features four articles that explore a collection of questions concerning identity and society; it concludes with book reviews of recent scholarship on labor in media practice, cinema's potential to change people's relation to the natural world, and the ecological impact of media production and distribution.

Marta Holliday's essay, "Halle Berry as the Modernized Tragic Mulatta," analyzes the characterizations in a number of television and film productions starring Berry, and argues that the narratives consistently highlight the eroticism and martyrdom of the characters. Using *Alex Haley's Queen* (1993), *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* (1999), *Losing Isiah* (1995) and *Monster's Ball* (2002) as her primary case studies, Holliday also proposes that these roles have come to shape Berry's star image. As she explains, especially when depicting Dandridge's role in the 1954 film *Carmen Jones*, Berry's portrayal in *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* "resembles a series of Russian dolls: Berry as a mulatta who portrays a tragic mulatta who portrays a tragic mulatta." Holliday concludes that the roles for which Halle Berry has become known reveal that

mainstream media continues to represent mixed-race identity as “nothing more than a fetish, or a visual feast of desire and destruction before the camera lens.”

Robert Joseph’s article, “‘I’m from the future. You should go to China.’: *Looper* as Representative of U.S. Anxieties about China,” provides detailed analyses of Rian Johnson’s 2012 science-fiction thriller and the economic realities that made this film one of an increasing number of contemporary productions designed to secure wide release in China, now the world’s most important international market. Discussing the film’s depiction of Kansas as so devastated that city crime spills out into the countryside, Joseph points out that while science fiction films often feature dystopic futures, what is striking is that *Looper* presents the U.S. in ruins as a contrast to the People’s Republic of China, which is shown to be a utopia of peace and prosperity. Joseph argues that this strategy allowed the film to circulate without restriction in China and at the same time reveals American anxieties about its declining role in the world. Joseph’s article considers the xenophobic and orientalist stereotypes that have been part of American cinema. It also provides a concise account of research on Chinese-American co-productions, developments in the expanding Chinese film market, and representational choices in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), *Iron Man 3* (2013), *Pacific Rim* (2013), and *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014) that compare to those in *Looper*. The article’s analysis of several moments in Johnson’s film effectively illustrates the pattern of depicting China and Chinese characters in a positive, even utopic light that is emerging in contemporary Hollywood films.

In the article “‘Say ‘What’ One Mo’ Time’: Transmedia Storytelling and Racial Violence in the 21st Century through the lens of *The Boondocks*,” author George White, Jr. illustrates ways in which *The Boondocks*, the animated television series created by Aaron McGruder that is based on his syndicated comic strip, examines “a wide range of topics, from

climate change and police brutality to hyper-masculinity in Hip Hop or the super-exploitative effects of unregulated capitalism.” The article focuses on the episode “A Date with the Health Inspector,” which first aired on December 4, 2005 as part of the Cartoon Network’s Adult Swim programming; white demonstrates that the episode deftly challenges both “the legitimacy of the regimes of mass incarceration and the War on Terror.” The essay proposes that McGruder’s series not only satirizes and critiques “contemporary political, social, and cultural icons (whether Black or White),” but also gives special attention to “a core question: what is the truth of the relationship between Black men and America, their ostensive home?” The essay considers connections between *The Boondocks* and traditions in Black humor. It provides a useful context for understanding McGruder’s series by discussing its relationship to well-known and short-lived Black sitcoms, and locates points of contact between the series and, for example, the comedy of Richard Pryor now archived in his concert films and 1977 television show. The essay’s attention to the performative dimensions of McGruder’s series, which includes the cross-racial casting for secondary characters Ed the Third and Gin Rummy, contributes to the richness of the essay’s formal and ideological analysis.

The fourth article, “‘I Like the Pole and the Hole’: The Subversive Self-Definitive Bisexuality of Jerri Blank,” by Vern Cooper finds that for the most part American television continues to see bisexuality as “something that cannot or need not be represented.” Locating an exception to the rule, Cooper’s essay focuses on the character of Jerri Blank (Amy Sedaris) in *Strangers with Candy* (Comedy Central 1999-2000) and “her liminal social position as a 46(ish) year-old high school student.” (*Strangers with Candy* is also the title of the 2005 film, which is a prequel to the series.) Cooper explains that “Jerri Blank was the creation of Paul Dinello, Stephen Colbert, and Amy Sedaris, who modeled Blank’s character on Florrie Fisher, a

motivational speaker who toured the country's high schools in the 1960s and 1970s telling her story of addiction and sex work to high school students in an attempt to scare them straight.”

Cooper finds that the satire in *Strangers with Candy* “makes the point that the unfair standard of feminine purity is directly opposed to both the pressures on young men to be sexually experienced and the reality of women's sexual desires and pleasures.” Yet Cooper also notes that the series' depiction of same-sex attraction can be seen as “a cautionary tale regarding the particular cultural willingness to stigmatize certain sex acts because of who is involved in them.”

The winter 2017 issue of *The Projector* also features book reviews of recent scholarship in emergent fields of inquiry in film and media studies. Aju Basil James reviews *Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor* (University of California Press, 2016), edited by Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson. Trinidad Linares reviews *Ecomedia: Key Issues* (Routledge, 2016) edited by Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt. Rebekah Sinewe reviews *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013) by Adrian J. Ivakhiv. These publications reflect differences in critical approach, with *Precarious Creativity* and *Ecomedia: Key Issues* grounded in a materialist perspective and *Ecologies of the Moving Image* informed by a semiotic/philosophical perspective, yet the three volumes contribute to a burgeoning body of scholarship in areas such as environmental studies, film and media studies, theatre and performance studies, and cultural and literary studies, all of which shed new light on fictional representations of nature and the often troubling material implications of practices in the global media and communications industry.

Halle Berry as the Modernized Tragic Mulatta



Marta Holliday

This essay discusses how Halle Berry, who has long been esteemed as both a glamorous and critically acclaimed actress, reincarnates the “tragic mulatta” archetype through the roles that she portrays. The tragic mulatta has long been a popular if controversial character in various examples of American and African American fiction and film over the past two centuries, from ante- and postbellum slave novels, to biracial heroines that were created by biracial authors during the Harlem Renaissance, to the exoticized cinematic heroines of the 1950’s. She is a heroine who is usually ostracized by both black and white society because she does not belong completely to either realm, at different American time periods when society’s acceptance (as well as one’s self acceptance) of bi- and multiraciality would have been virtually impossible, such as during slavery, or at any point amid the “separate but equal” mentality of the post-*Plessy vs. Ferguson*/pre-Civil Rights years.

For example, the protagonists of William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* (1852)¹ and Charles

Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900)² are rebuffed by pureblooded black slaves and ex-slaves who envy their "white" privilege and beauty, while their white masters commoditize their lives and their bodies. Two generations later, the similarly conflicted heroines of Harlem Renaissance era fiction likewise struggle with where they racially belong, but act against this sense of powerlessness by doing everything they can with their appearance and behavior to "seem" white and so attain greater degrees of white privilege and acceptance among family, lovers and peers. In spite of their quests, they merely succeed in further tormenting themselves because their lives devolve into a suffocating lie of who they can never fully be. Jessie Fauset's *Angela Murray (Plum Bun, 1929)*³ and Nella Larsen's *Clare Kendry (Passing, 1929)*,⁴ conveniently but desperately use their golden appearances to "pass" as white in their careers, social circles and love lives—to the extent of completely denying any semblance of their black roots.

But, regardless of genre or generation, what has remained especially tantalizing to readers (and, in Berry's case, viewers) about the tragic mulatta's existence in print (or onscreen) is that her lifelong angst and psychological torment is almost always coupled with the physical martyrdom that her creators (authors and film directors) impose upon her eroticized and golden skinned body, in the form of either devastating illnesses, self harm, or the various cruelties inflicted upon her body by physically and sexually abusive masters or lovers. Death is a frequent culmination to these heroines' tortured lives, and is imagined both in print and onscreen to be highly glamorized and sensationalized: *Clotel* jumps into the Potomac River to avoid being recaptured into slavery, *Rena Walden* moans and shivers as she slowly expires from a fever, and *Clare Kendry* plummets to her demise from a sixth floor apartment window. Even one of Berry's fictitious filmic predecessors, the bronze skinned *Carmen Jones* (as she is played by Dorothy

Dandridge) is gloriously strangled by a jilted lover.

The biracial Berry, who is the daughter of a white mother and an African American father, may not necessarily be considered a “tragic” figure, in terms of someone who is torn between two racially polarized worlds, for her film career has thrived in a vastly changed era where interracial relationships are condoned and even celebrated, and where racially mixed individuals are no longer perceived as mongrels or misfits in a contemporary American society. Nonetheless, like her literary and filmic mulatta predecessors, the historical figures and fictitious characters whom Berry portrays embody a profound sense of both eroticism and martyrdom, whether they themselves are mixed raced individuals whose inner torment translates into profound moments of suffering, or light skinned but nonetheless highly sexualized black characters who have led challenging or destructive lives. The most memorable of Berry’s alluring yet long suffering characters, who exemplify not only the fetishization of Berry the actress but also the fetishization of the tragic mulatta in contemporary times, are the titular figures in the television miniseries *Alex Haley’s Queen* (John Erman, 1993) and the HBO docudrama *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* (Martha Coolidge, 1999), and the characters Khaila Richards and Leticia Musgrove, both impoverished and self destructive young mothers, in the films *Losing Isaiah* (Stephen Gyllenhaal, 1995) and *Monster’s Ball* (Marc Forster, 2002), respectively. What can be concluded from the collective analyses of these performances is the reality that, in spite of Berry’s popular and critical acclaim—including her esteemed status as the only woman of color to have ever achieved a Best Actress Academy Award—her mixed race identity and her glamorous and light skinned appearance limit her to the same typecasting that once defined the tragically doomed mixed heroines and victims of bygone generations, because onscreen she does little more than suffer, sin, and arouse other characters (and audience

members, for that matter) through her titillating performances.

Berry was 25 years old when she debuted as a film actress, in Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* (1991). She appeared here as the vulgar and filthy Vivian, a drug addicted prostitute who exists in an abandoned Harlem crackhouse alongside her lover Gator (Samuel L. Jackson), whose life has likewise been destroyed by the ravages of crack cocaine. However, considering that a cameo role usually refers to a usually brief onscreen appearance, it is difficult to argue whether Vivian can be interpreted as an objectified or even long-suffering character. In a way, Vivian's life story mirrors that of the equally troubled Khaila Richards of *Losing Isaiah*, whom Berry would portray four years after *Jungle Fever*, and whose own life is likewise devastated by her crack cocaine addiction. But Vivian, a peripheral character whose actions and overall existence are secondary to the film's main storyline (which centers around an interracial love affair that has ensnared Gator's brother and his Italian-American coworker) does not devolve nor evolve as a character, whereas Khaila becomes an almost beatified mother who is ultimately motivated to rehabilitate herself for the sake of her child. Rather, Vivian merely exists as Gator's easy and convenient source of heroin and sex. In terms of her actual appearance (and perhaps unlike the stunning tragic characters of earlier fiction) Vivian is obviously not ugly but she is not supposed to look beautiful, either. Throughout the movie she wears filthy and ragged clothing, and her skin is consistently grimy and unwashed. Moreover, it would be difficult to argue that Vivian is as objectified as other tragic biracial characters have been (both in Berry's body of work, as well as in the prose and film of generations past) because as a prostitute, her profession *consciously* involves her selling her body in order to maintain her economic survival.

During the 1990s, Berry subsequently took on leading roles of light skinned and/or biracial characters whose combination of suffering and sex appeal became the chief hallmarks of

their identities. In 1993, she starred as the illegitimate and partially white Queen Haley, the titular figure in the television miniseries *Alex Haley's Queen* (1993), based on the latter's memoir about his paternal grandmother (*Queen: The Story of an American Family*). Throughout the episodes of this miniseries, it became quickly and painfully clear to viewers that Queen, as a semi-fictionalized slave heroine, is reduced to the physical and psychological martyrdom that has been connoted with biracial beauty. Through such limitations of her character, Queen's televised biography appears to do little more than to arouse and titillate her viewers rather than to educate them on the realities and horrors of slavery and segregation, overall.

In his actual memoir, Haley situates his grandmother in her young womanhood as the latest descendant in a legacy of beautiful partially white slave daughters who, like many real and fictitious "tragic mulatta" slave heroines, were conceived in forbidden liaisons, either from rape, or from illicit interracial love affairs, between their enslaved mothers and master fathers. That Queen herself (the bastard daughter of a quadroon slave and one of her master's sons) becomes a victim of sexual violence in her own young womanhood (which is described in the memoir and dramatized in the miniseries) suggests that biracial female exploitation at the hands of white men is inevitable. ("Quadroon" refers to a mixed raced individual who is three quarters white and one quarter black). As an adolescent she is sexually assaulted by a group of white patrons at a local store in her hometown, and in later chapters she becomes the victim of a violent rape that her laudanum addicted fiancé perpetrates against her (Haley 524). Overall, throughout Haley's pages, and throughout the miniseries episodes, Queen's character gradually ages from the young slave who is humiliated by her masters and mistresses, into glamorized the sexual assault survivor, and ultimately into the aged dementia patient who is victimized more by her treatment than her illness. Nonetheless, throughout these moments in her life, her sense of suffering and

exploitation at the hands of others remains constant.

Berry's performances not only visualizes the physical and sexual violence that Haley recreated in print, but her work also immortalizes the filmic Queen Haley as a construct of the usual suffering and survival that hallmarks the tragic mulatta's existence. In terms of the visualization of her suffering (and perhaps similar to *Jungle Fever's* Vivian), Berry's Queen appears as an onscreen paradox in that she is portrayed by an otherwise beautiful actress whose physical wounds and psychological torment do not necessarily make her appear ugly onscreen, but who evokes a sense of pity for all of her ordeals. For instance, Queen's rape *and* its aftermath become spectacles of raw desperation before the camera. The attack itself is precipitated when Queen confesses to her once adoring fiancé Digby (Victor Garber) that she is in fact the partially black bastard daughter of a Confederate soldier and a house slave. As is similar to the reactions of the charming yet bigoted suitors of other mulatta heroines (Rena Walden's lover George Tryon in *The House Behind the Cedars*, or Clare Kendry's husband Jack Billew in *Passing*), Digby's transition from suitor to bigoted sadist is abrupt, complete, and unmitigated. He slaps and punches her, tears her dress and undergarments so that her backside is bared, and hoists her buttocks in the air, with the scene abruptly fading just at the moment as he undoes his belt buckle in his attempt to penetrate her. After Queen flees Digby, she happens upon a camp of black migrant workers who mock her hunger, her filth, and her pain when she approaches them for help, and they dismiss her as a "white bitch" who racially does not belong among them. When the disheveled, delirious, and desperate Queen subsequently bursts into a nearby black church seeking refuge, her ravaged appearance attracts the gasps of darker skinned black parishioners as she awkwardly staggers up the aisle. Queen's unkempt hair flaps behind her as she screams for help. Her skin is caked with mud and is raw from angry lacerations. Even in Queen's moments

of desperation and lost sanity, she still appears before the camera as a pitiable spectacle. Her destroyed dress appears to be conveniently torn in the most scandalous places, revealing her bared, bruised shoulders and the deep groove of her cleavage, further reducing her to the parishioners (and to viewers) as an unintended sex object even in the face of her obvious and very graphic sexual victimization.

In the last episode of the series, the mental degeneration of the elderly Queen Haley is depicted just as vividly as her earlier ordeals of torture and humiliation. For that matter, her descent into dementia is captured onscreen much more sensationally than Haley ever imagined it in print. After Queen begins to wander away from home and sets herself on fire, her family commits her against her will to an institution. The mental hospital is depicted onscreen as the quintessential turn of the century hellhole that one associates with the cruelly normalized (mis)treatment of the mentally ill during the turn of the twentieth century. The camera captures how patients' arms reach through bars, how patients laugh and scream at no one, and how, at one point, a woman is seen spinning endlessly on a bizarre contraption that looks reminiscent of a medieval torture device. Queen herself is tortured by procedures that vaguely resemble sexual fetishes. She is strait jacketed when she is first wheeled, dazed, into the hospital. In a climactic forced shower scene, she is tethered naked to what looks like an electric chair, as the background music that accompanies the rush of water is eerily similar to the classic shower scene in *Psycho* (1960). Bust shots emphasize Queen's wide-eyed, bewildered gazes at her torment as the water soaks her face and her disheveled hair. Still, in the face of her suffering in these later years, Berry's elderly Queen looks like a young woman in costume, with a few silver locks of hair threaded into her otherwise dark brown waist length extensions, and with her once alluring face weighed down with heavy foundation and pink eyeshadow to make her appear aged and weary

from a life of suffering.

Though the biracial Queen Haley was one of Berry's earliest acclaimed roles, the majority of roles that Berry embodies are those of light skinned black women who likewise display a delectable combination of sex appeal and martyrdom before the camera. One of the most notable of these roles is that of Khaila Richards, a single mother who is entangled in both the physical and psychological ravages of drug addiction and whose fragile health is compounded by the stress of a bitter custody battle for her son in *Losing Isaiah* (1995). Curiously, though Khaila is an unquestionably tragic heroine, in terms of her ordeals with prostitution, crack cocaine, and incarceration, the psychological "tragedy" of being a racial misfit is endured by her much darker skinned son Isaiah Richards/Lewin (Marc John Jefferies). His adoptive parents, Margaret and Charles Lewin (Jessica Lange and David Strathairn), are educated, affluent, and white whereas Khaila is illiterate and impoverished. The central issue of the ensuing custody battle over Isaiah is whether he would live a more fulfilling life with loving and financially stable parents who are not of his race, or whether he should be uprooted from the only home he has ever known and returned to his struggling black mother. Khaila herself is portrayed as a clichéd representation of urban black sin and suffering, who is far behind the social status of the Lewins. She inadvertently abandons her newborn child, conceived during a drug exchange, in a trash dumpster and then fears that she killed him. While Khaila is incarcerated, following a nervous breakdown over her false fears of her son's death, she gradually becomes sober and learns that her son is miraculously alive. The rest of the movie follows her journey to become a mother: petitioning for Isaiah's custody, continuing to rehabilitate herself by staying "clean" of drugs and learning to read, and finding a new and permanent home in which to attempt to raise him.

Though Khaila is not the tragic heroine who is torn between two races, as a golden complexioned black mother she is nonetheless eroticized before the camera lens. The opening shots perversely endear her as an unwashed and wild haired Madonna figure of the slums who nurses Isaiah with her drug poisoned milk. A ragged and filthy shirt, darkened at the breasts with milk stains, hangs off her nearly skeletal body. But this Madonna swiftly degenerates into someone who is supposed to be seen as a clearly immoral woman as the plotline develops. Crack cocaine ravages Khaila's body and mind: after she fears she has killed her son, she degenerates into a hysterical, raving madwoman until her arrest saves her from her lifestyle and forces her to become sober. After her incarceration, Khaila gradually attempts to transition into an image of a more respectable mother, though it is obvious to her viewers that she will never attain the same status nor respect as Isaiah's adoptive mother. Even though Khaila tries to appear decent and respectable for her court appearances by setting her hair and wearing floral print dresses and pearls, she still presents herself as mentally immature. She still speaks in grammatically incorrect sentences at the hearings ("I was never no prostitute!"), and she still barely knows how to read.

If Queen Haley and Khaila Richards represent some of Berry's earliest and most recognizable roles as tortured yet glamorous heroines, Berry's performance in the HBO docudrama *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* (1999) represents her mastery of the combinations of suffering, struggle, and sensuality played out on her body. On a poster advertising the debut of this movie (which was commonly replicated on the earliest DVD covers), Halle Berry poses as Dorothy Dandridge, seductively draping her body over a chaise lounge. Some elements of this image are accurate re-imaginings of the real Dandridge's appearance (the teased hair, the diamonds and fur stole that she wears); some elements are quintessential features of Berry's recognizably seductive beauty (the perfectly arched eyebrow, the sultry gaze, the smug, red

smile); and other advertising conventions highlight Berry/Dandridge as a light skinned visual feast (the exposed cleavage; the discreetly bared thigh). However, the tagline of this poster misleads potential viewers about both the image and Dandridge's story: "She was everything America wanted a movie star to be . . . *except white*" (emphasis mine, ellipsis in the original). It suggests that not only is black identity to be emphasized over Dandridge's mixed-race birth, but that the entire film is related to the civil rights struggle—implying that Dandridge, unlike other mixed-race characters or historical figures, was forced to confront her black origins, and could not hide from them.

But if Dandridge's body in this biopic is read simply within the construct of a civil rights struggle, then it is to be perceived by her viewers as less a fantasy than it is a catalyst of sympathy and rage. Berry's Dandridge may be imagined to be an onscreen delight, be it as Tarzan's jungle queen complement or as the sultry Carmen Jones. But in the scenes of Dandridge's off-screen life, it is evident that her "black" skin denies her access to the most basic and the most intimate "white" privileges. Not only is she supposed to enter various whites-only hotels and clubs through the typical kitchen door but, in one scene where her Las Vegas hotel dressing room lacks a toilet, she must relieve herself in a Styrofoam cup instead of using the whites-only public restrooms. She is also warned against swimming in the hotel pool, and is warned that the pool would have to be drained and disinfected if she were to immerse herself in its already chlorinated waters. Dandridge is further humiliated whenever she attempts to protest these rules. At one point, she purposely dips one foot into the swimming pool in full view of the clientele and manager. She laughs about her small act of rebellion with her manager and confidante Earl Mills (Brent Spiner), but her confidence implodes when she passes by the pool after her scheduled performance that evening. True to his threat, the manager had ordered the

pool drained and scrubbed (by an all black cleaning crew) and Dandridge is left feeling outraged and insulted

There are subtler yet equally scarring ways in which Dandridge's character is seen confronting and defending her black heritage in public. Early in the film, Dandridge introduces her future first husband Harold Nicholas (Obba Babatundé) to her mother Ruby while they are on a date at the local movie house: Nicholas and Dandridge are spectators to Ruby Dandridge's (Loretta Devine's) exploits as a mammy character in a comedy film. Nicholas, himself a black entertainer, grumbles his discomfort, only to realize his embarrassment when he discovers why Dorothy insisted on *this* movie. She defends her mother with the obvious rationale: what *other* roles are available for a dark skinned black woman who, as a single mother, was her family's sole provider? However, when the lighter Dandridge herself seeks Hollywood stardom, she is frustrated by the fact that as a black woman with light skin, she is one notch above the sexless kitchen slave of her mother's films, depicted as the forbidden flesh of black men who lust after her, or as the jungle queen of the *Tarzan* productions whose gyrations and vine-tethered limbs vaguely resemble kinky sex.

The epitome of Berry's performances of Dandridge's sexualization is most notably exhibited through her re-creation of Dandridge's most celebrated (and Oscar-nominated) role as the titular character in *Carmen Jones* (1954). This musical is Otto Preminger's adaptation of Georges Bizet's opera *Carmen*, which originally depicted the doomed love triangle of a Spanish cigar factory worker and the two men whom she seduces and manipulates, the soldier Don Jose and the bullfighter Escamillo. In Preminger's film, the cigar factory morphs into the wartime parachute plant, Don Jose translates into the aspiring fighter pilot Joe (Harry Belafonte), and Escamillo is reincarnated as the boxing prizefighter Husky Miller (Joe Adams). At face value,

the film itself has been heralded a landmark contribution to American cinematic history, because it is not only one of the first mainstream productions to feature an entirely black ensemble, but the characters themselves are not reduced to the simplistic expectations of black performance that were common in early twentieth century cinema (jolly and uneducated house slaves like *Gone With the Wind's* Mammy, Prissy, or Pork, who are content with their destinies as servants bound to their masters' families, or Lincoln Perry's buffoonish Stepin Fetchit caricature) that were common in the earliest decades of film history. The leading characters, as well the ensemble cast (the background factory workers and saloon patrons) perform musical numbers with eloquent, classically trained voices. The men are gallant soldiers, and the women are the patriotic factory workers who sew the parachutes their men will use on the front, and who display a degree of class and beauty even in their Rosie the Riveter style bandanas and work uniforms.

Despite these overall positive portrayals of onscreen black identity, Carmen herself is portrayed as a controversial and ultimately tragic character. She is hardly a model employee, as is evident in her solo from the opening lunchroom number ("Dat's Love"), in which she toys with the affections of various soldiers and cajoles several of them into giving her free food and cigarettes. Beautiful and sexually experienced, Carmen routinely flirts and works whenever *she* wants to. A fight with a co-worker causes her arrest and extradition from the factory, which leads her to seduce Joe, the arresting officer who falls for her and eventually gives up his dreams of flight school and marriage to the pretty but painfully naïve and childish Cindy Lou (Olga James) to follow her. Though Carmen appears initially satisfied with Joe's affections, Husky Miller later woos Carmen away from Joe with his promises of luxurious furs, jewels, and an overall exciting and faster life if she follows him to his future victories in Chicago. Joe, devastated by her

betrayal, kills her out of desperation and revenge.

Yet overall, Carmen's character is herself problematic because she too demonstrates how "tragedy" is associated with exploitation. She is little more than the sum of her parts. She is unapologetic about her beauty and its destructive temptations. She is the sexual misfit who struts into the cafeteria in her tight red skirt and lace blouse. She commands the urge to be loved or the urge to be hated: she toys with male coworkers when a female employee goads her toward a conquest, and she coolly promises a snitch that she will "cut out the one good eye [she] has left."

Although Berry-as-Dandridge-as-Carmen Jones is a five minute sequence in the entire biopic, her portrayal resembles a series of Russian dolls: Berry as a mulatta who portrays a tragic mulatta who portrays a tragic mulatta. In the "Dat's Love" number, the viewer observes a 1999 interpretation of a 1954 studio depiction of a 1940's war plant cafeteria. However, in both the actual and interpreted examples of Dandridge's performance, there is a blatant distinction between Dandridge the star and the stock characters who surround her. In the 1999 re-creation, Harry Belafonte and Olga James are elements of the background: James is only seen from behind for less than a minute on the lunch line, and Belafonte whispers a few words of encouragement to his co-star. Still, Berry's Dandridge makes a dramatic entrance—not as the errant employee, but as Preminger's Other Woman who arouses him in her red skirt. Her solo scene cuts to Preminger's bedroom, as "Dat's Love" becomes the background music that is choreographed to their sexual relations. In this rendition, "Carmen" is not a lusty performer, but rather the naive paramour who is juxtaposed against Otto Preminger's (Klaus Maria Brandauer's) age, whiteness, and status.

Although Berry's recreation of Dandridge's Carmen Jones is especially pivotal to this production, to reduce Dandridge's experiences, and the other crucial scenes in this biopic overall,

to a black woman's overall struggle against Hollywood racism is to elide its significance, or even its limitations, when it comes to depicting the experience of the mixed race main character—especially beyond the fame of *Carmen Jones*. Berry's Dandridge is a star who brings an exotic flair to white performance: be it as Tarzan's complement, or through her onscreen renditions of operatic characters. Yet Berry's Dandridge is also a victim of private ordeals. She is the abandoned daughter and abuse survivor; she is the abandoned first wife; she is the "other woman" in a forbidden interracial affair with a white married man; she is the mother of an institutionalized child; she is the sister of a jealous and equally troubled actress. Such delicate topics are ordinarily kept behind closed doors because the survivors want—or need—to keep them silent. But, when the violated daughter or spouse or the frustrated parent is in a visible career, then the personal becomes publicized, and often exploited due to this publicity.

The dilemma of sex—and particularly considering how pivotal sex *and* sexualization are to the tragic mulatta's identity—is particularly ironic in relation to Berry's Dandridge. Although the real life Dandridge was typecast as the bronze skinned spitfire in her most recognizable films like *Carmen Jones*, the *Tarzan* series, or as the tempting newcomer (who ultimately becomes an abuse survivor) who intrigues the men of Catfish Row in the film version of *Porgy and Bess* (1959), Mills' biography of her indicates that she was actually traumatized by her experience with sexual abuse and as such was terrified of intimate encounters with men. But compared to the actual Dandridge's onscreen contained exploits of jungle queens and factory floozies, Berry's Dandridge becomes a less sanitized martyr when these scenes are recreated in this film.

Dandridge's wedding night scenes with Harold Nicholas are spliced with her flashbacks to a traumatizing memory where her mother's lesbian partner (Latanya Richardson) thrusts her finger into the teenaged Dandridge's vagina to verify her virginity after a date. Close-up shots of

Dandridge's contorted face emphasize her agony at this intrusion. Yet the newlywed Dandridge must ignore such memories if she is to survive the wedding night, which itself becomes a catalyst for a different trauma. The camera quickly cuts from Nicholas' penetration to nine months later, when his bride gives birth to their daughter Harolyn, in a moment of pure physical agony. Dandridge's subsequent tryst with Preminger becomes, without irony, an onscreen metaphor for the lyrics of "Dat's Love": she goes for him but he, as a white married man, is taboo. Even Dandridge's ostensibly platonic friendship with Earl Mills is exaggerated through the camera's manipulation of her body. In two final scenes near the conclusion of the film, Mills arrives at Dandridge's home to surprise her with the promise of new performances. But in both of these scenes, unfortunate incidents that happen to Dandridge, and which normally should not be viewed as erotic, emphasize her vulnerability.

In the first scene Dandridge, who is pumping weights and recovering from a prior suicide attempt, is so carelessly excited about new work that she trips over a weight in a slow-motion fall from grace. Her accident devastates her—for, after sustaining a broken ankle, she now cannot perform in these promised shows. Then there is the eroticizing of Dandridge's actual death scenes. The real life Dandridge's demise, from a drug overdose, has been commonly assumed to be a suicide. Although one would assume that an overdose is painless because the victim puts herself to sleep, Dandridge's end is all the more controversial because she was found undressed. In the film, the white male intrusion is emphasized as detectives and medics mill around the body despite Mills admonitions to at least cover her body.

Dandridge's death scene is intended to be both physically and sexually compelling. The discovery of her corpse is intended to be seen as a blatant intrusion into the death scene and as the capstone to her highly troubled life. The real Dandridge was in fact discovered nude in her

home, presumably in the process of bathing. She is face down and her hair is neatly styled, and her body (now a grayish shade due to the lack of oxygen) bridges a path between the bathroom and bedroom. She remains on display, in this position, as investigators mull over quintessential accident versus suicide hypotheses. These final speculations in the film, combined with the troubling and tortured memories of Dandridge's brief life, combine to make Dandridge's onscreen demise seem especially tantalizing. Her glorious death becomes the emblem of her martyrdom, the delectable and delicate body of a relatively young, troubled suicide victim, always beautiful even in her final moments, and whose seemingly painless final sleep becomes fetishized by how Dandridge/Berry is displayed on camera.

Berry would later achieve the acting milestone to which Dandridge had once aspired. In 2002, Berry was heralded as the first black woman (or more accurately the first woman of color) to *win* the Best Actress Oscar, which she earned for work in the film *Monster's Ball*. Here, Berry plays Leticia Musgrove, the widow of a black Louisiana death row inmate (Sean "P. Diddy" Combs), who becomes sexually involved with a white prison guard named Hank Grotowski (Billy Bob Thornton) who is responsible for her husband's execution. Leticia is portrayed not only as impoverished and undereducated (circumstances that contrast against the power and privilege that Hank appears to possess over her, not only in his role as her husband's executioner, but also with his whiteness and the overall power that his badge represents) but she also has a fragile mental state. Moreover, her delicate sanity is further jeopardized by the threatened loss of her home, and also by the brutal deaths of both her husband and then her son (Coronji Calhoun), who is hit by a car. Interestingly, Leticia's psychological suffering is visualized very graphically through her affectionate and often erotic interactions with Hank.

Hank first comes into her life through his display of Good Samaritanism when he

encounters her, drenched and screaming, over her son's body. He has the fatherly charm and power to caress her vulnerable body like a child, and also the ability to, as she loudly urges, "make [her] feel good" through their climactic scenes of sexual intercourse, which are enacted upon Leticia's living room couch. Berry's performance in these very explicit love scenes are intended to evoke not only pity but also arousal from her viewers, in terms of how he violently undresses her, dominates her, twists her body into a variety of contortions. These sex scenes are perhaps the most forbidding and the most graphic that she has ever shot. In *Queen* or *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge*, the sexual experiences of Berry's other characters are merely implied through what is understood, but not specifically seen, on camera. For instance, the viewer does not actually witness the penetration of Dandridge's abuser's finger into her hymen, or Dandridge and Nicholas' wedding night interactions. Even in the rape scene in *Queen*, the camera conveniently and abruptly fades out just at the moment that Digby loosens his belt, and before he violently enters Queen's body. But on Leticia's couch, nothing is left to the imagination: in the proverbial heat of the moment, she and Hank strip each other completely naked, groan, scream, and intertwine their bodies in a variety of poses as they reach their climax of pure, unadulterated passion.

Leticia, who through these explicit scenes enabled Berry to achieve the highly coveted Best Actress Academy Award, is *the* epitome of *who* Berry has become reduced to, as a professional actor. Both before and after her Oscar win, Berry, much like the actual Dorothy Dandridge, has continuously played characters who alternate between representations of the exotic and the tragic. Aside from embodying both the crack addicted temptress (Vivian), the crack addicted mother (Khaila), or the beautiful mixed race victims of unspeakable abuses (Queen Haley or Dorothy Dandridge), Berry has also morphed into the seductively haunted

psychiatrist of *Gothika* (Mathieu Kassovitz, 2003), or the feral Catwoman of dramatic deaths, multiple reincarnations and dominatrix-style leather outfits (*Catwoman*, Pitof, 2004). She is the honey-voiced and flamboyantly attired Zola Taylor, the ex-wife of teen idol turned heroin addict Frankie Lymon (*Why Do Fools Fall in Love*, Gregory Nava, 1998). She is Nina, the May-December paramour of Jay Bulworth (*Bulworth*, Warren Beatty, 1998). In more recent years, she has portrayed tortured characters like the golden skinned 1970s stripper with multiple personalities in *Frankie and Alice* (Geoffrey Sax, 2010), and an attractive but visibly distressed 911 operator whose severe guilt over bungling the rescue of a murder victim converts into her obsession to save the next beautiful victim from a sexual predator in *The Call* (Brad Anderson, 2013). But of all these roles, Leticia in *Monster's Ball* is the ultimate victim. She is martyred and exploited far more than Berry's other characters: she is the sole survivor of a family of black men who are destroyed by their own vices, and she wants Hank to give her only the most basic carnal satisfaction.

Inevitably, Berry's legacy requires one to ask whether it is possible for mixed-raced characters, even at the turn of the twenty-first century, to not be reduced to a sexualized objectification, especially in visual culture. Compared to the legacies of heroines from centuries ago, it is obvious that in the twenty-first century, bi- and multiracial individuals, as well as the mixed marriages and unions that produce such sons and daughters, have become normalized and even celebrated in popular culture. Recent commercials (which aired during the administration of Barack Obama, the first biracial American president) have depicted interracial families and mixed-race individuals in loving households, including the cherubic biracial daughter in a 2013 Cheerios commercial, who pours cereal on her sleeping black father's chest and then innocently asks her white mother if Cheerios are good for a person's heart, or the gleeful boy and girl who

help their African American mother and their disabled white father clean their living room in a 2014 Swiffer advertisement.

In a broader scope, these images portray mixed love itself (both the love for bi and multiracial children, as well as the love for partners of different races) as highly commonplace. Such contemporary portrayals are indeed far different from the perpetually doomed “mulattas” who once persisted in the literature and film of earlier generations. Yet in spite of these moments of the pride, celebration and even the normalization of biracial identity, when Halle Berry’s most recognizable roles are factored into the modern day perceptions of biraciality, these images of her highly eroticized characters have the power to succeed in returning mixed-race identity to nothing more than a fetish, or a visual feast of desire and destruction before the camera lens. Ultimately, Berry becomes so associated with her long suffering characters that she becomes like a character herself, to be read by viewers as the proverbial sum of her own alluring parts (her bared flesh, her cropped, disheveled or perfectly coiffed waves of hair, her golden skin that can be made up to look seductive or glamorous, or raw with wounds or desperate tears) that are the product of her unique mixed background.

End Notes

1. In 1892, Louisiana train passenger Homer Plessy, who was one-eighth black, was denounced as a trespasser on an all-white railcar, and arrested when he refused to remove himself to the colored-only car. Four years later, Plessy brought his case before the United States Supreme Court on the grounds that his civil rights had been violated. However, the court ruled (7-1) against Plessy, and deemed that segregation in public spaces was not unconstitutional. This landmark decision paved the way for “separate but equal” laws and mentalities to segregate virtually all aspects of white and black life, from train travel to schools to hospitals and cemeteries. It can also be argued that such divisions also had the consequence of preventing mixed individuals from fully identifying or belonging in either strictly divided realm.

2. Brown's titular heroine is the fictitious, deceptively white bastard daughter of President Thomas Jefferson. Nonetheless, Clotel's fraction of blackness automatically cancels any semblance of white privilege that she might be entitled to. She is born into slavery and sold to a series of masters (many of whom are sexually abusive toward her) during her adolescence. Not only is Clotel doomed to a lifetime of bondage and humiliation, but as a racially mixed slave she is despised by her mistresses and objectified by her masters, as well as she is distrusted by the darker slaves. Ultimately, as is typical of many tragic heroines, Clotel dies a dramatic death, choosing to drown herself in the Potomac Rivers rather than surrender to the slave catchers from whom she is fleeing.
3. *The House Behind the Cedars* takes place during the start of Reconstruction. The heroine Rena Walden exists amid a prominent population of freed blacks and racially mixed citizens in a fictitious town in North Carolina. The illegitimate daughter of a quadroon mother and a white father, Rena can pass as white, and dreads being "seen" by her community as "black." Compounding Rena's inner conflicts is her romantic involvement with a charming but flagrantly racist white suitor who, when he eventually discovers what she is, takes revenge upon her by having her abandoned in the woods during a rainstorm. Rena contracts a fever during this ordeal and, though she dies in bed, her suffering is nonetheless exaggerated and eroticized. Deprived of her faculties and her sanity, she sweats and moans incoherently, and is reduced amid the bedclothes to a childlike and even a feral state.
4. Angela Murray is a talented and glamorous New Yorker who passes for white (and even changes her name to "Angele") both to gain esteem as an artist and to secure the affections of her boyfriend Roger. However, when she is eventually outed as a "black" woman, she is jeered and rejected by both her lover *and* her peers as an intruder in both the classroom and the bedroom. After a different failed love affair with a biracial Brazilian man who himself was trying to "pass" as a non-Latino, Angela/Angele sojourns to Paris—a metropolis imagined by Fauset not just as the proverbial promised land for an aspiring artist, but also as a race-blind oasis that is an ocean away from a racially striated America. But what is also tantamount to Angela's story is the fact that she looks beautiful in the face of her psychological torment. She may not die a dramatic death, but she is still sensationalized as the jeered and humiliated classmate with the fashionable chin-length hair, or the lover in the delectable "flame colored" cocktail dress who is desperately clings to an emotionally cruel man who rejects her.
5. Chicagoan Clare Kendry has been commonly vilified as a race traitor, not only by other characters in this novella, but also in existent scholarly discourse on the intertwined subject matters of *Passing* and biraciality. The daughter of a black mother and an alcoholic white father, Clare passes for white to maintain her racist husband's affections as well as to maintain her status in Chicago's high society. Eventually, Clare's inner yearnings for a connection to her black ancestry compel her to search for kinship among a black social circle of friends, to the extent of completely denying her partial whiteness. Ultimately, Clare's confused life culminates in her beautified death. Shortly after her

horrified husband discovers her blackness, she falls to her death from a sixth story apartment window at an all black house party. Larsen's imagery in these final paragraphs succeed in resurrecting Clare's otherwise unpleasant exit into a stylized stream of vibrant hues: "One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone...Gone! The soft, white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole torturing loveliness that had been Clare Kendry" (111).

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“I’m from the future. You should go to China.”:

***Looper* as Representative of U.S. Anxieties about China**



Robert Gordon Joseph

The 2012 science-fiction film *Looper* (Johnson, 2012) portrays a future that reflects anxieties grounded in the present. The film follows Joe (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), a gun-for-hire working as an assassin for the mob. Called “loopers,” these assassins work for gangsters from the future, who send enemies back in time to be killed and incinerated. When Joe’s employers send back his older self from the future (Bruce Willis), and Joe refuses to kill “himself,” the older and younger Joes both become fugitives on the run from the mob. These plot convolutions make for intriguing science fiction, but what is more interesting is the universe that writer/director Rian Johnson creates around these characters, a universe that is grounded in a specific anxiety in American culture.

The city in which Joe lives, which goes unnamed but is somewhere in Kansas, is a run-down dystopia, with deprivation so widespread that crime regularly spills into the surrounding

countryside. While negative portrayals of the U.S. are quite common in American science fiction, what complicates this dystopia is the alternative utopia within the film's universe: a peaceful, prosperous People's Republic of China (PRC). The placement of the PRC as a utopia highlights the film's depiction of the United States as a future dystopia, inviting the viewer, as with any effective science fiction, to consider how this vision of the future reflects realities of the present.

The origins of this on-screen portrayal lie partly in the details of the film's production. *Looper* was co-produced by Tri-Star Pictures (a division of Sony Pictures Entertainment), the American-owned production companies FilmDistrict and Endgame Entertainment, and DMG Entertainment, a Chinese advertising and film production company. As such, the film qualifies as a Chinese-American co-production, a status guaranteeing foreign studios a Chinese market release and favorable tax credit. In exchange, the production is required to film on-location in China, and to insert "Chinese elements" into the story (Montlake). This status is coveted by Hollywood studios looking to break into the world's fastest-growing global movie market, though acquiring it involves enduring negotiation with a government with a reputation for obfuscating bureaucracy (Ma and Burkitt.; Masters).

In this essay, I argue that altering films to appease the Chinese government, as in the case of *Looper*, is becoming the rule of Hollywood, as studios must consider the market appeal of any blockbuster in relation to their most important international market. I further argue that *Looper*'s on-screen portrayals of China and the United States reflect American anxieties regarding the rise of China. While avoiding an overtly negative portrayal of China, *Looper*'s "country of the future" approach discloses American anxieties about the rise of China by juxtaposing them with imagery of a United States in decline. Representations of these anxieties are a growing trend

within Hollywood cinema, and can be found in an increasing number of film collaborations between Hollywood and China. Given Hollywood studios' increasing reliance on the Chinese market for their bottom line, American blockbusters will continue avoiding negative portrayals of China to prevent alienating a Chinese government with a history of blackballing uncooperative Hollywood studios. One way for U.S. filmmakers to craft "positive" representations of China, and at the same time convey American anxiety about losing status in the global economic-political structure, is to present the U.S. as a place of decline and decay.

Context: Collaboration and Representation

To date, Hollywood's cinematic collaborations with China have been the subject of much academic attention. Previous articles include textual analyses of the effect of co-production status on Chinese-American collaborations such as the martial arts films *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Lee, 2000) and the 2010 remake of *The Karate Kid* (Zwart). For example, Georgette Wang and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh compare *Crouching Tiger* with the Disney animated film *Mulan* (Bancroft and Cook, 1998) to highlight the strengths of *Crouching Tiger*'s more multicultural approach. These studies also explore the effects of U.S.-Chinese funding on the representation of the culture on-screen. Chen Shao-Chun and Christina Klein both analyze *Crouching Tiger* as a work of diaspora, attributing the film's hyper-Chinese elements to the Taiwanese-American perspective of Ang Lee. Michael Berry looks at how *The Karate Kid* has been appropriated by Chinese cinema, despite the preponderance of American funding, actors, and crew. Berry also notes a trend within these early co-productions, which also include *The Forbidden Kingdom* (Minkoff, 2008) and *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* (Cohen, 2008), of "an extremely conservative filmmaking style laden with stereotypes and time-worn

tropes” (177). Indeed, the scholarship also highlights that early Sino-Hollywood co-productions included a heightening of what Wang and Yeh label “Chineseness” within the films’ stories, in which internationally-recognizable Ancient Chinese culture is hyper-realized on-screen for global audiences (179). The research shows that these initial realizations of China on-screen, vastly different than the future China of *Looper*, can be attributed to the circumstances of the films’ productions.

Rather than focusing on individual case studies, other analyses of film collaboration between China and the U.S. examine the larger economic trends in productions involving the two countries. In *Framing Piracy*, Shujen Wang offers a concise overview of how Chinese film bureaucracy operates in relation to the piracy of Hollywood products by Chinese consumers. In “Hollywood and China as Adversaries and Allies,” Wan Jihong and Richard Kraus analyze the effects of Hollywood’s early forays into the Chinese market. Wang’s study is legal in nature, exploring piracy in China to understand its significance in relation to intellectual property and the dissemination of ideas. By comparison, Jihong and Kraus’ work is more grounded in cultural studies, exploring cultural imperialism and utilizing political economy inquiries to present Hollywood and China’s relationship in terms of cultural negotiation.

The most comprehensive and relevant English language scholarship on Sino-American film relations is the work of Wendy Su, who has published multiple articles on Chinese methods for dealing with Hollywood encroachment. Her first article, tracking the period from 1994 to 2000, analyzes the strategic logic of China’s decision to allow U.S. films to be shown in Chinese theaters following the forty-five-year embargo (2010). She revisits the Chinese-U.S. film relationship two more times, analyzing the subject in later articles to account for developments in U.S. import and Chinese production policies through 2007 and 2012 (2011; 2014). Throughout

all of these articles, Su insists that the key to understanding the U.S.-China film dynamic is not through the lens of cultural imperialism, which overvalues external determinants and characterizes audiences as too passive (2010, 39). Rather, Su calls for a framework that maintains cultural imperialism's thesis of power through international communication while accounting for the Chinese government as an active player in a hegemonic struggle with the United States.

I find Su's conclusions important regarding both the reality of the production and the nature of the representation of Chinese in *Looper*. A foundational concept of cultural imperialism is the desire by the colonial power to dominate and subjugate the other by economic means (Said, 2-3). The nature of Hollywood's current intervention into China, in which studio participation in the Chinese market is conditional on co-partnerships that satisfy Chinese requirements, provides a challenge to a view of the U.S. as an imperial power in this instance, and invites a more balanced perspective along the lines of Su's understanding. This perspective does, of course, include recognition that there has been a disparity in representation through stereotypes, by which Western powers have enforced their fixed, unchallenged understanding of the other (Bhaba, 66). This trend has a long legacy in Hollywood, particularly in representation of Asians through yellow-face and predatory, Fu Manchu-esque stereotypes. The representations of China and Chinese in Sino-Hollywood collaborations are still not balanced; American, predominantly-white actors are still heavily favored over native Chinese performers. However, while early co-productions such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *The Karate Kid* frame China as exotic and other, the Chinese government now draws the line at representations of Chinese nationals which they deem negative. This attitude has led to the censorship of both *Men in Black 3* (Sonnenfeld, 2012) for featuring stereotypical Chinese-Americans and *Skyfall*

(Mendes, 2012) for its references to Chinese government corruption (see Masters; Cox). This overt enforcement of positive representations of Chinese nationals illustrates the role of the Chinese government as a player with agency in film production.

Academic studies of *Looper* have focused on religious themes and the use of science-fiction conventions within the story, but have not examined the film's "Chinese elements" (see Nail; Bould). To connect the film to its co-production status, and build on Wendy Su's look at the Hollywood-China connection, this discussion views *Looper* as representative of a trend in which China appears as a dominant (if not *the* dominant) power within the universes of Hollywood films. It also focuses on the text's significance in relation to its U.S. audience to explore ways in which the film reflects complications and ambivalences in American global perspectives. To consider the text and the context of *Looper*, this discussion links the film's mise-en-scene with the circumstances that led to production choices, and uses rhetorical analysis, specifically considerations of the "representative anecdote," which will allow for reconciliation of the production context with its effect not only on the final on-screen product, but also on ways that product might be understood by U.S. audiences (Brummett).

The Rise of the Chinese Film Market

As noted earlier, from the ascension to power of People's Republic of China in the late 1940s through the early 1990s, no U.S. film was shown legally in China. Despite Hollywood cinema's growing global hegemony in the current "Age of the Blockbuster," China remained an exception to U.S. film dominance through a Chinese government-enforced blackout (King). This blackout was discontinued in 1993, the year the PRC established a system of revenue sharing with foreign studios. This system initially allowed for an annual quota of ten imported films

(Wang, 62). This quota was expanded to twenty upon China's admission into the World Trade Organization in 2001, and to thirty-four in 2009, with a 25% profit share for the foreign studios (Wang, 62).¹ These measures were implemented partly to curb the rampant piracy of Hollywood films in China, ensuring profits for Hollywood and the Chinese government from films many Chinese were watching anyway (Montlake). Such measures, combined with the tremendous expansion of movie theaters and Chinese film attendance throughout the mainland, make China the fastest-growing, most lucrative foreign market for Hollywood films (Ebiri).

Despite these concessions to foreign investors, significant obstacles remain for Hollywood studios. The China Film Group (CFG), the state-run corporation overseeing all film distribution in China, maintains a non-transparent regulatory process. Every film's script must pass the CFG's board of censors, and any material deemed offensive to Chinese culture is cut from the Chinese release (Montlake). Because of this hurdle, many Hollywood studios seek a different route to the Chinese market: co-production status. If a film receives this co-production status, a studio can circumvent the quota system and receive 38% of the gross, a significantly larger cut than the foreign studio 25% share (Montlake). Co-production status is difficult to achieve. Not only must the film be partially funded by a Chinese production company, but it must also contain "Chinese elements," and be partially filmed in China (Montlake).

If the term "Chinese elements" sounds vague, it is because the label reflects a strategic lack of governmental transparency. The China Hollywood Society, a network of American and Chinese film executives established in Los Angeles in 2011, gives American producers additional information and a translation of guidelines provided by the state-run China Film Co-Production Corporation (CFCC). For example, the Society explains that in addition to Chinese investment, qualifying for "Joint Production" status requires a "Chinese cast [to] constitute at

least one-third of the main cast members.” Finally, the proposed film must pass censorship review with the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT), the administrative body of the state-owned Chinese media. Yet other than the quantitative casting requirements, no further elaboration as to what exactly are “Chinese elements” is offered (“About Co-productions”).

With no clear guidelines available in print, one way to identify the Chinese government’s requirements is to take an existing co-production like *Looper* and work backwards. *Looper* was co-produced by DMG Entertainment, a Chinese firm that co-produced Warner Bros.’ *Transcendence* (Pfister, 2014) and was the Chinese distributor of Disney/Marvel’s *Iron Man 3* (Black, 2013). In addition to co-funding and distribution by DMG, *Looper* filmed on-location in Shanghai and cast Chinese actress Summer Qing as Joe’s eventual love interest. Though neither Qing nor any other Chinese actor has a speaking role in the film’s U.S. version,² enough extras show up in the brief Shanghai sequence that one-third of the film’s cast may well be Chinese.

Such alterations are now commonplace in Hollywood films released in China, even in films that never receive co-production status. In *Iron Man 3*, American superhero Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) goes to China to undergo a crucial medical operation. The film also features the Mandarin (Ben Kingsley), a popular villain from the original comic books, whose original appearance resembles the stereotypical Fu Manchu mystic. However, for *Iron Man 3*, the Mandarin is altered into a white actor playing an Arab terrorist, yet another story choice with a clear origin in contemporary anxieties. Finally, as in *Looper*, a longer version of *Iron Man 3* was released to the Chinese mainland, in which the Chinese doctor and his assistant are given more scenes and a more prominent place in the narrative. While these scenes, as with *Looper*, were criticized by some Chinese audiences for their apparent disconnect from the main story, the film

was a box office smash in China, in no small part because the film erased any trace of orientalist stereotypes from the original source material (Ashcraft).

While *Looper* and *Iron Man 3* are prominent examples of altered Hollywood productions, they are far from the only films with positive Chinese representations. In *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (Bay, 2014), the Chinese government and military are depicted as more competent than the U.S. government, which appears corrupt by comparison (Cohen). Instead of Tokyo, Hong Kong is prominently featured in the monster movie *Pacific Rim* (Del Toro, 2013), despite Japan's status as founder of the *kaiju* subgenre. While *Iron Man 3*, *Transformers: Age of Extinction*, and *Pacific Rim* were all released in China to tremendous success, none qualified as co-productions, demonstrating the extent to which even films under the quota system must comply with Chinese regulatory expectations.

Earning a co-production categorization for *Looper* provided Tri-Star Pictures a guaranteed Chinese market release and a bigger cut of the proceeds than if the film were released through China's quota system. This arrangement shifts the balance of power to favor Chinese regulatory bodies, as government censorship boards have final cut of Hollywood films shown in mainland Chinese multiplexes. This relationship is one to which Hollywood studios are willing, if not eager, to capitulate, as they rely increasingly on the Chinese market to make up for declining domestic attendance (Roxborough). This situation also provides the CFG with obvious leverage in dictating how its country is portrayed on-screen. Yet these increased positive representations of China also ironically feed into pre-existing U.S. cultural anxieties.

U.S. Anxieties about China

The economically-prosperous Shanghai of *Looper* can be materially attributed to Chinese

co-production funding, given director Rian Johnson's statements that locations in the script were altered from France to China to take advantage of Chinese subsidization. Yet this representation of a future China can be understood through the lens of U.S. anxieties towards the China in the present. In her analysis of Chinese representation in Hollywood films, Naomi Greene notes how "China [still] casts the darkest of shadows over contemporary America" (181). Rather than taking the form of the sinister orientalist stereotypes of the past, this shadow is defined by "other factors—economic, cultural, and social—[that] have conspired to banish earlier stereotypes and foster radically changed representations of China" (ibid). Greene focuses on Chinese representations in relation to historical stereotypes, placing Hollywood's increased representations of China against the backdrop of growing multiculturalism in the U.S. While she does not delve into U.S. anxieties regarding China, her wording for China casting "the darkest of shadows" is prescient; while contemporary U.S. anxiety towards China is divorced from xenophobia that took the form of stereotypes, today's anxieties stem from the fear of a future China overtaking the economic and political supremacy of the United States.

These anxieties are grounded in current events regarding the economic and political ascension of China. From the rise of Deng Xiaoping to de facto leader of Communist China in the late 1970s through the country's present status, the PRC has embarked on a policy of economic growth through engagement with global capitalism. These efforts have resulted in China becoming the fastest-growing economy in the world. In addition to achieving an average GDP growth that the World Bank estimates at ten percent, the PRC has also greatly expanded its manufacturing base during a period of gradual deindustrialization in the United States ("GDP per Capita Growth (annual %)"). Regardless of causation, a correlation between Chinese ascension and U.S. decline has made "the China problem" a political debate in the United States.

Far from being isolated to political elites and policy wonks, this debate has permeated the consciousness of the American populace. In 2011, a year before the release of *Looper*, a national survey conducted by Xavier University revealed that sixty-five percent of Americans believe that America is in decline, with fifty-two percent naming China as the nation that the rest of the world looks to as the power of the future (“Survey: America in Decline, China on the Rise”). In the subsequent years, China has remained in the national imaginary, coming up in the form of currency cheating during the 2012 presidential election, hacking scandals involving U.S. corporations and the Chinese military, and Chinese military expansion into artificial islands in the South China Sea (see Judis; Fantz; Agence France-Presse). Heightened anxieties about the danger posed by China has declined in more recent years due to the rise of terrorist threats like ISIS, the recovery of the U.S. economy, and the relative decline of China’s economy (Jones). However, the rhetorical posturing by presidential candidate Donald Trump during the 2016 Republican primary, in which U.S. success is framed in relation to defeating Mexico and China in trade, was embraced by a sizable amount of the American electorate.³ The tone of this political debate, its ongoing coverage by the U.S. media, and continued concerns by Republican voters, assures that Chinese economic and political ascension is still seen as a danger by many Americans (“Republicans More Concerned than Democrats about China on Most Issues”).

Connected to these economic anxieties are perceptions of China as a threat to U.S. global sovereignty. In his overview of Sino-American rhetorical exchanges in the twentieth century, Xing Lu notes that even though relations between the two countries softened through political dialogue in the 1970s, neither the U.S. government nor the American public fully trusts China as a world partner. He further notes in the 1980s and 90s, “[a]s China became even more economically successful, the United States began to view China as a threat” (345-346). Lu

argues that despite these tensions, the United States and China are now more economically interdependent than ever, with China holding the largest amount of U.S. Treasury bonds (349). While Lu does not go into Sino-American interactions and the film market, these interactions are a key component of the two countries' economic relationship. This global context is crucial to an understanding of the "Chinese" elements of *Looper*.

The Utopic China of *Looper*

Twenty minutes into *Looper*, the younger Joe is grilled by his boss, Abe (Jeff Daniels). Abe is from the future, sent back in time to run the loopers for the criminal syndicate that sends their enemies back in time to be killed and disposed of. Abe says he knows that Joe saves half of the silver he earns as a looper to plan for the future, along with "studying up [his] Mandarin." When Joe corrects Abe and says he is practicing French, Abe is incredulous:

Abe: "Why the fuck French?"

Joe: "I'm going to France."

Abe: "You should go to China."

Joe: "I'm going to France."

Abe: "I'm from the future. You should go to China."

This throwaway exchange, unrelated to the main topic of conversation, demonstrates the film's relationship with the United States, China, and the future. As shown on-screen to that point, the primary location of the film, an unnamed city in Kansas, is a ruin. Homeless people live in camps in the streets, while Abe controls the city with little effort. Abe's remark, the first mention of China in the film, hints at a society of such unhindered progress that a young man of means would be crazy not to travel there. This promise comes to fruition in the later scenes filmed in Shanghai, with the Chinese metropolis presented as a utopic counterpoint to the Kansas dystopia.

Despite the large role the country eventually plays in the film's production and story, the

original screenplay for *Looper* makes no mention of China. When Rian Johnson's initial draft called for Joe to travel to France, working with significant budgetary restrictions, the writer-director faced the daunting task of transforming New Orleans' French Quarter into the streets of Paris (Johnson, audio commentary to *Looper*). During pre-production, the American producers were offered an alternative by DMG Entertainment, the film's Chinese distributor: shoot part of the movie in China and the film can be subsidized as a co-production. The American producers agreed, and Johnson changed the script to accommodate the agreement. While Johnson initially rejected the idea, "the more I thought about it, the more I thought, you know what, in some weird way, it actually makes sense if it takes place in China" (Zakarin). Though Johnson does not elaborate on this, in addition to the obvious monetary incentive, the script change "makes sense" because of the current socioeconomic dynamic between China and the United States, which enhances and complicates the significance of the script's vision of American decline. This unresolved tension results in a representation of a future utopic China that stands in stark contrast with the film's fictional United States.

Ten minutes after Joe and Abe's exchange, the film features a sequence compressing thirty years of the story into a three-minute montage. In this sequence, Joe follows Abe's advice: he takes a shipping freighter to China, finding a country in a very different state of affairs than his own. The first image of Shanghai is a CGI rendering of a cargo ship arriving in a harbor, revealing a bright, clean-looking skyline of a futuristic city (Frei).⁴ The film cuts to Joe on the ground level in the middle of a city plaza. The camera pans as Joe observes a large crowd that includes an old couple walking, a child flying a kite, and young people smiling and going about their business. The shot ends on Joe standing in front of a futuristic Shanghai skyline, with the caption "SHANGHAI" fading in and out of the top-right corner of the screen, just as Joe smiles

over his shoulder at a pair of young women walking past him. The on-screen connotation is clear: Shanghai is an orderly, prosperous, and safe city.

The subsequent shots in the sequence only reinforce this prosperity. In one brief shot, Joe walks down an alley with Chinese children playing soccer, playfully kicking the ball back as he passes them. Other shots feature Joe smoking in his enormous loft overlooking the skyline, partying in a crowded nightclub, and walking in a populated courtyard. Cut together to the film's electronic score, these brief glimpses into Joe's life establish a rhythm of orderliness. In none of the shots is there a hint of poverty.

Moments in this Chinese sequence hint at a less utopic reality. They involve Joe's return to a life of crime as his money runs out and drug habit escalates. He is later shown blowing up a store front, participating in drive-by shootings, and getting into a bar fight. While diminishing China's pristine image, these violent acts are framed in a different manner than the violence in Kansas. The establishing shots of the American city reveal a violent world, with the first street-level shot is of a man openly wielding a shotgun in the street. By contrast, the establishing shots of a tranquil Shanghai frame the later violent incidents as disruptions of a status quo, in which violence comes in from the outside (and, notably, from the U.S.) and upsets the balance. Shanghai's utopic status is only broken by the arrival of a cultural outsider.

The change from Paris to China in the script thus "makes sense" from the story's perspective that reflects anxieties in the United States towards Chinese economic ascension. However, there is a more practical reason that this script change makes sense: the lure of a government-subsidized location shoot. This evidence alone draws a connection between positive Chinese representation and material incentive to do so. However, what makes *Looper* an even more compelling text is its juxtaposition of Chinese prosperity with U.S. desolation.

The Dystopic United States of *Looper*

In *Looper*'s second half, as Joe is hiding from the criminal syndicate in the countryside outside the Kansas city, a woman (Emily Blunt) who eventually takes Joe in initially mistakes him for a vagabond trespassing on her farmland. "I have shot and buried three vagrants in the past year," she warns him as she brandishes a shotgun, "so I don't care what hobo sob story you got, I get a dozen a week pal, it cuts no cash with me." The threat turns out to be a bluff, but the prevalence of homeless raids is a real threat. Later in the film, the woman's son (Pierce Gagnon) describes a recent past when things were grimmer: "My granddad built this tunnel when the vagrant raids got bad," he tells Joe as they explore a shelter below the farm. The topic of vagrant raids is never mentioned again or explored in more detail, but these two small details hint at a time in which desperate homeless people resort to violence and organize mobs to survive. In this future United States in *Looper*, there is an inability to contain crime to the cities.

Looper's opening scenes take place in this rural Kansas, with Joe navigating sugarcane fields, a derelict power plant, and a country diner in his work as an assassin. After about three minutes, Joe drives his truck towards a futuristic-looking metropolis in the distance. The skyline in the distance features multiple skyscrapers, one resembling an even more colossal version of Chicago's Willis Tower. The following shot is framed within the city itself: futuristic-looking skyscrapers, hologram billboards, a low-flying helicopter, and double-layered lattices appearing to be massive elevated highways. While such a futuristic-looking vista might hint at a technologically-progressed civilization, shots of the city on the ground dash this promise.

Rather than resembling the tranquility and order in Shanghai, the first ground-level shot of Joe in the city in Kansas reveals desolation. The camera tilts down to ground-level, revealing a disheveled man brandishing a shotgun, homeless camps on the side of the road, and a pawn shop.

A street preacher can be heard off-screen. As Joe drives through the chaos, disheveled men, women, and children crowd the streets, some living in tents and abandoned cars, indicating widespread urban decay. In one tracking shot, a young man in a hooded sweatshirt attempts to steal a bag from an older man next to a broken-down school bus. The victim immediately pulls a shotgun from under the hood of the bus, shooting the thief in the back as he runs away. While the people on the street react in mild surprise, Joe does not even bother to slow down (or speed up) his convertible. Later in the film, Joe speeds his car through the city streets while high, barely avoiding a dirty young child in the middle of the street clutching a soccer ball. While the Shanghai children are shown laughing and playing soccer, the Kansas child is solitary and destitute, his blank stare fixed on Joe. That each city features sequences highlighting the safety level of children establishes a clear parallel, with one city turning children into criminals, while the other is so safe that children can play in the streets without worry.

While most Americans in the future appear either homeless or desperate-looking, the gangsters thrive. Crime boss Abe holds court in a vault-like room in the basement of a burlesque nightclub. The only time any police show up in the film is when Abe calls them to his club during a crisis. Abe's henchmen are well-paid and dressed. Joe himself has an impressive loft apartment with appliances, a floor safe, and a parking garage to house his convertible. Like the rest of the loopers, Joe is paid with four silver bars for every target from the future he kills. At one of Abe's pawn shops, he is given the option to turn in his silver for hard currency. That the currency is the Chinese renminbi (with Chairman Mao's face gracing the bill) reemphasizes the lack of U.S. government infrastructure while further alluding to Chinese economic dominance.

The U.S. dystopia in *Looper* thus operates as the second component of this cultural apprehension, as China ascends economically as the United States descends. This economic

deterioration is highlighted by the production dynamics of the Kansas-set scenes, which were filmed in New Orleans and Thibodaux, Louisiana. In the Shanghai scenes, city landmarks like Oriental Pearl Tower and Aurora Plaza are “dressed up” with CGI skyscrapers and walkways to resemble a city of the future. Meanwhile New Orleans, a city still rebuilding a decade after Hurricane Katrina, is “dressed down” to resemble an anarchic ruin somewhere in Kansas. This production choice can also be attributed to favorable tax credits, this time offered by the State of Louisiana (Scott). While the Louisiana location leads to the curious idea of sugar cane fields in Kansas, it also reflects the film’s production reality. For *Looper*’s production, a struggling U.S. city alters its exterior to resemble a dystopia for the promise of economic stimulus, while the Chinese government leverages Shanghai into representing the civilization of the future.

Erasure of Negative Portrayals of China

As a representative anecdote, *Looper* stands in not only for U.S. anxieties towards China, but for broader patterns of this representation in media, “the same *story structure* to be told in different guises” (Brummett, 163). The film exemplifies not only how Americans feel about present and future Chinese ascension, but also a trend of films with the financial incentive to portray China as a power of the future. To further demonstrate the potential effect this trend of positive Chinese representation could have, one can compare it with another intersecting trend in U.S. cinema: the erasure of negative Chinese representations in film.

An explicit erasure of Chinese elements can be found in the 2012 remake of *Red Dawn* (Bradley), a film that practically diagrams the intersection of U.S. cultural anxieties with Chinese ascendance. While the original *Red Dawn* (Milius, 1984) featured an invasion of the United States by the Soviet Union and its communist allies, this remake replaced the original Soviet

coalition with the Chinese. While anachronistic, such a ham-fisted application of Cold War hostilities to modern U.S.-Chinese relations is at least grounded in the rhetorical tensions outlined by Xing Lu. However, following criticism of the production in the Chinese press and the bankruptcy of MGM, the film was re-written and digitally altered in post-production, replacing all characters and references to China with North Koreans (Landreth).

This change opened the film to ridicule upon release; Roger Ebert, aware of the script change, ironically wonders how a nation with a population of 25 million could possibly invade a country of 315 million (Ebert). Yet this drastic alteration was likely done to avoid alienating the Chinese government for *future* studio releases, as *Red Dawn* did not even receive a Chinese distribution. Ben Fritz and John Horn of the *Los Angeles Times* note that at the time, MGM was developing *The Hobbit* adaptations and a future James Bond film, the kind of blockbuster properties most appealing to international markets like China. Fritz and Horn also write that while MGM shopped the film around to other studios, none expressed interest because “they couldn’t risk distributing it given the potential blowback in China.” Given that the Chinese government blackballed three studios, including MGM, in the 1990s for releasing films critical of China,⁵ fear of further retribution against a studio for releasing an anti-Chinese *Red Dawn* is realistic, and a risk the financially-troubled MGM could not afford to take.

Red Dawn was a critical and financial failure, and the benefits of its erasure of Chinese elements remain speculative. A more prominent example of a negative Chinese portrayal in Hollywood cinema, with more concrete financial causation, can be found in Warner Bros.’ Dark Knight Trilogy. The second film of the series, *The Dark Knight* (Nolan, 2008), features a Chinese antagonist named Lau (Chin Han), an unscrupulous Hong Kong financier fleeing Gotham City to avoid local prosecution. Such a negative representation of a Chinese national

was possible because Chinese funding was not a factor in the film's production, but the narrative choice came at a cost. While *The Dark Knight* was a global box office hit, the film's negative representation of a Chinese national prevented the film from acquiring Chinese distribution ("Dark Knight won't be on big screen in China").

Losing such a lucrative market is a mistake Warner Bros. would not make twice. By 2012, the year of *Looper*'s release, China had risen to the second-largest film market in the world (Statista). That same year, *The Dark Knight*'s sequel, *The Dark Knight Rises* (Nolan, 2012), secured a Chinese release, its story free of any offensive representations of China or Chinese culture. While *The Dark Knight Rises* grossed about \$91 million less domestically than its predecessor, the film actually out-grossed *The Dark Knight* by \$80 million with international markets taken into account. This difference is in no small part to the sequel's Chinese market release, where it made over \$57 million alone ("The Dark Knight"; "The Dark Knight Rises").

This transition between two franchise sequels, from a negative Chinese representation to no China at all, is further evidence of a reality highlighted by *Looper*: China is becoming a crucial market for Hollywood productions. In 2014, the Chinese box office rose by thirty-five percent; by mid-2015, it rose another fifty percent, putting it on track to surpass the United States box office by 2017 (*International Business Times*). While Hollywood had a record year in 2015 in terms of profits, attendance has fallen steadily for decades, and studios "are becoming more dependent than ever on global ticket buyers to bail them out" (Roxborough). Even if they wanted to, Hollywood studios can no longer afford to upset or ignore the Chinese government. As the Wharton School of Business' marketing professor Z. John Zhang puts it, "You will not see a Chinese communist as a villain in a Hollywood big budget movie anytime soon" ("China's Film Industry").

Conclusion

In the current economic environment, the Chinese market is crucial to Hollywood studios' bottom lines, and the PRC is willing to prevent negative depictions of their nationals by shutting studios out. The final products of this synergy are Hollywood blockbusters that either portray China positively or avoid negative portrayals. *Looper* remains an example of the former, representing U.S. cultural tensions towards China while still framing the communist nation in a positive light. While these more positive portrayals avoid the overt negativity of films like *The Dark Knight* and *Red Dawn*, as I have demonstrated with *Looper*, the preexisting apprehensions conceived during China's 1970s economic reform nonetheless frames representations of Chinese ascension in relation to U.S. decline. The final result is a pattern of representation that feeds into preexisting cultural anxieties, which at worst could reinforce and perpetuate antipathy towards China in the U.S. public, something already being accomplished in right-wing political discourse. While this outcome is perhaps unlikely, as the Chinese market continues to rise, so will its citizens' appetites for Hollywood films. Accordingly, Hollywood studios will continue providing entertainment scrubbed clean of any political controversy concerning China.

In July 2015, the Chinese stock market crashed, leading to a recession with major domestic and global implications. However, even with this potential setback in market growth, experts argue that this recession will not adversely affect the growth of multiplexes in China. Discussing the recession, *BoxOffice* magazine Vice President Phil Contrino notes that "Moviegoing tends to be recession-proof," and "Despite the turmoil in the Chinese economy, people are still going to the movies" (quoted in Ebiri). Furthermore, given reported rumors of the of foreign film quota "[increasing] significantly," Hollywood's reliance on Chinese markets will only increase (Brzeski "Accused of Hiding Money"). As long as Chinese government regulation

of cinema, American cultural tensions, and Chinese economic growth all continue unabated, fictional futures such as the Chinese utopia of *Looper* will continue finding their way into Hollywood films.

End Notes

¹ It was also stipulated that the additional 14 films must be in either 3D or IMAX format.

² One caveat worth mentioning: *Looper* was released in two versions, one for China, and one for the U.S. and other international markets. By first-hand accounts online, the Chinese version contains extended scenes involving Bruce Willis and Summer Qing interacting with each other. Despite repeated attempts through multiple channels, I was not able to find a home video or digital version of this film. It appears to have never been released in any medium other than its initial theatrical run.

³ Tellingly, while Trump has not shied away from describing Mexico and its population through longstanding stereotypes (“They’re murderers. They’re rapists.”), he has avoided equivalent stereotypes of Chinese/Asians when describing the Chinese threat, characterizing China instead as a vague economic threat along similar lines as the country appears in *Looper*.

⁴ The original live-action shot, or “plate,” from which this CGI shot was rendered was footage of San Francisco Bay. This shot is the only Shanghai exterior that uses another American city: the rest work with footage of China. From Vincent Frei, “Looper: Ryan Tudhope – Co-founder & VFX Supervisor – Atomic Fiction,” *Art of VFX*, August 8, 2012, accessed March 1, 2012, <http://www.artofvfx.com/cgi-sys/suspendedpage.cgi?p=3080>.

⁵ Disney, Sony Pictures, and MGM were all blackballed from the Chinese market for respectively releasing *Kundun* (Scorsese, 1997), *Seven Years in Tibet* (Annaud, 1997), and *Red Corner* (Avnet, 1997) (Fritz and Horn).

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“Say ‘What’ One Mo’ Time”: Transmedia Storytelling and Racial Violence in the 21st Century through the lens of *The Boondocks*



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10 year-old Huey Freeman and his 8 year-old brother Riley are riding in the back seat of a late-model SUV driven by their wealthy neighbor, Ed Wuncler III (or “Ed the Third”). Ed the Third is accompanied in the front by his best friend, known only as “Gin Rummy”; both men are White, the boys are Black. Ed takes a big swig from a dark brown glass bottle of malt liquor (spilling some on his platinum chain with the letter “W”), while Rummy loads a metal round into the chamber of a semi-automatic rifle. The Freeman boys have just met Rummy and are naturally curious about him. Riley asks “So, y’all was in Iraq together?” to which Rummy responds “Yeah, we was in Iraq.” Unsatisfied by this curt reply, Riley asks “What did you do?” While checking the grip and laser guidance on what appears to be a “Desert Eagle” semi-automatic pistol, Rummy responds “We was lookin’ for weapons of mass destruction.” As Huey sits silently, Riley can’t help but prod a little further; “Did you ever find ‘em?”

Rummy quickly swivels around in his seat, the gun in his hand is raised; “You know goddamn well we ain’t find ‘em! What are you, some kinda political humorist?! You Gary

Trudeau up in this bitch?!” Ed interjects, “I was lookin’ for bitches but they had that carpet shit all over them and I couldn’t see what they look like. All that was really exposed was they eyes (gesturing with two fingers and opening his eyes widely). That wasn’t enough for me ‘cause, you know...shit, I’m looking at they eyes and they eyes could be pretty but then I take that carpet off...and then I got a tragedy.” Ed’s soliloquy lightens the mood in the car, but only for a heartbeat:

Rummy: “Well, naw, we ain’t find ‘em but I always say ‘the absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence.’”

Riley: “What?”

Rummy: “Simply because you don’t have evidence that something does exist does not mean that you have evidence that something doesn’t exist.”

Riley: (tilting his head to the side in confusion) “What?”

Rummy: “What country you from?”

Riley: “What?”

Rummy: “‘What’ ain’t no country I ever heard of? They speak English in ‘what’?”

Riley: “What?”

Rummy: (leaning close to Riley’s face) “English, motherfucker; do you speak it!?”

Riley: (weakly) “Yeah.”

Rummy: “So you understand the words I’m sayin’ to you?”

Riley: (voice trembling) “Yeah.”

Rummy: “Well what I’m sayin’ is that there are ‘known knowns’ and that there are ‘known unknowns’ but there’s also ‘unknown unknowns,’ thangs that we don’t know that we don’t know.”

Riley: (shrinking back into his seat) “What?”

Rummy: “Say ‘what’ again! Say...‘what’...again! I dare you. I double-dare you, motherfucker! Say ‘what’ one mo’ time!”

The conversation between a White male adult and a Black child illustrates, among other things, the paternalism of neoconservative politics. Lurking beyond the differences in the age of the speakers lay the disparities in power. Rummy is armed with multiple firearms and a bully’s loud rhetoric that will brook no criticism. For his part, Riley carries only simple, penetrating questions. In one brief exchange, *The Boondocks* rips the façade

off America's War on Terror, explores its elimination of dissent, and illumines the power of White Privilege in "color-blind," post-Civil Rights America.

The Boondocks television show (which aired on Cartoon Network from 2005-2014) is an example of contemporary storytelling and social critique that is central to the tradition of Black comedy in the United States. In particular, the episode referenced above entitled "A Date with the Health Inspector" deploys characters and themes of *The Boondocks* syndicated comic strip alongside elements unique to the TV show and adds important popular culture references to tackle questions of identity, racial terror, and justice. *The Boondocks* is one of a few series to address racial privilege and institutionalized violence against people of color. Some of the themes from this episode overlap with themes addressed in series like *The Wire* (HBO 2002-2008) and *Homeland* (Showtime 2011-present). However, Aaron McGruder's use of skilled comedians, celebrities, and mash-ups of political and pop culture icons helps *The Boondocks* stand out from live-action dramas or other satirical series.

Although visually similar to the classic anime series *Cowboy Bebop* (which aired in the U.S. on Cartoon Network in 2001), *The Boondocks* features a biologically related family instead of the fictive family of bounty hunters who travel on the spaceship "Bebop." Further, *The Boondocks* tackles themes like existentialism and justice in a recognizable contemporary setting, rather than in the relative comfort of post-apocalyptic communities in outer space featured in *Cowboy Bebop* (see Alderman; Jeffries). *The Boondocks* shares the premise of a family-based comedy with the highly successful animated show *Family Guy* (a Fox Network show, 1999 to the present), but that popular show is more simplistic and relies heavily on "gag humor" to cover for thin storytelling.

Further, *The Boondocks* is grounded in the Black experience, while *Family Guy* places any discussion of Blackness or race at the periphery of its discourse (see Amidi; Gillespie & Walker).

The Boondocks comic strip and, later, TV series centers on the lives of the Freeman family – Robert “Granddad” Freeman, 10 year-old Huey, and 8 year-old Riley – as they navigate the complicated social terrain of contemporary American suburbia. Like the comic strip, the TV show has examined a wide range of topics, from climate change and police brutality to hyper-masculinity in Hip Hop or the super-exploitative effects of unregulated capitalism. Creator Aaron McGruder eschews easy binaries of “good” v. “evil” and his team of writers and voice actors help to complicate audiences’ view of social phenomena while playing up the insecurities and shortcomings of the show’s central characters, Granddad, Huey, and Riley. Indeed, some regular readers/viewers might assert that *The Boondocks* does its heaviest lifting when exploring the myriad ways in which post-traumatic disorders inflect the behaviors of Black Americans. Even as McGruder and his crew delight in satirizing and critiquing contemporary political, social, and cultural icons (whether Black or White), they never lose sight of a core question: what is the truth of the relationship between Black men and America, their ostensive home? (see Howard).

In keeping with the best aspects of the Black comedic tradition in America, *The Boondocks* provides a way of describing and coping with the realities of persistent racial fascism. Its critique continues a tradition exemplified by intellectuals and leaders like bell hooks, Malcolm X, Angela Davis, and Martin Luther King, who linked America’s savage projections of violence overseas to racial oppression at home. By casting two well-known

Black entertainers, Charlie Murphy and Samuel L. Jackson as voice actors portraying the lawless White characters, Ed the III and Gin Rummy, McGruder and his team call attention to White Privilege, and the show exposes the commonplace operation of White power through witty writing, parody, and visual cues. The episode, “A Date with the Health Inspector,” explores which behaviors that American society sanctions and privileges, and examines ways in which media, state actors, and “peer pressure” work to create a “fog of war” that obscures reality.

The Boondocks, Black Comedy, and Television

Aaron McGruder created *The Boondocks* comic strip while he was an African American Studies major at the University of Maryland. The strip became syndicated in 1999 and ran in newspapers across the nation. Given its penchant for racial satire and social commentary, *The Boondocks* received mixed reviews. Many readers and critics dismissed it as “angry,” while others objected to what they perceived as the reinforcement of racist stereotypes. In fact, the comic strip was censored in some newspapers for its critique of then-President George W. Bush and many of his advisors. Lost on most critics is the fact that McGruder’s sharp wit takes aim at Blacks and Whites, rich and poor, Left/Liberals and Neo-Conservatives, alike (see Bruchey 1; Braxton). At least five of the episodes in the show’s inaugural season almost exclusively examine self-inflicted wounds within the Black community (episodes 2, 4, 6, 9, 13).

The Boondocks animated television show, featured on Cartoon Network’s “Adult Swim” block of programming, debuted in 2005 and its fourth season aired in 2014. Although the comic strip and show existed simultaneously only for a year, the expansion of the strip into a different medium signaled McGruder’s effort to reach a wider audience slightly different from the steady

consumers of the comic strip; “According to McGruder, younger adults ...are the target market for his Adult Swim series, and older adults who read the daily newspaper were the target market for his former comic strip” (Whaley 191).

At the heart of the comic strip is the Freeman family: Robert “Granddad” Freeman, and his grandsons, Huey and Riley. The story centers on Granddad’s relocation of the family to a predominantly White suburb and the “shock of arrival” felt by each member of the family (see Alexander). In the TV show, comedian John Witherspoon portrays Granddad and Emmy-Award winning actress Regina King voices both Huey and Riley. The family members represent three different iterations of the multi-faceted Black male experience in America.

On the surface, it appears that Granddad and 10-year-old Huey represent the competing and complimentary aspects of the modern Civil Rights Movement – nonviolent civil disobedience and Black Power – while 8-year-old Riley represents the overweening contemporary icon of the “Gangsta.” The hairstyles drawn for each character reinforce this notion, with Granddad’s conservative low-cut, clean-shaven style standing in stark contrast to Huey’s spiky Afro and Riley’s ever-present skull cap and (later) cornrows. Some observers see the brothers as markers of competing poles of Black culture and Granddad as their mediator (Whaley 192). However, on deeper reflection, the Freeman men seem to mark something other than political strands in contemporary Black history. Granddad is the respectable, aspiring Black man who is relatively well-educated, has worked hard all of his life, and aims to achieve satisfaction (if not comfort) by breaching the color barrier imposed by White Privilege through the purchase of a home in a White enclave. Granddad is a “striver,” representing a cohort of Blacks like Paul Cuffee, T. Thomas Fortune, or Madame C.J. Walker who consistently struggled to build wealth within an antagonistic environment. In many ways, Granddad reflects the power

and limits of the politics of respectability. In turn, Huey represents the activist, militant strand of Black masculinity through his overt critiques of power, his revolutionary manifestos, and his forays into direct action protest. Riley, on the other hand, represents the pragmatic element of Black manhood that does not believe it is possible to re-define the power relations that capture him and, thus, seeks a face-saving accommodation while simultaneously challenging Huey's idealism. Although Riley invokes analysis, styles, and idioms associated with "Gangsta Rap," his actions and rhetoric reveal a "mother wit" common to generations of Black people who have struggled to survive a society that does not welcome them. Riley sneers at both activism and White Privilege, since he is neither wide-eyed dreamer nor quiet integrationist. His comments, wrapped in the "cool pose" of young Black men, often underscore a sharp understanding of how the world actually exists, even if he feels powerless to change it (Allen iii; Howard 160-63).

The family's feelings of uncertainty are exacerbated by neighbors and schoolmates. The major antagonist is a self-denying Black man named Uncle Ruckus whose reverence for White Supremacy and sharp eye for social stratification means that there is no Black person who cannot be ridiculed and no White person who cannot be exalted. On the television show, Gary Anthony Williams plays Ruckus. Next door is the DuBois family. Tom, the father, is a well-educated Black man who works as a local Prosecuting Attorney; Tom is one of the centerpieces of the episode in question. Sarah, the White mother, is a lawyer for the NAACP, and the bi-racial daughter, Jasmine, attends J. Edgar Hoover Elementary School with Huey and Riley. Comedian Cedric Yarbrough (from the TV show *Reno 911*) voices Tom, while Jill Talley and Gabby Soleil portray Sarah and Jasmine, respectively. The various episodes of *The Boondocks* feature cameo appearances from people like Cee Lo Green, *Mad TV*-alum Debra Wilson, Cedric the

Entertainer, Niecy Nash, Katt Williams, Adam West, Yasiin Bey (nee the rapper Mos Def), and Kim Whitley.

Not all of the characters from the strip appear in the animated TV show, and vice versa. For example, Huey's dreadlocked comrade from the comic strip, Caesar, never appears in the television show. The Wuncler men, Ed Senior and his grandson are staples in the show but were not featured in the strip. These differences do not detract from the television series; if anything, they reinforce the "Black Music" aesthetic that McGruder and his fellow artists have maintained in being able to effectively improvise for a particular audience or issue (see Scheinin).

The Boondocks fits neatly into longstanding traditions of Black humor. For some Black intellectuals, humor (especially the type that plied racial stereotypes) was a way of coping with the pain of slavery and the anguish of stubborn racialized privilege (see Watkins; Williams; Howard, 151-56). To the extent that *The Boondocks* seeks redress of injustices, it fits into the tradition of Black comedy as a form of resistance. As one scholar has written:

By conceding to the possibilities that black comics are doing more than telling jokes, entertaining us, or are otherwise there for our consumption, we endow them with agency so that we can begin to consider ways that analyzing said performances yields new and insightful commentary about race, class, gender, sexuality, and a host of other conditions endemic to life in America, indeed to life everywhere. (Anonymous, "Fight the Power," 257)

In addition to the therapeutic or redemptive paths in Black humor, another possibility exists in a world of "color-blind racism" (Bonilla-Silva). Glenda Carpio proposes an "incongruity theory" through which artists as diverse as Kara Walker, Ishmael Reed, and Dave Chappelle "do not so much protest against the sociological manifestations of this

racism as probe into the subtle and sometimes difficult-to-define ways that the concept of chattel slavery, especially the stereotypical imagery that it produced, influences individual identity, social relations, and artistic production of African Americans” (7). One episode of *The Boondocks* that speaks very directly to Carpio’s vision is “The Story of Catcher Freeman” (white). The title character of that episode is a distant relative of the Freemans and something of an enigmatic legend: to Granddad, Catcher Freeman was a one-man army who liberated enslaved Africans; to Uncle Ruckus’s mind, Catcher Freeman was a noble, obedient slave who helped capture runaway slaves. The competing stories conceal the identity of a true hero (see Thelma) and push the portrayals of enslaved Africans and plantation owners to limits that reveal the absurdity of their dialectical stereotypes. Various episodes of *The Boondocks* dance in all of these realms of Black comedy. “The Garden Party” explores Whiteness and racial privilege, while “The Trial of Robert Kelly” explores the opioid-like effects of masculine privilege and celebrity culture on Black communities. Together, these episodes reflect the genius of Black stand-up comedy.

Black comics like Jackie “Moms” Mabley and Richard Pryor used comedy in therapeutic ways, but they also employed comedy to help people understand the social world. Sometimes their comedy was not just about redeeming Blackness, easing pain, or teasing out absurdities; sometimes their comedy acted as a machine that stripped the mask from the claims of (White) American nobility, innocence, and primacy to reveal a much less appealing face.

Mabley’s jokes and stories revealed, among other things, the arrogance of men and the ways that men seek to sustain their gender privilege (see Bennetts). As the video-

recording of Pryor's 1978 Long Beach concert performance shows, his comedy shed light on various forms of privilege. Pryor was notorious for taking material from his own life and mocking himself, and in the midst of discussing a dispute between himself and his wife (who was White), Pryor uses the moment to discuss police brutality and his own fears of police officers. He explains:

Police got a choke-hold they use out here, though, man. They choke Niggers to death. That mean you be dead when they through. Did you know that? (asking the audience) Niggers goin' "yeah, we knew," White folks goin' "no, I had no idea." Yeah, two grab your legs, one grabs your head, then, snap, "Oh shit, he broke. Can you break a nigger? Is it ok? Let's check the manual. Yep, page 8, you can break a nigger, right there, see? Ok, let's drag him downtown."

In this incredible moment, Pryor skewers any notions of racial progress in front of his interracial crowd. In addition to indicating that celebrity status did not immunize Blacks from the impact of racism, Pryor seemed to be saying that Blacks and Whites sitting together and listening to art was but a good, small step toward racial egalitarianism, but that Blacks and Whites still occupied separate realms of lived reality. These differences might explain why generations of Black comedies have struggled to receive critical recognition or popular acclaim from White audiences and why *The Boondocks* is such a significant landmark in the trajectory of Blacks on television.

At its inception, television borrowed heavily from other media. Although television networks and their producers made room for comedy, White executives had little interest in exploring the diverse, rebellious mixture that made up Black comedic traditions (Marc 24-26, 33-35). Accordingly, many of the first Black characters on TV –

Amos 'n' Andy, *Beulah*, Willie Best's "Charlie, the Elevator Boy," or "Rochester" on *The Jack Benny Show* – simply repeated the racist stereotypes and caricatures familiar from minstrel shows, radio, and film (Bogle 26-55; Marc 34, 199). As Blacks inside and outside the entertainment world sought to develop and support characters who were more fully human – Cicely Tyson's "Jane Foster" on *East Side, West Side*, Ivan Dixon's "Kinchloe" on *Hogan's Heroes*, Nichelle Nichols' "Uhura" on *Star Trek*, or John Amos and Esther Rolle as "James and Florida Evans" on *Good Times* – some caricatures fell while others manifested themselves in different ways. Critics in the 1970s believed that the two male leads on *Sanford and Son* – comedy legend Redd Foxx and newcomer Demond Wilson – replicated old stereotypes of childlike Black men. Once the show introduced another comedy veteran in LaWanda Page as the character of "Aunt Esther," it appeared to add the loud, man-eating "Sapphire" to the shiftless "Coons."

Although critics of *Sanford and Son* had a point, this 1970s creation of NBC did differ from *Amos & Andy* in acknowledging racism and its power. Similarly, *Good Times* actually opened as a seeming rebuttal to the stereotypes of Black family dysfunction. However, by its second season, comedian Jimmy Walker overshadowed the veteran artists portraying his mother and father. Walker's "JJ Evans" seemed to revel in his buffoonery, childishness, and mugging for the camera. To the chagrin of many, the rebirth of the "Coon" was all the more devastating because the show creators wrote the father character out of the show after the second season, following a heated contractual dispute between John Amos and Norman Lear's production company (Bogle 108-207; see also Marc 35). It also is interesting to note that during this period, in shows as diverse as *Different Strokes*, *What's Happening*, *The Jeffersons*, or *That's My Mama*, few Black

characters could speak openly and honestly about race in America. It seemed as if “*only* out of the mouth of babes” could a TV viewer hear any discussion of racism (Bogle 203, 225). It was in this cycle of Black-cast shows that *The Richard Pryor Show* (1977) flashed across the television sky like a shooting star (Bogle 117).

Although he toned down the language from his stand-up routine to appease television censors, Pryor never dimmed his withering analysis of American society. His guests included a Native American comedian who joked about “manifest destiny” and female comedians who mocked Richard’s sex life. One sketch that drew the ire of the National Rifle Association had Richard dreamily listening to talking guns as they told him of the people they had killed. A young Robin Williams, who also was a guest on the show, marveled at Pryor’s art: “This man is a genius. Who else can take all the forms of comedy – slapstick, satire, mime, and stand-up – and turn them into something that will offend everyone?” (Marc 218). After constant battles between Pryor and network censors, NBC cancelled the show five weeks after it debuted (Marc 218-219). The metaphorical door to a wider array of Black TV figures began to open only in 1984 with *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992).

The Cosby Show and its spin-off, *A Different World* (1987-1993), created images of the Black experience with which many Americans were unfamiliar. Although *The Cosby Show* faced class-based criticisms, the expansiveness of Black representation was undeniable and owed a great deal to the artists in front of the camera as well as to veterans behind the camera like director Debbie Allen (see Coleman and Cavalcante; Ibrahim). The tremendous ratings successes of the shows encouraged studio executives at a fourth network – Fox TV – to launch several shows featuring Black artists and targeting

Black audiences (Bogle 289-303, 316-322; Zook 3-4). Shows like *In Living Color*, *Living Single*, *Frank's Place*, and *Roc*, attempted to explore issues of race, gender, and class within Black communities in ways that had seemed impossible just ten years prior. Yet even in this supposed “golden age” of Black television – 1984-1994 – the medium remained uncomfortable with dramatic renderings of Black life (Zook, pp. 9-11). In fact, some have argued that the battle to maintain the Black nationalist and Black feminist dynamics of *Roc* (1991-1994) led to its demise (Zook 77-87; but see Bogle 412-413).

The promise and possibilities of contemporary Black television cannot be denied. However, many scholars and pundits worry that as new comedic talents and ideas emerge, many will find themselves marginalized or misunderstood by mainstream audiences (Smith-Shomade 1-5; rboylorn). Even during its inaugural season, *The Boondocks* animated show received criticism for allegedly reinforcing stereotypes and/or mangling Black history (Whaley 189). However, within the historical context of Black television, *The Boondocks* represents a clear evolution of narrative, symbolism, and message, because it bears the hallmarks of Black-created shows: autobiography, improvisation, aesthetics, and drama (Zook 5). A closer inspection of its sometimes subtle idiosyncrasies demonstrates the way it builds on earlier programs.

Because so much of the humor of *The Boondocks* comes as the lead characters interrogate each other, one can understand the easy conclusion that the show is simply another “hootin’ and hollerin” comedy in the vein of *Amos ‘n’ Andy*. For instance, episodes like “Granddad’s Fight” involve the Freemans criticizing or teasing each other. However, the story offers a critique of a very narrow definition of Black masculinity that requires a Black male to violently respond to any show of disrespect by another Black

person. Ultimately, the episode mocks these showings of machismo and mourns the consequences of reflexive action. Of course, the prolific use of the “N-word” only seems to drive home the point that the show’s humor rests on the plying of negative racial stereotypes. If *The Boondocks* were in less deft hands, this argument might be persuasive. However, much like the paintings and sculpture of Kara Walker, the comedy of *The Boondocks* deploys racial stereotypes and stretches them to their ludicrous, logical conclusions in order to undermine the culture that birthed them. Moreover, the characters’ use of the “N-word” appears to be a means by which the artists make clear the persistence of White Supremacy while also pointing to the ways in which Black people can be complicit in our own oppression. Another fear that critics may hold is the fact that the Freemans are not a “nuclear” family and, thus, reflect a supposedly pathological Black culture. The absence of Huey and Riley’s parents may not be a symbol of Black family dysfunction as much as a reflection of the multi-generational families that have always been a part of the Black experience. McGruder and staff never explain the absence of Huey and Riley’s parents but repeatedly demonstrate the love between the generations and refuse to pass judgment on the clan. Finally, like many of the comedies from the 1970s, a great deal of the noteworthy discussions on race emerges from the mouths of Huey and Riley. Yet, unlike the elders in those pioneering shows, Granddad and other adults weigh in on these matters as well, often in equally outrageous ways.

Additionally, the locale for the comedy is more subversive than it might appear. *The Boondocks*’ suburban setting is not a coincidence. Although early TV shows placed their characters in cities, the suburb gradually usurped the glamour of the metropolis to “establish...itself as the sitcom’s genus locus” (Marc 51). The suburb of sitcom dreams is

devoid of drugs, strangers, eroticism, and nearly all significant forms of angst. It represents the victory of technology over nature, over filth, over joblessness (Marc 52-53). However, in McGruder's hands, the suburb is the seat of anxiety, a space of confrontation. The Freemans, along with their neighbors, de-romanticize the suburbs as another way of deconstructing White privilege (Whaley 192).

Like Moms Mabley and Richard Pryor, McGruder and his team of artists seek to voice that which remains silent, the willfully forgotten chasms and obstacles between Blacks and the American Dream. McGruder's characters show us that the differences (and differing levels of awareness) between people of color and Whites are stark and have a tangible effect on everyday life. Pryor's Long Beach concert performance exposed one of the great aspects of White privilege: that things White people do not even know about often kill Black Americans. The Freeman boys learn this in "A Date with the Health Inspector."

A Case of Mistaken Identity

At one level, the episode entitled "A Date with the Health Inspector" (2005) turns on the issue of mistaken identity. Woodcrest police arrest Black neighbor Tom DuBois for a murder that he did not commit. Tom, seemingly less concerned with the veracity of the charges and more concerned about what will happen to him if he is sent to jail, pleads with Huey to find the real killer. Because Huey is a child – precocious though he may be – he and his younger brother must rely on adults to help them identify and detain the true culprit. To that end, the Freeman boys enlist the aid of Ed Wuncler III and Gin Rummy.

It is in the journey to exonerate Tom that McGruder and the other artists braid multiple themes over a well-known story arc.

The episode opens in the midst of Tom DuBois' worst nightmare. He stands naked and frozen in a prison shower. Although he is surrounded by other men bathing themselves and talking in low voices, he alone is paralyzed. As Tom tries to lather up, the bar of soap he is holding slips from his grasp and falls to the wet floor; the slow descent of the soap is matched by Tom's elongated cry of "Noooooooooo." As the soap floats toward the drain, the other men in the shower quietly laugh and mock Tom; Tom audibly sobs. His terror truly begins when he is accosted by a much larger inmate:

Inmate: "Soap drop, nigger! (Tom turns but says nothing) Oh, you think you jus' gon' leave it down there?"

Tom: (weakly) No.

Inmate: Huhn? We don' waste no mo'fuckin' soap in here.

Tom: I'm...I'm finished.

Inmate: Naw, naw, nigger, you ain't finish. I been watching you. You ain't wash behind yo' ears or nothin'. Look at me, how I'm all clean, glistenin' and shit. That's hygiene, nigger. (the camera pans down his muscular torso to his ridiculously long, pendulous penis) You can call me the Health Inspector...NOW PICK UP THE SOAP!

Tom bends over to comply with the command and the Health Inspector smiles. The dream ends as Tom awakens in a cold sweat. "Dropped the soap again," says Sarah sleepily as Tom sits straight up in bed.

In voiceover, Huey explains to the audience that Tom DuBois lived a life of order, driven by his fear of being raped in prison. The audience watches scenes of Tom, at different stages of his life, refusing to break laws because of his fear. The sequence draws to an ironic close as Tom helps convict a young Black man of making bootleg copies of "Soul Plane"; the young man's punishment is incarceration and he pleads with the judge not to send him to jail because he does not want "to be anally raped." Tom's face

registers shock at hearing someone else cry out as he has. As the shot lingers on Tom's face, the background changes. The scene ends with Tom lying on the ground, surrounded by police and accused of murder; his face registers the dissonance caused by the collision between his ideal of "order" and the real-life consequences for Black lives.

The next scene opens with Huey watching television and learning about the so-called "X-Box Killer," a young Black man who killed a friend in a dispute arising from a video game played on the X-Box gaming system. The description of the suspect is deliberately vague: "the suspect is blah, blah, blah." Huey changes the channel and hears a spokesperson for the Department of Homeland Security stating that the "terror alert" has been raised to "intense orange-red because of credible, very detailed information on a non-specific threat." After listing a number of possible forms of terrorist assault, the spokesperson says, "but what we do know is that it is absolutely, positively gonna happen...today...maybe." Then Jasmine DuBois pounds on the door of the Freeman residence as she exclaims, "terrorists kidnapped my father and their going to cut off his head in Algeria!"

Huey tries to calm Jasmine and, in his stiff way, reassures her that her father being late to pick her up from school has nothing to do with terrorism. On cue, Tom calls the Freeman residence (twice). Riley remarks, "I thought you only get one phone call." Tom tells Huey that the police have accused him of being the X-Box Killer and that he needs Huey's help. Talking a version of tough love, Huey tries to reassure Tom that spending a weekend in jail is not terrible. Yet Tom is not interested simply in being exonerated but in being freed immediately before he leaves "booking" and is transferred to "real, butt-pounding jail." As Huey hangs up the phone, he promises to do what he can

to free Tom. He then tries to assuage Jasmine's fears by telling her, "Your father wants you to know that he's nobody's bitch."

Huey and Riley leave their home and enlist the help of Ed the Third. With only five hours until Tom's transfer, Huey needs Ed's wheels and, perhaps, his guns. Ed agrees to help hunt the real killer, but wants his former Army buddy to help. A subtle change in setting mirrors the transition in the action. Most of the scenes in the first eight minutes of the episode take place in the peaceful suburb. As the Freeman brothers and their putative allies begin to pursue the X-Box killer, the pastoral backdrop yields to a grittier, urban landscape. In her incisive analysis of *The Boondocks*, Deborah Whaley describes the significance of the pastoral setting of the series' debut episode, "The Garden Party." Whaley argues that McGruder's use of pastoral backgrounds fits with the long-held assertion that images and narratives of the pastoral idea of America provide a way to reinforce the "innocence" of White settler-colonialism. The notion of America as a vast garden that was cultivated by its Anglo inhabitants renders invisible the tragedies of African enslavement, genocide of Native Americans, and belligerence in our foreign relations. In other words, if the land is innocent and peaceful, so too must be the majority of those who dwell on it (Whaley 197). As such, the setting throughout the balance of "A Date with the Health Inspector" helps to strip the innocence from the White characters and calls to mind the military subjugation of Baghdad on April 9, 2003 or the slaughter of Iraqi civilians in Fallujah on April 28, 2003.

The Freeman boys and Ed find Gin Rummy as he is making breakfast. Upon being informed of their request, Rummy agrees to help them and delivers the perfect vigilante speech:

Sounds like you got yourself a fugitive of justice. I say y'all came to the right hombre . . . I be dead on his ass like "Spencer for fuckin' Hire." I'll hunt him down and feed him his own testicles. And I'll do it in a jiffy. And I 'on't care if his mama there, his grandmamma, innocent bystanders, little kids, baby sitters, bill collectors . . . whatever! (voice rising) I'll leave his whole block filled with hot brass if I have to. And you know why? 'Cause I just don't give a fuck!

The four individuals set out for the area of the metropolis where the X-Box Killer struck; during the journey, they have the conversation presented in the introduction of this piece.

Meanwhile, Tom is being brutally questioned by two police officers. A Black detective has to remove a White detective from the room and tries to reassure Tom. Tom asks, "Why are you doing this to me?" The Black detective responds, "You know what this is man. It's fuckin' racism, man... You just happen to fit the description."

Significantly, the Black officer tries to get Tom to sign a confession to the crime. "Look (slides a typed confession and a pen across the desk to Tom), even if you didn't kill him, just admit that you killed him . . . I promise you, you won't go to jail." Tom initially scoffs, saying, "I'm a prosecutor; I'm never gonna fall for this!" but within ten minutes he is about ready to sign the confession in exchange for the promise of not being anally raped.

Once Huey, Riley, Ed and Rummy arrive at their destination and exit the vehicle, the adults pull out their weapons while Huey cautions that they should "be tactful." Ed does not know the word, so Rummy explains "he talkin' 'bout diplomacy. I don't *do* diplomacy." Ed and Rummy begin to terrorize the neighbors as they kick in doors, line up a group of Black men, and savagely beat one while he is down on the ground. (The

audience hears Ed exclaim, “yeah, run yo’ shit, nigger” and “work him out”). The adults return to the car with no intelligence regarding the X-Box Killer. Huey and Riley are already seated in the SUV. As Rummy laments “ain’t nobody seen nothin’,” Huey shouts, “I know who did the killin’! I’ve known for 20 minutes!” Huey knows the killer’s name and has MapQuest directions to his house; Riley has sketched a picture of the killer based on descriptions from eye-witnesses. When questioned by the adults about how the boys were able to gather intelligence, Huey retorts “we *talked* to people!” Armed with this information, the four set out to find the X-Box Killer only to encounter a different kind of trouble.

While driving to the location of the X-Box Killer, Ed the Third decides he is thirsty and convinces Gin Rummy they should stop at a nearby convenience store. Over Huey’s objections, Ed proceeds to the convenience store. Ed and Rummy decide they will not pay for the alcohol they have taken from the store’s refrigerator; they notice a single customer in the store, a uniformed police officer. When they are stopped by the store owner, a man named “Aladdin Hussein,” who addresses the men as “my good friends and allies,” they decide to turn the situation to their advantage. Rummy loudly exclaims that the store owner has a gun and is threatening them, saying this while pointing two semi-automatic rifles with laser guides at the unarmed owner. When the officer takes note of the situation, he insists that he cannot see a gun. Huey interjects by shouting to the officer that the store owner does not have a weapon. To make the ruse work, Ed and Gin Rummy repeat their claims loudly and often in order to convince the nearby police officer that Hussein poses a threat to them. Although the policeman cannot

see a gun, he eventually acquiesces to Ed and Rummy's shouts and threats that "either you are with us or you're with this [man] who is obviously of terrorist descent!"

Ed and Rummy then open fire on Hussein, who dodges their barrage of bullets and is aided by Arabic friends who also work at the store. Huey and Riley complain but are also terrified by the gun battle. The police officer in the store at the time of the confrontation is caught in the crossfire (twice), but Ed and Rummy do not care about him. The gun battle ends as police reinforcements arrive. The police handcuff and detain Hussein and his friends, a gurney carts the stricken police officer to a waiting ambulance, and Ed and Rummy emerge from the store stunned by the crowd that has gathered outside. In response to Ed's tentative question, "the fuck y'all lookin' at?" the crowd begins to applaud Ed and Rummy and shouts, "USA, USA, USA." The episode ends as the cover of the next day's local newspaper leads with the convenience store gun battle, including the headline, "War Heroes Thwart Terror Cell." A story regarding the real X-Box Killer (accompanied by a mug shot of the perpetrator that looks nothing like Tom) appears at the bottom of the paper, while to the right is a small story about Tom's lawsuit against the police department.

Storytelling across Platforms

The Boondocks TV show relies heavily on its namesake comic strip. Both share a propensity for political satire and social commentary, exploration of privilege, and the deconstruction of social power. The major characters were fully realized in the comic strip years before the launch of the television series. McGruder's sequential art became a cultural lightning rod almost immediately upon syndication and remained so, with the

strip either moved to newspapers' editorial sections or pulled from dailies (Whaley 190). Discussing this phenomenon in a collection of some of the censored or oft-revised strips, McGruder notes: "What I find remarkable about the strip was that no matter how much time passed, people never stopped getting mad" (McGruder 2). A viewer who had read the strip knows what to expect of Granddad, Huey, and Riley. Yet additional tensions arise as the characters interact with new forces and come closer, through television, to three-dimensional physical and linguistic expressions. McGruder's televised art blends the aesthetics of Japanese anime with American cultural elements. The show "functions as a mixture of the visual and the political; parody, polemic, and prescription; Black, Euroethnic, and Asian; dangerous and redemptive" (Whaley 190). The TV show, then, is not a simple sequel to the strip, but rather a powerful extension of it, a re-imagining of the universe of the strip. In sum, the strip creator uses the TV show to do things that he cannot in a flat, silent format. One might say that this is McGruder's way of using technology to challenge the assumptions that we live in a post-modern, post-racial world.

In the episode "A Date with the Health Inspector," the artists involved with the televised version of *The Boondocks* spend a greater amount of time illustrating the fears that haunt many Black men (as well as their responses to such fears) than they could in a three to four panel strip. Tom's arrest, his mistreatment by detectives who encourage him to admit to a crime that he did not commit, and his visceral fright about sexual violence while imprisoned speak to issues faced by millions of Black people in America over the centuries; the fact that these fears and issues are rendered in a largely absurdist fashion makes it possible to bring them to light. The flashbacks that reinforce Huey's description of his neighbor, Tom DuBois, showing how Tom matured from a scared child to a wary

teenager, add depth to even this secondary character. The transition shot of Tom's face, at first in a courtroom and then lying on a street as he is arrested, are fully realized through moving images.

At the same time, the crimes of the "X-Box Killer" are neither ignored nor pathologized. Huey reacts matter-of-factly to the initial news report of the death of the X-Box gamer, "Antoine Michaels." As the news reporter provides a vague description of the suspect, Huey turns the channel and hears a government official announce an equally vague threat about terrorism. Huey offers no comment to either story. It is only when Tom calls that Huey leaps into action in an effort to serve the interests of justice (freeing an innocent man and finding the real culprit). Through the juxtaposition of local and international news stories on the Freeman family television, the artists link the domestic police state to the U.S. War on Terror, implying that protecting Americans may have little to do with either.

An especially provocative aspect of the episode is the choice of voice actors as a means of probing White Privilege and identity. Former football player Terry Crews, known for his roles in movies like *White Chicks* (2004) and *The Expendables* (2010) and the TV show *Everybody Hates Chris* (CBS 2005-2009), voices "the Health Inspector." Nevertheless, his menacing tones are rendered secondary by the vocal performances of Charlie Murphy and Samuel L. Jackson; Murphy voices Ed the III while Jackson supplies the voice of Rummy. Because these actors have achieved tremendous success in television and film, most viewers know who they are; more specifically, the viewers know these actors are Black, even though their characters are White. By employing these

actors to play these roles, McGruder and his crew undermine the conventional invisibility of Whiteness.

Ed the Third is the grandson of the wealthiest person in the Freeman's well-heeled suburb. Yet all of the wealth cannot hide the fact that he is a lazy, drunken psychopath. Rummy does not seem to be much better. His red-white-and-blue bandana covers his blonde cornrows but cannot cover the fact that he is making breakfast in the late afternoon. Neither of these characters matches the positive stereotypes of White behavior, yet their racial privilege is clear. They are able to drive a late-model SUV filled with guns, in broad daylight, without attracting the attention of the police. Ed drinks alcohol as he drives, again without fear of being seen or caught. No one calls the police as Ed and Rummy terrorize an entire neighborhood of Black residents, breaking down doors and holding families at gun point, creating makeshift "line ups" of suspects, shooting or stomping on a fleeing citizen. Their racial privilege is exemplified both by their coercion of the cop in the convenience store and by the adulation from onlookers who do not know (or ignore) the fact that Ed and Rummy had been attempting to rob the store. The episode expands on these themes by having Ed and Rummy use actual quotes from Bush administration officials who justified the War on Terror through a dizzying array of tangled, solipsistic arguments that nearly sounded rational when repeated by a fawning, uncritical press.

In "A Date with the Health Inspector," the use of Bush administration assertions complement the rest of the surreal animation and dialogue. Adding to this incredible mélange is a clear homage to Jackson's famous soliloquy in the film *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994). Thus, while the comic strip can show White people acting

with privilege or ignorance, it cannot destabilize Whiteness as thoroughly as the TV show because the strip is silent; it relies on the imaginations of its readers to “hear” how words are spoken or ideas conveyed. By comparison, the animated show makes its intentions clear. When all of these audio-visual ingredients come together, the viewer has a much clearer sense of the identity of real gangsters and a nagging suspicion that true justice will never emerge from the regimes of mass incarceration or state violence disguised as patriotic self-defense. McGruder’s choice to cast Murphy and Jackson (two actors popularly known for their portrayals of menacing thugs or gangsters) as the voices of Ed and Rummy is a direct statement indicating his view that their doppelgangsters are, at best, violent vigilantes.

Conclusion: Samples by DJ McGruder

Not unlike the prototypical Hip Hop DJs of the 1970s and 1980s, McGruder brings to bear numerous styles and pop culture references to his comic strip and animated television show. Because the comic strip predates the television show, the show does not have to use an extended exposition to flesh out the thoughts and motivations of the main characters. It can also move more quickly into examinations of how the main characters interact with their neighbors and immediate environment, and wrestle with the ethical dilemmas they face. In turn, the comic strip benefits from the existence of the show because the show is able to amplify and more clearly convey meaning through moving images and voice acting, while quite possibly encouraging non-readers to seek out the original source material.

“A Date with the Health Inspector” specifically challenges the legitimacy of the regimes of mass incarceration and the War on Terror. The comic strip had dealt with these issues, but separately (McGruder, 248). By braiding together the two issues, the episode of the television program suggests that they are manifestations of color-blind racism (a type of racial privilege that, on its face, appears to be racially neutral or based on another issue) equally deserving of thoughtful, irreverent deconstruction, incisive critique, and lucid, principled opposition. Many governmental and law enforcement authorities defend unconstitutional and questionable police tactics and state violence against Black and Brown bodies by claiming that these efforts save lives and make communities safer. Yet, Tom’s arrest and subsequent treatment by the police suggests otherwise. Police officers arrest Tom despite the fact that he looks nothing like the suspect. Tom’s detention disrupts the lives of his family, and the disruption would have been worse if he had signed a false confession (something that many accused do simply to avoid a greater sentence or in the mistaken belief that they will be more quickly returned to their families). As a result of the police work shaped by racial profiling, the true culprit actually killed another person before he is captured. The episode suggests that the War on Terror exacts similar costs from communities of color in other parts of the world and the white vigilantes continue to be celebrated for breaking the law.

In addition to the claim of seeking justice for the attacks of September 11, 2001, officials often justify the War on Terror with state violence and dubious assertions and tactics. As a result, many people around the world question the campaign and its true objectives. When Ed and Rummy try to rob the convenience store, they accuse the shopkeeper, Aladdin Hussein, of holding a weapon against them. The police officer in the

store acknowledges that he cannot see a weapon, but Ed and Rummy insist. As Ed and Rummy intimidate the officer, Huey repeatedly screams that Hussein is not holding a weapon and that Ed and Rummy are robbing the store. While pleading for his life, Hussein rebuts the accusations of Ed and Rummy, and goes so far as to say, “I can’t give you a weapon I’m not holding . . . You’re thinking of the Korean shop, north of here.” In the hands of Ed and Rummy (stand-ins for former President George W. Bush and former Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld), the War on Terror seems like a callous projection of power meant to satisfy the bloodlust and appetites of the globe’s privileged few. The glib rejection of any noble mission in Iraq by Charlie Murphy’s character echoes President Bush’s facile remark during the invasion of Iraq that he did not really care where Osama bin Laden might be (see Reynolds). Statements by Rumsfeld, articulated by Samuel L. Jackson’s character, are augmented by the volume of Jackson’s voice and spittle flying from Rummy’s mouth, mirroring the ways in which administration officials and their supporters brow-beat inquisitive journalists and the skeptical public.

For these reasons and more, *The Boondocks* stands as a thought-provoking show that seems like an heir to the tradition begun by *The Richard Pryor Show* and carried on by shows like *In Living Color*. Given the racial history of television, *The Boondocks* is a critical antidote to a culture of “the middle” that celebrates mindless consumption, endless competition, and obedience to authority (Marc 26-28, 177). As Whaley points out, “If, as McGruder muses, his younger audience members are not reading newspapers for information on a daily basis, his Afro-Anime satire is ever more vital in serving as the medium through which they might find encouragement to raise their consciousness to a critical level” (201). In addition to incisive content, the television series is a perfect

example of storytelling in the twenty-first century that exists on multiple media platforms and is multicultural in its performance. *The Boondocks* provides an unflinching look at the lives of African American pioneers in an exclusive suburb. Moreover, it reveals how a multi-layered critique can be conveyed through the creative use of anime-style art, seasoned comedic writers, and the inventive casting of celebrity voice actors.

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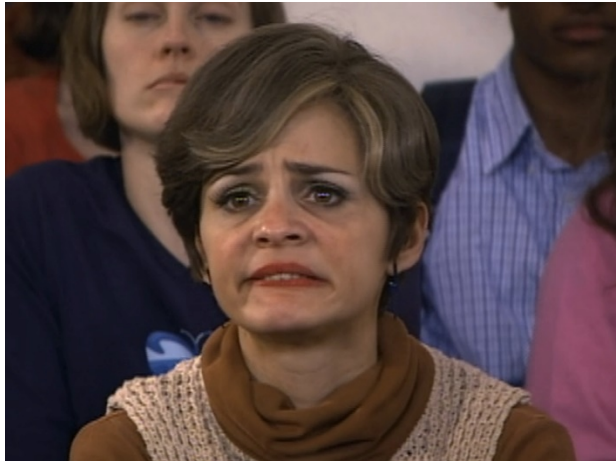
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“I Like the Pole and the Hole”:

The Subversive Self-Definitive Bisexuality of Jerri Blank



Vern Cooper

The problem of representation in television studies is perhaps more complicated than the dominant opposing factions seem to suggest. Most media consumers likely have a sizable collection of anecdotes about conversations concerning what is or is not acceptable for representation on television. Yet the debate, as it appears in its simplest form, often has one side that conceives of television audiences as passive observers who uncritically consume their media (leading to the viewer’s personality and behaviors being influenced), and another side that sees television simply as background noise. There is no shortage of journalistic endeavors, such as CNN’s 2013 report “Is Media Violence Damaging to Kids?,” which take up this dichotomy as it is described above to no avail (Emmons). These reports tend to conclude that the research is still out on what the actual affects are. I would hazard this is due to the way the question is framed and asked.

What we know about dichotomies is that they necessarily fallaciously reduce and thus exclude. Many scholars have sought to trouble this reductive dichotomy, some with particular attention to the problems associated with representing sexual content, such as Amy Villarejo’s

Ethereal Queer (2014) and before that Alexander Doty's *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (1993). Some have focused on the representations of non-heterosexuals, but few have narrowed that focus to analyze the politics of representation for queer identities that are not gay men or lesbians. Notable exceptions are Maria San Filippo's work and that of the Bi Academic Intervention. San Filippo's *The B Word: Bisexuality in Contemporary Film and Television* (2013) is an excellent tome on bisexual representation, and the Bi Academic Review's *The Bisexual Imaginary: Representation, Identity, and Desire* (1997) expands from representation to identity production, desire-mapping, and epistemology of sexual expression. There may be quantitative studies concerning bisexual representation on television, but there are only a handful of ideological analyses; these tend to be abstract overviews that briefly touch on certain shows, but do not discuss specific shows or characters in detail.¹

An exception to this is the reality TV show *A Shot at Love with Tila Tequila* (MTV, 2007-2008), which has more than its share of scholarship devoted entirely to it, much of which is taken up with critiques of hyper-sexuality and bisexuality as branding.² In the course of doing research to present a study of Jerri Blank (Amy Sedaris), the bisexual protagonist of *Strangers with Candy* (Comedy Central 1999-2000), my response to the lack of in-depth scholarship in this area began with an initial stance of annoyance and sense of existential hardship and became an awareness that the absent scholarly inquiries into television's representations of bisexuality are a piece of the puzzle and a symptom of the problem that bisexuality continues to be something that American television producers see as something that cannot or need not be represented.

Jerri Blank was the creation of Paul Dinello, Stephen Colbert, and Amy Sedaris, who modeled Blank's character on Florrie Fisher, a motivational speaker who toured the country's high schools in the 1960s and 1970s telling her story of addiction and sex work to high school

students in an attempt to scare them straight. In the public service announcement, *The Trip Back* (1970)³, over the course of 28 minutes Fisher tells various stories in a stream of consciousness format about her experiences with jail, drug use, and sex work. Fisher is very earnest in her accounts and sometimes comes to tears, so besides an opportunity to mock her, the reason that Dinello, Colbert, and Sedaris thought to make her the subject of a comedy show is not readily apparent.

In *The Trip Back*, Florrie Fisher is at first difficult to follow; she seems abrasive and the faces of the students in the audience seem to suggest they feel they are being attacked. Watching it, I also initially felt that I was being attacked. She speaks with absolute certainty that each of the students in the room is perilously at risk of following in her footsteps. However, after about ten minutes of viewing the short film, I found myself not only genuinely amused with Fisher, but also identifying with her and what she had been through. It was my amused response that intrigued me. What was funny about this woman's evident pain and suffering?

It was not what she had been through that I found funny, but rather her intense and genuine concern for the students in the room. Fisher opens her talk to the students by pointing out that publicly admitting everything she had done was painful and embarrassing, but that she was willing to do it for the sake of the futures of the students in the room. It is this altruistic quality that led me and (judging by their faces) the students in her audience to not only forgive Fisher, but to also embrace her and be proud of what she had accomplished along with her.

After watching *The Trip Back*, I re-watched the three seasons of *Strangers with Candy* and could see traces of Florrie Fisher's inspiration. Beyond the amused response to her farcical exaggerated personality, the biggest influence Fisher's work had on the fictional Jerri Blank is in the episodic delivery of the moral. The format of the *Strangers with Candy* episodes is similar to

the special episode models of *Saved by the Bell* (NBC, 1989-1992/3) or *Beverly Hills 90210* (Fox, 1990-2000) and instructive after school specials in which the characters learn a meaningful lesson about the dangers of certain hot button issues faced by teens such as drugs, pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, bullying, and emergent sexuality.

Unlike Florrie Fisher, Jerri Blank's morals are skewed and are often precisely the opposite of what many might refer to as conventional wisdom. This element of the farce provides much of the humor that presents a travesty of Jerri's morality. For instance, when Jerri's blind, somewhat love interest is seriously injured while attempting to play on the football team, Jerri explains that the moral is that we should never encourage the handicapped because they will only get hurt ("Behind Blank Eyes"). Considering the inspiration for and the show's representation of the character, it becomes necessary to consider the moralistic nature of Jerri Blank in the context of her status as a bisexual woman and to ask what it means for a pathologized, bisexual female body to deliver a travestied moral lesson at the close of every episode. Additionally, how is this stylistically underscored by the surrealism and farce of the show?

Beyond an ideological critique of the show itself, which will require a close look at the representation of Jerri Blank as a bisexual female body, it is important to consider the show in the context of its cult status and what Jerri may mean to viewers who both do and do not identify as bisexual. In any analysis, one must first acknowledge that Jerri Blank is not a virtuous person. The character is clearly criminal and her sexuality is not coincidental. There is a long history of the pathologized bisexual female body in film such as *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992), *Showgirls* (Paul Verhoeven, 1995), *Wild Things* (John McNaughton, 1998), *Cruel Intentions* (Roger Kumble, 1999), *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (David Fincher, 2009), and many others. Most of these films belong to genres such as the erotic thriller.

However, this genre is not the only place to find punitive examples of the bisexual female body. Comedies such as *Sex Monster* (Mike Binder, 1999) suggest that sex addiction and a voracious sexual appetite are inseparable from bisexuality. Therefore, the first step in talking about television representations of bisexual female bodies is to see how they are marked across genres. This is difficult because of the dearth of analyses that focus on bisexuality. Yet scholars such as Lisa Diamond (2008) have done significant work on the lived categories of bisexuality. Television scholar Michaela Mayer has used Diamond's work to code trends in how bisexual female bodies are marked.

Mayer's work over the past decade and a half has focused on the intersectional, hybrid nature of the representations of bisexual women. What Mayer finds is that there is a high likelihood that a bisexual woman will be non-white, possibly marked by criminality, and is rarely afforded the discursive agency of the coming out narrative (Meyer, 372-373). The denial of the coming out narrative is telling. As Mayer points out, the pressure of heteronormativity "establishes bisexuality as a debatable construct, and as such, bisexuality can often produce 'continued uncertainty' about the legitimacy of one's identity" (371). Representationally, bisexuals in television are denied the agency of self-identification in the heteronormative context of being able to *prove* the stability of one's sexual identity. For instance, a coming out narrative is often only legitimized by the completion of a sexual encounter or a romantic partnering or a gender transition (for trans identities). In this scheme, representations of bisexual coming out narratives have been delegitimized due to the ways in which legitimacy is predicated on coming out narratives being consummated by a sexual or romantic act.

In *Strangers with Candy*, Jerri's bisexuality is marked as white, but is classed as non-normative. Her gender performance is contrasted with that of her step-mother's (Deborah Rush)

more appropriate femininity. Jerri's physical appearance has also been marked by her criminality. Her hands have what are often called prison tattoos and her teeth have been eroded by crystal meth use. At the time of filming the series, Amy Sedaris was only 36, yet her makeup for Jerri makes her skin look worn and lined, producing the effect of someone much older than the 46-year-old character. In several episodes, Jerri's body is sexually marked as excessive and spent, as in the episode in which Jerri has super-Syphilis ("Jerri's Burning Issue") or the episode in which Jerri decides to restore her virginity ("The Virgin Jerri"). In these moments, Jerri's voracious sexual appetite is the butt of the joke, and her bisexuality is always adjacent to these moments, in large part due to the fact that if sexuality must be able to be demonstrated in order to be valid, then bisexuality must be doubly performed in order to prove its existence—often it is this unfair standard which leads to charges of hyper-sexuality of bisexuals.

Interestingly, Jerri is not portrayed as a victim of her desires. On the contrary, in the episode, "The Virgin Jerri," she is shown to be more victimized by her subjectivity to the expected standard of feminine purity. In this episode, Jerri sets her sights on one of the school studs, Drake (Jeremy Davidson), but must suppress her desires for him in order to be accepted by the school's aggressive female culture of purity. When she finally rejects Drake, after a brief struggle with herself, saying "on the one hand I want to, but on the other hand, I really want to," Jerri publicly humiliates high-school star Drake and, at the urging of her sometimes mentor the gym teacher Coach Wolf (Sarah Thyre), chooses a boy to have sex with who will keep the secret.

This is a complicated representation of sexuality, especially in the context of young people and emerging sexualities. The satire makes the point that the unfair standard of feminine purity is directly opposed to both the pressures on young men to be sexually experienced and the reality of women's sexual desires and pleasures. This is a complicated point and the skill the

show displays in representing it cannot be overlooked. Yet this scene cannot be divorced from Jerri's bisexuality, and thus the scene of public humiliation is meaningful in a heterosexist context. As Micheala Meyer points out, the role of representations in *emerging adulthood* is key if the representation in question is bisexual, an identity not always readily found in mainstream media. This point is corroborated by Fisher, et al. in their non-heterosexual content analysis, which reveals that representation of sexualities such as Jerri's are much fewer than the more respectable monosexual identities (169). Therefore, when the bisexual woman, Jerri, publicly humiliates the hyper-masculine Drake, she expresses regret at doing so, but fulfills one of the more persistent paranoias of heteropatriarchy—which is that femininity (and particularly queer femininity) is waiting to mock it mercilessly and deny it sexual access.

Bisexual Stigma and Value Judgments about Character

As noted before, Jerri is not a classically virtuous person. Several bits of her personality and character make it difficult to really like her. However, the puzzling earnestness with which she approaches her life and her situation makes it possible to like her despite certain glaring flaws such as her racism, her (sometimes) sexual predation, and her tendency to call gay and straight men alike by homophobic slurs. The accomplishment of making Jerri likeable despite these flaws is perhaps the most successful piece of Sedaris' pastiche of Florrie Fisher. The real Florrie Fisher begins her impassioned talk in *The Trip Back* yelling full volume and at high speed, seemingly with no awareness that her method of delivery could alienate her audience. However, by the halfway mark, the audience has for some reason forgiven all her outward markers of social transgressions and "wrongness" and is invested not only in the tale of her own life of misery and pain but in her seemingly sincere wish to dissuade them from making the same

mistakes. Sedaris is somehow able to channel this incredible nuance into her performance so that she become likable despite her glaring flaws.

Season One is more aggressively negative in its depictions of Jerri's bisexual body than the rest of the other seasons and the feature film made afterward (Dinello, 2005). In the Season One episode, "A Burden's Burden," Jerri is assigned an actual baby to care for in her home economics class. She is partnered with her female classmate Tammi Littlenut (Maria Thayer) and immediately begins to reproduce not only a heteronormative relationship, but a toxic one in which she is the neglectful, abusive, and exploitative man/father, and Tammi is the beleaguered woman/mother. That Jerri chooses this configuration for her same sex pseudo-relationship with Tammi is important for several reasons.

First, scholars of bisexuality have often countered the claim that bisexuality serves to maintain the sexual binary with the argument that it is not the existence of bisexuality that shores up the false sexual binary, but rather the *stigma* associated with bisexuality (Callis 84). They argue that the stigma is designed to keep bisexuality impossible and unintelligible within a heterosexist patriarchal paradigm. Bisexual men are assumed to be gay whereas bisexual women are assumed to be straight—or *heteroflexible* to use Meyer's term—and simply show sexual interest in other women for the pleasure of straight men (370). This set of impossibilities for bisexual existence also points to the andro-centrism and phallo-centrism of heterosexism. One does not have to look very hard to see that both assumptions center attraction of all ambiguous identities onto cisgender men and penises. To use a colloquialism, this means that all bisexuals just want the pole.

"A Burden's Burden" consists of Jerri pawning her responsibilities as a parent off on Tammi and flying into jealous rages in which she accuses Tammi of cheating on her. The climax

entails Jerri and Tammi both trying to trap one another by setting up a sting at a hotel room— Jerri with the intentions of getting sex from Tammi (reinforcing the predatory bisexual trope) and Tammi with the intentions of catching Jerri as an irresponsible parent. This early episode is the first instance of Jerri delivering the travestied moral of the story. In this case, she explains that she has learned that “it was a lot easier being a single mother back when I was the father.” The delivery of the line is not quite the same as in later episodes. Jerri delivers it with total naiveté and with the tone of a child who must reluctantly give up a game he/she is enjoying because a guardian figure points out the game is not fun or fair to everyone involved. Audiences are invited to find Jerri’s genuine confusion at the fact that single fatherhood is difficult in different ways than single motherhood endearing; and I must admit I absolutely did. For the entire first season, Jerri reads as an unsure adolescent receiving her information about the world through imbalanced peer-networks. What this means is that Jerri is at once our protagonist and also our audience surrogate. This allows her to embody the experience of consuming media and also representing it. This liminality is what especially allows Jerri to model development and also critique erasure of representation.

Even though Jerri’s bisexuality is a continuing theme throughout the three seasons and the subsequent feature film, there are certain episodes, such as “The Burden’s Burden,” which engage with her sexual identity and her sense of morality in specific ways—for instance, “The Trip Back” and “There Once Was a Blank From Nantucket.” Chronologically, these episodes display the evolution of the style of the show and the character of Jerri Blank. However, the biggest change in the show that is important to an analysis of the character is that Jerri moves from monstrous outsider in Season One to a full participating member of the peer group in Flatpoint High in the second and third seasons. On the one hand, this change signals an

organically believable process of integration when one finds oneself the new kid at school and must negotiate an unfamiliar social terrain to seek peer validation and acceptance. On the other hand, it is possible that the show's writers found the job of keeping Jerri as an outsider unsustainable for the life of the show. In any case, Season Two and Three show Jerri as on a more equal footing with both her student peers and the adult teachers. This illustrates another aspect of Jerri's situation that is easy to view as metaphorically linked to her bisexuality—her liminal social position as a 46(ish) year-old high school student. As interesting as this progression is, my reasons for considering these episodes in this order have nothing to do with chronology but rather themes. “The Trip Back,” an allusion to the Florrie Fisher documentary, illustrates Jerri's outsider status as well as the punitive representation of dangerous same-sex desire and the marked female bisexual body. “There Once Was a Blank from Nantucket” shows Jerri dealing with sexual bullying and the painful process of self-identification and living authentically.

Bisexual Hybridity and Stigma: The Case of Jerri Blank

“The Trip Back” is the Season One finale of *Strangers with Candy* and is named as a direct reference to the inspiration for the series, Florrie Fisher's motivational speaking work and PSA, *The Trip Back* (1970). Following the show's tradition of travesty the documentary's messages, Florrie Fisher's trip back as a somewhat triumphant missionary as a recovered addict and sex worker trying to prevent other emerging adults from following in her footsteps becomes Jerri Blank's “trip back” into drug use, sex work, and disrepute. After a year of sobriety and clean living, Jerri is tempted back into the incomplete public citizenship characteristic of the representations of addicts in popular media.

The literal story of the episode is that her “gateway drug” back into the addict lifestyle is marijuana, yet the drug is, from the beginning, symbolically linked to same sex attraction and literal gateway of the vagina. The episode appears to be exploring the notion that, while the PSA format is not known to be an effective means of correcting undesirable behavior⁴, as in the case of the anti-marijuana PSAs of the 1980s and 1990s, emerging adults do get the majority of their information about sexual identities and new sex acts from popular media (Meyer 239-40). In television, behaviors and expectations for underrepresented sexual identities are modeled for viewers who, if they have an emerging LGB sexual identity or transgender identity, likely do not see its accompanying behaviors modeled in their everyday lives. This could arguably increase the importance and the role of such representations on television in the emerging identities of LGBT youth (Meyer 370).

The episode opens, in the style of other after-school special PSA’s of this type, with Jerri poised for great things and the successful completion of her first year back in high school. The writers have space for a joke that Jerri’s version of success is passing the school year with a D. Again, following the standard format, the episode then produces a temptation to hell in the form of an object of desire—a tall, blonde, deep-voiced stoner named Trish (Stephanie Sanditz). It is important to note that Jerri experiences the longing for affiliation with Trish before the object of the drug is introduced. The camera takes on Jerri’s gaze and, as she covets Trish from across a field, time literally slows down. Jerri’s friend Orlando (Orlando Pabatoy) perceives her fascination and warns her not to get caught up with that crowd, as they are “career freshmen.” In this way, Jerri is established as the protagonist with potential and much to lose, with Trish representing the tempting object of ruinous desire.

Jerri next sees Trish in their gym class where Trish is riding a mechanical bull. Trish is further established as an object of desire because Coach Wolf (Sarah Thyre) appears to be masturbating while instructing Trish to “smack” the bull. After finishing her ride, Trish goes to the water fountain; Jerri is propped up aside the wall and makes sexual banter with her using various permutations of the concepts of wetness. Trish responds positively and tells Jerri there is something she wants to show her; they go into a bathroom stall together. It is clear that Jerri is expecting a sex act by her posture and question, “who gets to go first?” Trish reaches into her shorts and produces a joint. The camera zooms in so that only Trish’s shorts and hand are visible, and when she produces the drugs from her shorts, it is clear that the drug and the same-sex attraction are metonymically linked. In this moment they become interchangeable. So, even though the rest of the episode carries on as though it is only drugs Jerri is getting wrapped up in, those “drugs” are forever also same-sex attraction.



On the surface, one could read this link as a straightforward cautionary tale regarding drugs. While this First Season is not unproblematic in marking the bisexual female body, to say it is unproblematic is to give a simplistic reading, given the hardline satirical tone of the show as a whole. Considering that the show structures itself as a travestied critical turn on the kinds of

after-school specials and didactic programming in PSAs, it actually makes more sense to read Jerri's downfall by same-sex attraction as a cautionary tale regarding the particular cultural willingness to stigmatize certain sex acts because of who is involved in them. Following the format of other satires such as Johnathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" (1729), the real argument is revealed by the author but not in the standard format of an argument (at the beginning) but at the very end when it appears that the author has exhausted all other alternatives.

The first scene of "The Trip Back" features Jerri in Mr. Noblett's (Stephen Colbert) classroom, where he openly taunts her in front of her classmates. After class is dismissed, he keeps her behind to say that she is capable of graduation if she keeps her D grades up, which he hopes she can do because he hates her and does not want to teach her anymore. While this, like everything else Dinello, Colbert, and Sedaris do on the show, is in the spirit of surrealist farce (which is also a kind of satire), its inclusion at the opening to frame the narrative of the episode leaves space to consider the role of the school system in Jerri's failure to keep sober/straight. As outlined by Shannon Snapp, et al, while it is difficult to get a complete picture of literal punitive measures taken against LGBTQ youth in schools (such as the actual types of bullying that occur), it is possible to see the reactions in the administration and community when LGBTQ youth attempt to counter the bullying they experience (59-60). Mr. Noblett represents a travestied version of the actual, real-world failure of youth of all marginalized or underrepresented categories.

By the time the episode "There Once Was a Blank from Nantucket" comes along, Jerri has become more integrated and accepted into the student body. She has become good friends with Tammi Littlenut, who was once the target of the predatory bisexual trope back in "The

Burden's Burden," but who now attempts to help Jerri negotiate the complicated peer networks of their high school in a homosocial way.

Often Tammi is the virtuous character who, in a perfect world, would be in charge of delivering the moral. In this episode, Jerri is the target of what can only be described as a campaign to smear her as sexually promiscuous. This episode recalls the season two episode "The Virgin Jerri," wherein Drake, upset that Jerri did not wish to have sex with him, tells everyone that Jerri is easy, so that he can then make the argument to Jerri that they should have sex anyway since everyone now thinks that she has done it anyway. In "Nantucket" however, Jerri is already dating a boy named Miles (Judson Morgan) and she finds herself in a conflict over whether to tell the school administrators and Miles about the harassment for fear that it would make Miles not want to date her anymore. Tammi does her best to advise Jerri in this, but her advice is vague. Therefore, Jerri devises her own solution and warns Miles that "things could get ugly" when she confronts her harassers. Miles assures her that he will support her no matter what. This episode, in its maudlin language and worrying over social acceptance and mores, recalls the standard format of the after school special. This setup prefaces one of the most genuinely funny turns of events in the entire series. Some of the things that make it so funny are its reversal of expectations, its irreverence, and its inclusion of many intersecting themes, all of which are perfectly timed in their delivery.

One bizarre element of the episode's context is that Jerri has joined a jazz band, despite her well-known racism. Combine this with the fact that her gender performance is arguably a kind of minstrelsy in that her exaggerated face makeup and expressions, and the overall set-up are uncomfortable. As Jerri and the jazz band take the stage to perform after her talk with Miles, Jerri sees her harassers enter the concert hall and take seats above the walkway holding a

handmade sign on blue paper, rolled up to conceal its message until the moment they are ready to reveal it.

The scene slows to half time and Jerri begins to scat, and the camera cuts back and forth between Jerri's ridiculously exaggerated facial and vocal performance as it slows even more and the harassers who begin to position their homemade sign over the walkway to unfurl it. When the camera cuts back to Jerri, she begins to work her way back on the stage, and she glances at Miles and Tammi as she does so, willing them with her imploring look not to see the harassers' leering faces. The camera cuts to the harassers to show that they are just about to unfurl the sign; it then cuts back to Jerri who has her hand on a chain that she immediately pulls. Suddenly the action launches back into real time as a sign, of Jerri's construction, bearing an image of her smiling while giving the thumbs up and embossed with the words, "I'm a stupid whore." As dead silence falls in the auditorium (a close-up of a pin dropping makes this clear), the harassers unroll their now-pitiful by comparison hand-written sign that says, "Jerri Blank is a stupid whore."



The diegetic audience sits in stunned silence for a while before erupting into appreciative laughter at the brazen way Jerri shuts down the harassers by beating them to the punch. This episode is unique in that, rather than the usual format of Jerri delivering her backwards moral to

or at least towards camera, here Jerri visually represents with the text of her body and her identity (“I’m” instead of “Jerri Blank”) that she does not care what anyone thinks of her, as long as she is the one who gets to tell it. Jerri’s shifting the tense from third to first person exemplifies not only that she is fully cognizant of where she is in the context of the moment, but also that she sees this as an opportunity to self-author. To use another metaphor, the difference between third and first person is the difference between biography and autobiography. This is Jerri self-identifying and taking the agency of the harassers for herself. Her first act with this newly taken agency is self-authoring. The hilariously self-satisfied look on Amy Sedaris’s face was, for me as a viewer, the culmination of going back and forth in the process of identifying with Jerri’s struggle to navigate the difficult peer networks of a high school and also find the space to self-identify. Although Jerri was conceived as a surreal and travestied parody of the motivational speaker and PSAs aimed at keeping kids on the “correct,” “straight and narrow” pathway, Jerri manages to embody at times a perfectly reasonable response to the ridiculous and fleeting environment that is high school.

The joy for me in representations of bisexuality such as Jerri’s is also its utility. What Jerri models is both a position subject to a type of identity hegemony and a trajectory of learning to enact resistances to that subjectification. The decision to place Jerri in a high school setting—beyond merely serving the comedy—brings up not only identity but also identity formation and notions of emerging selfhood. If middle schools are places in which peer-networks are first (and often brutally) established, high schools are where individuals jockey for positions in certain peer groups and contest inclusion in others. However, Jerri’s positionality is markedly liminal in nearly as many ways as could be, yet her bisexuality stands alone as a facet of her identity that does not have a corresponding peer group. For instance, in high school peer group television

clichés, there are often groups of criminals, drug users, sexually active, and even gay or lesbian (always either separate or signaled euphemistically as “theater” and “softball players”) but there is arguably no trope of a high school clique of bisexual girls. The closest I can think of is when that bisexuality also signals a kind of monstrosity or contagion, as in Diablo Cody’s *Jennifer’s Body* (2009), and in this case this is not a trope about identity, belonging, or finding one’s place when they may not be one ready-made but instead a trope about malignantly aberrant social identity. So, of all the ways that Jerri is socially and metonymically marked, her bisexuality is what perpetually excludes her from any such peer networks. However, what is most interesting about the show is that Jerri manages to self-author herself in such a way that she cannot be subsumed under the peer networks due to her liminal status as a bisexual woman. Her insistence on self-authoring, even in the face of peer-exclusion, means that she will not allow her lack of a “legitimate” identity to be a means to her erasure. While, in this farcical landscape, this means little to a real, lived experiences, it is something that Jerri is afforded, and this self-authoring as coming out narrative and identity declaration can and should be considered alongside other developments in contemporary culture.

End Notes

¹ See Bond, Bradley J., and Benjamin L. Compton. "Gay On-Screen: The Relationship between Exposure To Gay Characters On Television And Heterosexual Audiences' Endorsement Of Gay Equality." *Journal Of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 59.4 (2015): 717-732. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 29 July 2016.; Marshall, Daniel. "Reading Queer Television: Some Notes On Method." *Review of Education, Pedagogy & Cultural Studies* 38.1 (2016): 85-101. *Education Research Complete*. Web. 29 July 2016. (Marshall notably only focuses on research methods for lesbian and gay identities.); Jacobs, Jason. "RAISING GAYS: On Glee, Queer Kids, And The Limits Of The Family." *GLQ: A Journal Of Lesbian & Gay Studies* 20.3 (2014): 319-352. *LGBT Life with Full Text*. Web. 29 July 2016. (Once again an emphasis on monosexual identities.);

Netzley, Sara Baker. "Visibility That Demystifies: Gays, Gender, And Sex On Television." *Journal Of Homosexuality* 57.8 (2010): 968-986. *LGBT Life with Full Text*. Web. 29 July 2016. (This content analysis (which would have been very helpful otherwise) does not even code for any queer identity other than gay men and "gay women".)

² See Antony, Mary Grace, and Ryan James Thomas. "Tequila, Straight Up: Bisexuality, Reality Dating, And The Discourse Of Heteronormativity." *Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal Of Qualitative Communication Research* 7.(2008): 49-65. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*. Web. 29 July 2016.; Richter, Nicole. "Ambiguous Bisexuality: The Case Of A Shot At Love With Tila Tequila." *Journal Of Bisexuality* 11.1 (2011): 120-140. *LGBT Life with Full Text*. Web. 29 July 2016.; Callis, April S. "Where Kinsey, Christ, And Tila Tequila Meet: Discourse And The Sexual (Non)-Binary." *Journal Of Homosexuality* 61.12 (2014): 1627-1648. *SocINDEX with Full Text*. Web. 29 July 2016.; Nygaard, Taylor. "Selling The Hypersexual Body: Tila Tequila's "Alternative" Gender Performances Across New And Old Media Platforms." *Spectator: The University Of Southern California Journal Of Film & Television* 31.2 (2011): 12-23. *Film & Television Literature Index with Full Text*. Web. 29 July 2016.; Suhr, Hiesun Cecilia. "Raising Popularity Through Social Media: A Case Study Of The Tila Tequila Brand." *International Journal Of The Humanities* 9.11 (2011): 9-22. *Humanities International Complete*. Web. 29 July 2016.

³ <https://youtu.be/0VUs1YkwGDw>

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Book Reviews

Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor. Curtin, Michael and Kevin Sanson, eds.

University of California Press, 2016.

Reviewed by Aju Basil James

Precarity is a condition that marks most human life in the age of neo-liberalism.

Contemporary news, for instance, gives people a sense of impending doom and an image of an extremely fragile world at its weakest. Half the world burns in drought while the other half is submerged under floods; people are mired in endless war where no one knows whom they are fighting and who is on their side; political and financial systems seem to have been taken hostage and in the U.S. Black people continue to be shot by the police on the streets; communities around the world are losing their environments and ways of life, and academic adjuncts are on food stamps. Further, there is very little hope that the precarity of existence will be alleviated in the near future. Instead, people are engulfed in the pessimism that things will probably only get worse.

Labor conditions in entertainment industries across the world display the precarity characteristic of the current era. Working conditions for both above- and below-the-line workers have been shaped by larger flows of capital and labor across the world. *Precarious Creativity* is an anthology of critical essays on these conditions, which create particular labor formations and lead to various responses to this environment. The book situates the contemporary reality for workers in entertainment industries as specific to today, while also maintaining a continuity with patterns in industries from previous times.

As Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson point out in their introduction, the essays “converge around the issue of precarity,” even as they point out the “enduring and profound differences” that exist between labor formations in different nations (5). The essays are brought together by a shared understanding of precarity as a function of relations of production and the concerns that surround it,

including the characteristics and nature of social dynamics that shape workers. Precarity for the media worker is perhaps manifested most markedly in the unmoored nature of the profession today, caught in successive waves of change in the modes of production, reception, and distribution. In this way, the precarity in which current creative workers exist is yet another manifestation of the neo-liberal world order, and it is indicative of labor conditions across various industries.

Curtin and Sanson note that even though film and television workers are often seen as “highly trained industrial elites,” they share concerns, shaped by deregulation, privatization, and the growth of transnational capital, with workers in other industries (6). As the subtitle of the book, “Global Media, Local Labor,” indicates, the fluid ease with which capital circulates around national boundaries pits its global dimension against local labor. The precarity faced by film and television workers is thus also a result of the changing nature of the nation-state and the transformations globalization creates in the constitution of the citizen. Curtin and Sanson see this process as being mutually constituted – as national borders become more porous, media companies conglomerate into mega-corporations such as Hollywood’s Time Warner or Bollywood’s Reliance Media, which then contribute to the further weakening of national boundaries by wooing investors and searching for transnational investment opportunities.

The precariousness in which local labor finds itself is constituted by the seemingly contradictory tendencies of (a) capital flight and the outsourcing of jobs from bigger centers such as Hollywood and (b) the emergence of opportunities for screen media workers in smaller centers, sometimes on the periphery in cases such as Eastern Europe, African countries like Nigeria, and a range of centers across Asia. The tension between these two aspects of the contemporary labor environment manifests itself in regionally specific ways that shape the dynamics of labor-capital relationships. Chapters that examine these tensions in specific regional locations, and in specific film and television industries, enable the book to present a diversity of viewpoints on how relations of production shape cultures of production around the world. *Precarious Creativity* is thus framed by a global perspective, which makes it a valuable contribution to studies of labor conditions in the

entertainment industry. The diversity in perspectives does not pertain only to the regional locations surveyed, but also to the theoretical approaches through which these concerns are studied. Curtis and Sanson note that the dominant approaches, such as political economy, sociology of work, and production studies pioneered by John Caldwell among others, are sometimes pitted against each other, whereas these approaches can and should be integrated to gain a better understanding of the “relentless and pervasive class warfare being waged against creative workers” in different parts of the world (9).

The chapters by Toby Miller and John Caldwell challenge what they see as a tendency to disregard, or even erase, labor relations as a structuring element of the media industry. Miller examines digital media’s claims to disruption, transformation, and transcendence; he argues that the supposed allure of democratization of media has in effect resulted in the elevation of the individual fantasies of the consumer at the expense of structural relationships between capital and labor. Caldwell raises similar arguments to understand the rise of “spec work” in television labor, contending that the dismantling of employment structures of a previous era has led to increased uncertainty and uncompensated work in the industry.

Changing conceptions of what it means to perform labor are central to the investigations of Shanti Kumar and Vicki Mayer. The former looks at the rise of the “film city” as an economic development oriented plan in various cities in India. These initiatives frame various kinds of film labor as a matter of a city’s prestige, thus altering the ways in which the relationship between creative labor and capital is understood. In Mayer’s study of HBO’s *Treme* filmed in New Orleans in the second decade of this century, she identifies a moral economy that connects television labor with the need to work to rebuild and restore a post-Katrina New Orleans. An army of extras and volunteer laborers were recruited through a call to help tell the story of New Orleans and its people in the post-Katrina years, thus combining an attempt to give voice to everyday people with a reformulation of labor relations. The ostensive labors of love observed by Kumar and Mayer thrive in the precarious locations of places ravaged by neo-liberal economics.

Petr Szczepanik's essay on screen media labor in post-socialist Prague highlights the importance of contextualizing the frameworks of media studies. Szczepanik notes that studies of creative labor has been dominated by the New International Division of Cultural Labor (NICL) approach, which puts the agency of Hollywood at the center and understands media labor in the rest of the world in relation to the effects Hollywood actions have on American workers. Szczepanik instead writes about screen media labor in Prague by understanding how local workers negotiate with global capital, often using it as an opportunities to learn American-style practices, while also struggling against glass ceilings imposed by American funded studios. In other chapters, Matt Sienkiewicz analyzes global-local tensions in the midst of the rise of Afghanistan's first cadre of female screen workers, Tejaswini Ganti shows how the English language has become a marker of sophistication and status among Bollywood elite at a time of massive transnational funding, and Juan Pinon look at how transnational capital negotiates between national media monopolies and local independent productions in Latin America. All of these essays illustrate ways that local labor conducts transactions with global and national capital. Like other chapters in the volume, these essays give credence to the editors' claim that the book welcomes a "range of agendas and perspectives" that are united by engaging with processes of "untangling the nuances of precarious creativity" in different sites across the world (10).

The specific characteristics of precarity in contemporary screen-media labor does not detract from a focus on its historical nature, which is manifested in the importance the contributors give to the structural reasons for instability in the media workplace. Many of the essays in *Precarious Creativity* highlight a pervasive "race to the bottom" that constantly sacrifices worker welfare for corporate profit. The immediate factors driving this phenomenon can be found in the constant expansion of global competition as well as in the rapidly changing modes of media distribution and consumption. American and local labor in foreign locations constantly apprehend the specter of the flight of capital, motivated by tax concessions offered by competing locations. The movement of capital is aided by an almost global consensus to invest in the "creative economy," seeing it as an

alternative, or sometimes even an upgrade, to industrial growth. The precariousness in which screen-media labor finds itself today is thus indicative of global trends towards de-industrialization, the financialization of the economy, and the rise of what is broadly called the knowledge economy.

Kristen Warner's chapter on "postracial" labor practices in Hollywood similarly locates precarity within a historical framework. Warner argues that precarity is commonplace for workers of color because it is embedded in the hiring practices in Hollywood and the discourses of representations and skill that surrounds it. The criteria and structures of hiring purport to be color-blind, and therefore being oblivious to existing biases of who "fits" certain work roles or who has the requisite skill sets and sensibility to perform certain tasks. The uncertainty that comes with screen-media jobs means that men and women of color have to at least tacitly assimilate into the normative ideologies of Hollywood. Precarious labor conditions thus restrict access to workers of color and limit their ability to meaningfully affect racial diversity in the industry.

Precarious Creativity attempts to make a multifaceted intervention in the field of screen-media labor studies, and the essays live up to this ideal in both topics and theoretical approaches. Specifically, the essays build upon previous work in this field, such as the anthology *Global Hollywood* (2001, eds. Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John McMurria, and Richard Maxwell) and Andrew Ross's *Nice Work If You Can Get It* (2009), by examining on-the-ground practices and what Curtin and Sanson call "middle dynamics" (8). The diversity of contributors and their topic areas bring an international perspective to the book. *Precarious Creativity* thus also takes steps towards creating a larger framework for media studies that accommodates regionally specific approaches in the age of globalization.

Rust, Stephen, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt, eds. *Ecomedia: Key Issues*. London & New York: Routledge, 2016.

Reviewed by Trinidad Linares

Ecomedia: Key Issues, edited by Stephen Rust, Salma Monani and Sean Cubitt, does more than examine environmental messages circulated through multiple medium. Along with an analysis of the agenda behind those messages, authors in this volume examine audience response and scrutinize the ways that media impacts environmental stability and ecological systems all over the globe. This volume also provides a model and basis for bringing explorations of ecomedia into college curriculums, by combining real world examples with various forms of theoretical frameworks. Scholars involved in media, film, and cultural studies will likely view the book's key terms and discussion boxes as useful guides, and they should help undergraduate students better understand the concepts used throughout the book. This anthology should prove valuable as a reference, even if it is not the primary text in a course.

Rust et al. approach the field of ecomedia in three ways: frames, flow, and convergence. Rust provides an introduction for each section to establish an understanding of the ecocritical issues that will be covered. In frames, *Ecomedia* highlights ways that the media has socialized audiences to view the environment within certain frameworks. For instance, H. Lewis Ulman discusses how Terry Evans's photography counters highly manufactured images of nature. Ulman employs the ecocriticism term "technê" used in Sean Cubitt's *Ecomedia* (2005); the term refers to "a coherent set of principles for making or producing something" and Ulman uses the term to illustrate the artifice and staging that has become standard in nature photography (27). Ulman is interested in analyzing how the practice of creating media, like photography, can be a way to explore our relationship with the environment. He differentiates between the landscape photography of Evans and ecoporn, which is highly idealized nature photos meant only to deliver aesthetic pleasure. While ecoporn exists simply to be visually appealing, Evans's work is meant to "engage our sense of

history, of place, and of our ecological relationship to the prairie and the nonhuman species with which we share the landscape” (33). Evans’s photography uses both the understanding of the “prairie ecosystem” and “complex, chaotic, cyclical, and spiral patterns” to provide an image that engages and transforms people’s conventional perception of nature (34). Ulman sees Evans’s exhibit at the Field Museum as an extension of her vision in her prairie work. As opposed to bringing the scientific eye to the landscape, Evans works to showcase the beauty in museum specimens that have been separated from their natural environment. She strips the clinical aspect of the animals in her images to make them as aesthetically approachable as the plants in her prairie work, again reconnecting humans to their environment. Using Evan’s photography as an example, Ulman encourages use of an ecocritical approach to images that is aware of the artifice in presenting nature and also how exhibits can harken back to the natural world. Ulman’s ecocritical insight into nature images can be applied to film and other media as well as photography.

Another article in the section, “Eco-Nostalgia in Popular Turkish Cinema” by Ekin Gündüz Özdemirci and Salma Monani deals with the representation of ecological concerns in the film *Şellale*. As a result of the growth of Turkish environmentalism, ecocinematic concerns have been expressed in the New Turkish Cinema. Özdemirci and Monani argue that eco-nostalgia in *Şellale* is less about yearning for a nonexistent idyllic past and instead more about apprehension regarding unintended consequences from modernization. They refer to realistic views of the pastoral past as “complex pastoral” (52). By focusing on the film’s protagonist and his family, the repercussions of environmental damage are examined on a personal level in *Şellale*. The family’s misfortune displays the human cost of unmitigated industrialization. Özdemirci and Monani use the theory of encoding and decoding, as well semiotics, to point out how ecological concerns are embedded into a film that combines Greek myth, Turkish history, and a family drama.

The book’s second section on flow demonstrates ways that environmental issues are funneled through different medium. Articles explore topics such as subversion in pirate radio, reality television’s postcolonial narratives, and ground-level analysis of Google Earth’s domain. A

chapter by Sarina Pearson examines how nature has been separated from environmentalism and commodified for television consumption in “New Zealand Reality Television: Hostile or Hospitable?” Just as Ulman establishes that photographic depictions of nature are unconsciously viewed as genuine, here Pearson challenges scholars to scrutinize the hegemonic scripting in reality television programs. Pearson applies a postcolonial lens and the globalization theories of Arjun Appadurai to discuss the impact of settler colonialism on the understanding of who belongs in the New Zealand environment. She focuses on reality television representations that favor *Pakeha*, settler colonizers, as authentic residents over the Māori, who are indigenous, and East Asian and Polynesian immigrants. For example, *Good Life* is real estate show that evokes the claims of colonialism, by stressing European settlers’ rights to the landscape and resources. Meanwhile, *Border Patrol* exerts a narrative of surveillance against the threat of pollution by East Asian and South Asian immigrants. Under the guise of protecting nature, the colonial gaze is employed against non-European immigrants. *Border Patrol* implies that New Zealand’s safety relies on the rejection of people of color who are depicted as sources of infestation rather than as human beings. Although *Border Patrol* emphasizes biosecurity against contamination by what the new immigrants are bringing, the reality is that the invasive plants and animals are already creating havoc in New Zealand’s ecosystem. In addition, the program *Topp Country*, which has two *Pakeha* sisters dealing with food tourism, legitimizes the *Pakeha* as owners of the land and downplays the tensions between them and the Māori. Regardless of whether these reality shows are adaptations from Western countries or developed in New Zealand, the settler colonizer is naturalized as the steward of the environment at the exclusion of everyone else.

The book’s third section on convergence highlights instances in which anthropology and cultural studies can provide a way to evaluate developing forms of communication and media. Audience expansion and evolving forms of narrative and interaction reinforce the need for ecocritical video game studies. In “Where the Wild Games Are: Ecologies in Latin American Video Games,” Lauren Woolbright and Thaianne Oliveira analyze connections between the digital world

and the natural one. Video game designers are making “gamespace,” the worlds of video games, more realistic in how they depict natural environments (197). Yet, the value assigned to preserving these environments in the game is still negligible, so players are not motivated to think about their impact on nature in real life. However, some games, like *Papa & Yo*, are creating awareness about environmental realities. *Papa & Yo* tells the story of Quico who lives in the favelas (slums) of Brazil. Özdemirci and Monani’s ecocritical perspective of the film *Şellale* relates here to ways that Quico’s oppressive landscape affects him. In the case of *Papaga & Yo*, video games players do not just listen to the narrative, but instead take on the role as well and so develop a deeper understanding of the environment through their affinity with the character.

Woolbright and Oliveira also touch upon how the marketing of a video game led to a concerted environmental protest. Promotions about the video game *Zone Incerta* conveyed a storyline about an industrial threat to the Amazon so persuasive that people spoke out against the fictional company causing the threat. The public’s response to this fictional endangerment galvanized them to protest George W. Bush’s interest in acquiring Brazilian ethanol. Woolbright and Oliveira thus show how consumers can think in ecocritical ways as a result of video games and their accompanying marketing.

Although the anthology’s various chapters focus on different issues and global contexts, the theme of *Ecomedia* is coherent. The volume makes the case that while media is an optimal way to disseminate information about environmental concerns, biases complicate interpretations of media messages, and most importantly the wide use of media has environmental costs that people must realize. Therefore, as the volume persuasively shows, ecomedia’s critical lens is imperative in contemporary scholarship.

Ivakhiv, Adrian J. *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013.

Reviewed by Rebekah Sinewe

Adrian J. Ivakhiv's *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature* provides a highly inclusive, detailed exploration of how films enact change on people's relationship to the world. Analyzing an extensive range of films, Ivakhiv uses a process-relational method that recognizes new socio-ecological meanings can be created. Although Ivakhiv is a professor of Environmental Studies at the University of Vermont, his interdisciplinary research encompasses work in ecology, social sciences, media, philosophy, and the creative arts. The interdisciplinary perspective in *Ecologies of the Moving Image* builds on Ivakhiv's ability to synthesize multiple research areas, as seen in his first book *Claiming Sacred Ground: Pilgrims and Politics at Glastonbury and Sedona*. Ivakhiv's knowledge in various fields makes *Ecologies of the Moving Image* a contribution to film ecocriticism.

Moving beyond film analysis and eco-critical theory, Ivakhiv shows how the moving images of film derive and create meaning from the human experience and change the world in which people live. Through an exploration of the relationship between cinema, affect, and nature, *Ecologies of the Moving Image* encourages an eco-philosophy of cinema by drawing on the work of Charles Saunders Peirce, Alfred North Whitehead, and other theorists. The book opens with a theoretical introduction and first chapter, which together establish a foundation for the more specific discussions that follow. In the next four chapters, Ivakhiv examines geo-morphism, anthropomorphism, bio-morphism, and the challenging moments created for viewers when these ideas interact with a film. The book concludes with an afterword that points to the digital future and an appendix that charts his argument. Throughout, Ivakhiv discusses an impressive collection of films ranging from documentaries, wildlife films, and eco-disaster films to Western genre films, European art films, and a variety of films in the areas of anthropology, eco-critical film studies, and

geography.

True to the title, one of Ivakhiv's central themes is the moving, active nature of cinema. He notes the point by film/media scholar Fatimah Tobing Rony that "all cinema is by its nature taxidermic: it renders alive something that is essentially not alive, not because it lacks movement (which it does not) but because it is only light and sound, lacking the capacity to initiate change once the cinematic elements are drawn together into an edited and assembled product" (153). Yet Ivakhiv argues for film's ability to *do* something, to come alive when a viewer forms an active relationship with the film, and to enact change on the world. *Ecologies of the Moving Image* is framed by the ideas that "the world has become a world of *the motion picture*" and that "cinema may bring us closest to the dynamism of the world outside cinema even while it adds dynamism to it" (25). The synthetic nature of cinema allows for controlled aesthetic representation while also creating an engagement with human experience.

Throughout *Ecologies of the Moving Image*, Ivakhiv continually returns to his central concerns: a focus on the ability of cinema to reflect, reshape, and understand the world, and the interconnectivity of cinema, affect, and nature. Ivakhiv breathes life into theory through his own enthusiasm, knowledge on the subject, a thoroughly argued line of reasoning, and numerous, diverse examples of films. Moving images illuminate the intersection of imagined and real spaces and demonstrate how these images can alter people's relationships to lived ecologies, which are identified as material, social, and perceptual.

Charles Whitehead and Alfred Peirce's theories are used to condense and combine the theory involved in Ivakhiv's eco-philosophical ideas of cinema as a moving, dynamic influence on the world. By drawing on these two theorists, Ivakhiv develops a framework for an ontology in which Whitehead's process and Peirce's semiotics converge to create a process-relational approach to cinema. While process-relational thought is not unique to Ivakhiv, his application to cinema is refreshing and supports his focus "on the dynamism by which things are perpetually moving forward, interacting, and creating new conditions in the world" (43).

Using both Whitehead and Peirce, Ivakhiv breaks down binaries, such as the nature-culture binary, to argue for a more comprehensive triad that allows him to explore perceptual ecologies of film. Echoing Peirce's triad, which goes beyond a static binary to suggest that one element of the triad is always at play, fluctuating, and evolving, Ivakhiv highlights the emergent, ever-changing nature of reality, as meaning is made through relational moments of experience. For Ivakhiv, the triad consists of what he calls "firstness," "secondness," and "thirdness." "Firstness" and "secondness" refer to a grounded reality in which the film itself is "firstness," and the physical experience of viewing a film is "secondness." As a logical progression of semiotic thought, "thirdness" is the resulting meaning from a film viewing experience and is contingent on numerous variables including prior knowledge, predispositions, and cultural influences. This scheme underlies Ivakhiv's central idea that cinema moves; the triad accounts for the infinite meanings that can occur through film viewing and interpretation.

After outlining the theoretical framework, Ivakhiv uses the remaining chapters to explore the ecologies that constitute the worlds within or created by film. Ivakhiv identifies geomorphic, biomorphic, and anthropomorphic as the three main components of the film world. The geomorphic component is the landscape, territory, background, or general space in a film, while biomorphic aspects address the relational processes with non-human animals, often wildlife. Finally, anthropomorphic elements ask complex and broad questions about human interactions, agency, culture, power structures, and identities. Like the triad built on Peirce's work, Ivakhiv sees these elements of the film world as being in constant flux, changing with the viewer's prior knowledge and experiences.

Although the material *Ecologies of the Moving Image* is intended for an audience with a knowledge of ecocriticism, film studies, or environmental studies, the content is well structured, and thus provides a streamlined and focused discussion of a rather dense body of theory. Ivakhiv's interest in teaching is visible in his writing, particularly in his formation of an argument that can be broken down into digestible sections. In the appendix, a chart, followed by an outline of ideas,

summarizes the progression of the elements of the film world to the film experience to the ecologies considered within the film world. In addition to the appendix, the table of contents is another tool that facilitates navigation of the dense material. Each chapter has section headings or key ideas that guide the specific ideas and arguments. These clarifiers can serve as reference points to reflect upon after reading. Throughout the chapters, Ivakhiv defines his use of terminology and summarizes his application of a specific theorist's work without drifting from the connection between theory and examples in film. Still, the density of the numerous theories included in the book is at times overwhelming, and it seems as though more detailed examinations are forfeited in an effort to be inclusive and far-reaching. This critique can also be considered a strength because Ivakhiv maintains a high level of focus on the presented argument, which lends itself to clarity and a flowing structure throughout the book's entirety.

Ecologies of the Moving Image presents a highly theoretical analysis of cinema, through which a process-relational account provides a framework to discuss lived ecologies. Ivakhiv's exploration of the moving image demonstrates the ever-present ability of humanity to make meaning from the moving images of film. As Ivakhiv examines the historical relationships of cinema, affect, and nature, he is able to establish the longstanding nature of these relationships.