To my Mom, my Dad, Louie, and Baylor
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CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF HYBRIDITY

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH
“Generic Transgressions: Gender, Genre, and Hybridity in American Science Fiction Television” focuses on the influence of genre hybridity on the portrayal of gender in contemporary science fiction (SF) television series. This project explores the connections between genre, postmodernism, and gender in the current television climate, focusing on the use of what are traditionally “masculine” genres (westerns, war films, cop shows, and action shows) to realign gender roles in SF/speculative shows.

Whereas many SF series through the 1980s relegated women to the margins of their stories—allowing female characters to exist only in positions that confirmed patriarchal dominance—SF television in the last twenty years has grown progressively more open to the critique of patriarchal systems, imagining futures comprised of non-normative portrayals of gender and sexuality.

Though there is still a tendency towards creating shows built around current patriarchal systems, SF genre-hybrids series such as *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-2009), *Firefly* (2002-2003), *The X-Files* (1993-2002), and *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* (2008-2009) do offer transgressive possibilities for looking at gender and
sexuality on television. This project addresses three major aspects of each of these series: their evolution from previous SF and genre television series, their respective genre hybridity (both in terms of genre and storytelling form), and the ramifications of this genre hybridity for sexuality and gender. The first part of the dissertation situates these series within the existing literature and critique of SF and sexuality, and the bulk of the project addresses the series as “hybrid” texts and discusses the influence of hybridity on portrayals of sexuality and gender. By examining these four series, I argue that hybridizing SF with what have long been considered “masculine” genres works to create spaces for transgressive depictions of female characters on mainstream television.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Science Fiction, Postmodernism, and Feminism

In many ways, science fiction (SF) is the genre most suited to postmodernism since both SF and postmodernism deal with issues such as technology, the body, reality, and the question of identity and fractured identities. SF can also be paired closely with feminism; SF is the genre of the utopia a form many feminist writers turn to in order to imagine worlds where women have power; Carl Freedman argues that “science-fictional narration may well be capable of demystifying the structures of gender oppression with unique force and clarity” (134). However, despite this connection, the rather uneasy relationship between feminism and postmodernism creates a number of contradictions within feminist SF texts. Because feminism is often thought to assume essentialism in women, and postmodernism denies any kind of essentialism, postmodernism in feminist SF is often confined to the aesthetic issues and not necessarily to the philosophical ones. However, anti-essentialist theorists such as Donna Haraway and Judith Butler point to ways that we can look at feminist theory in non-totalizing ways, which usually involve disrupting the binaries and dualisms that make up the gender/sex dynamic of the patriarchal system. Using the theoretical postmodern/feminism work of Butler and Haraway in conjunction with the theories of gender and viewer identification of Carol Clover and Yvonne Tasker, this project examines particular American SF television series that work to deconstruct the binary system of gender/sex.

1 Marleen S. Barr goes so far as to say that “SF is divided into separate men’s and women’s worlds” (4). It is this idea of inherent separation that problematizes the relationship between SF, feminism, and postmodernism.
Whereas many SF series through the 1980s relegated women to the margins of their stories—allowing women to exist only in positions that confirmed patriarchal dominance—SF television in the last twenty years has grown progressively more open to the critique of patriarchal systems. Though television is in many ways an inherently conservative medium, series such as *Battlestar Galactica*, *Firefly*, *The X-Files*, and *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* rely on genre hybridity to imagine spaces for non-normative portrayals of gender and sexuality. Though these narratives are not without problems—particularly in terms of the anxiety connected with portrayals of masculine females—the hybridization of masculine genres does work to deconstruct gender binaries and notions of essentialism.

This hybridity has also allowed SF to emerge from both the critical and popular margins of television. Contemporary SF TV is able to occupy a liminal space between the mainstream television landscape of police dramas and sitcoms and the marginal space of science fiction and horror, and this genre hybridity allows the series to find a success that was previously unavailable to most SF shows. Incorporating SF tropes into other genres (Westerns, war stories, etc.) allows for new possibilities that are not often found in “realist” interpretations of these genres; in the future, women can be seen as equal to men in combat situations, and a group of space cowboys doesn’t necessarily have to be made up exclusively of “boys.” Because they are not forced to adhere to the constraints of reality, the SF aspects of these narratives allow women to fulfill non-traditional roles. Another important result of this genre hybridity can be seen when looking at more traditional SF series. In these, women are often visually encoded as objects of desire—their clothes are usually tighter, sexier, and more revealing than
those worn by their male counterparts (see, for example: the Star Trek series, Star Wars, etc.). There’s no set dress code for a spaceship crew, so it’s easy for women to be visually coded in ways that are different. But because these other genres have their own visual tropes—how soldiers or gunslingers dress, for example—these are often translated into the SF show as well. In many ways, the strictures of genre allow for more freedom in terms of how women are “allowed” to look in terms of both their costuming and their bodies.

According to the critic John Fiske, television produces texts aimed towards one of two gendered audiences; shows made for a “feminine” audience are open-ended and likely to “resist narrative closure” (179), whereas shows produced for a “masculine” audience “are structured to produce greater narrative and ideological closure” (198). The difference in the need for narrative closure for differently gendered audiences is a result of the masculine audience’s lesser need to resist the ideologies of the patriarchy (Fiske 198). The concept of gendered storytelling in television is also the subject of Tania Modleski’s examination of the “women’s stories” of soap operas. Modleski comes to a similar conclusion as Fiske in her study, with the added claim that these “feminine” shows which are focused on romantic relationships appeal to female audiences because they tell stories that are more relevant to women’s lives, anxieties, and circumstances.

As Modleski points out, it’s problematic to argue that masculinity is superior simply because it’s masculinity, even if “the temptation to elevate what men do simply because men do it is, it would seem, practically irresistible” (Loving with a Vengeance 12). And yet masculinity, though traditionally associated with males, is not merely the realm of
men. In order for media to be transgressive in patriarchal systems, it would need, it seems, to do one of two things: either to elevate femininity so that it is seen as equally important to masculinity or to demonstrate that masculinity is not naturally the domain of men. Arguably, the former would be a more difficult project under the structures of patriarchy as it currently stands; women’s stories and “feminine” issues are still, thirty years after Modleski’s study, dismissed as lesser by audiences and critics alike. This is not to say, of course, that they are lesser, but it does seem as though popular women’s stories are typically speaking to audiences made up mostly of women, audiences that are dismissed as inferior under our current ideologies—so inferior, in fact, that the most popular of all feminine televisual genres, the soap opera, has all but vanished from the current television landscape.

A great deal of gender/genre research in television studies is focused on how feminine genres (most notably soap operas) are becoming integrated into masculine genres (most notably cop shows), an integration that is often attributed to postmodernism. However, the connection between feminine genres and female characters and audiences points to one of the problematic ways that sex and gender are conflated in television studies, essentializing and naturalizing notions of gender based on sexual difference. In order to move beyond this and to analyze how female characters are faring as television moves away from feminine genres, I look at how combining masculine genres offers progressive spaces for female characters within the

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2 Soap operas have long been dismissed by critics and audiences alike; the term “soap opera” is itself derogatory, pointing to the ways melodramas work to encourage emotional responses in their audiences, emotions that are “considered unjustified by their trivial domestic or personal content and explainable only in terms of a ‘feminized’ sensibility” (Gledhill 126).

3 In 1982, at the time of Modleski’s study there were no less than twelve soap operas being shown daily; as of April 2012, that number has dropped to only four.
narratives. SF television builds on tropes developed in other media, but the particular strengths of television, as a form that encourages polysemy and multiple sites of viewer identification, provide unique ways of understanding how gender works for a multiplicity of audiences. Furthermore, television series are able to create worlds with ongoing stories and continuously developing characters, stories that can be more involving than a single film or even a film series.

The seemingly clearly delineated “masculine” and “feminine” genres of 1980s television have been obviously blurred over the last thirty years, with the majority of popular series utilizing a “feminine” storytelling format of serialized, non-episodic storylines. The content of the storylines themselves, meanwhile, have become more “masculine”; there are fewer women’s stories on television today as genres like the soap opera have seen a swift decline in the 21st century. This doesn’t mean, of course, that women aren’t watching television anymore, but rather that they’re getting their “women’s stories” in what have traditionally been seen as men’s spaces, such as police procedurals and science fiction series. While these series do tend to promote masculinity as important, powerful, and superior, they are no longer (as they were in the 80s) solely the realms of men and, like most television series, they offer a number of sites for progressive viewing experiences for a multiplicity of audiences.

A key question for this project is whether or not television can truly provide progressive discourses or if it is an inherently conservative medium due to its attachment to narrative and structural realism.\(^4\) The argument here is that realism is

\(^4\) This sense of being “realistic” is not necessarily a matter of Realism, but is instead characterized by an attempt to depict a kind of consistent reality. Fiske argues that “we can thus call television an essentially realistic medium because of its ability to carry a socially convincing sense of the real. Realism is not a
essentially reactionary, working to create a dominant discourse that appears “true” and “real” and therefore “unchallengeable and unchangeable” (Fiske 36). Under this framework, television is seen as necessarily conservative, forcing even seemingly radical or subversive storylines to conform to dominant discourses and ideologies. The problem with this reading is that it elides the viewer, arguing that the meaning of a text is determined solely by the text itself, rather than by a negotiation between text and viewer. And while it is true that viewers must work within a certain set of constraints set by the narrative, television encourages active participation from its audiences. This is especially true of serialized television series that rely heavily on open-ended storylines that continue week after week, sometimes with little to no closure for various plot threads. Additionally, because of the necessities of broadcast television, the illusion of coherence for a series is “broken” repeatedly, not only because narratives occur over the course of twenty-two to twenty-four non-consecutive weeks, but because each individual narrative is further disrupted by commercial breaks. Storylines on television are never truly contained; they are constantly open for disruption due to the nature of the medium.

Even television’s need to reach as many audiences as possible, while it may seem to homogenize viewing experiences and readings, “also has to leave a space for their differences to come into play in their readings of the program” (Fiske 37). Additionally, most contemporary television series rarely have a single central character, so identification with a “hero” is rarely the same for all viewers. The rise in popularity of feminine storytelling structures also allows for close identification for viewers of these
narratives; serialized storylines further increase this feeling of intimacy by allowing greater “audience involvement, a sense of becoming a part of the lives and actions of the characters they see” (Loving with a Vengeance 87). Television viewers become both highly invested in characters and storylines and also repeatedly distanced from those “realistic” characters and events due to the format of television as a medium. This distance also encourages multiple identifications for viewers and works to subvert the more conservative elements of television as a mass media product constructed to disseminate and uphold the dominant ideological framework.

If television strives to create realistic narratives in order to reaffirm dominant ideologies, then it stands to reason that there is some avenue for subversion in narratives with fantastic storylines; even as these texts work to remain “realistic,” the very fact of their non-reality points to at least one possibility for radicalism or subversion. SF has, since television’s inception, been a presence on the tube, even while it has (until recently) also been marginalized from the mainstream of broadcast television. Despite its marginalization, SF is one of the most fruitful of the “masculine” genres for female characters, both because it doesn’t exclude women on the basis of claimed historical accuracy and because of one of its most central figures: the cyborg. The intersection of feminism and SF has been a hallmark of the genre since at least the 1970s, when feminist creators turned to SF to “redefine[e] the female subject outside the confines of the binary oppositions that seek to fix gender identities in the interests of existing relations of domination” (Wolmark 3). Though feminist SF has always been more popular in literature than in film and television, feminist ideas and narratives are becoming increasingly common in these mediums as well.
Because what constitutes “SF television” is very broad and wide-reaching, I’ve chosen to focus on four series that are the most representative of their respective genres: *The X-Files*, an SF-detective series hybrid; *Firefly*, an SF Western; *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*, an SF action series; and *Battlestar Galactica*, an SF combat narrative. Though there are undoubtedly a number of other series that fit these parameters (SF genre hybrids), the selected programs provide the clearest examples of how genre hybridity works in both American SF and television. In order to classify these series as “science fiction,” as opposed to, for example, fantasy, I’ll be utilizing Darko Suvin’s definition of the genre as one that employs “cognitive estrangement.” The chosen series all fulfill this requirement; each series employs a relationship to a recognizable historical reality while, at the same time, it attempts to create a new world that “performs an estranging critical interrogation” of the real world (Freedman 17).

This cognitive estrangement is integral to the series’ influence on and critique of society as it is viewed through postmodernism and feminist theory. Though the political, philosophical, and aesthetic elements of postmodernism are all important for this project, I’ll mostly be focusing on the aesthetic intersections between television and postmodernism, with the goal of translating these aesthetics into a political and philosophical critique of contemporary society. Furthermore, these political and philosophical elements will be influenced by theories of anti-essentialist feminism. Anti-essentialist feminism is arguably the type of feminism most agreeable to postmodern theory as it strives to deconstruct the binary systems of sex and gender, noting the ways in which these systems rely on a series of false binaries and pointing to the social (not biological) constructions of these systems. The underlying assumption for this
particular kind of feminism is that disrupting these binaries is necessarily progressive because it destroys the basis for oppressive norms of gender and sexuality. However, because there is much debate around whether or not this kind of feminist thought is “progressive” (rather than merely transgressive), this project further explores how and why the deconstruction of the sex/gender binary system should be considered progressive, within the worlds and narratives of the television programs as well as within our own.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that in order to have a politically effective theory of gender, we must first resist the impulse to essentialize gender through theories of gender unification. An effectively progressive theory of gender would deny gender unity. We must accept that gender is a performance dictated by culture, one that is repeated and upheld in order to appear natural and that can never be complete or unified. In order to successfully work with gender from a political standpoint, we must explain how and why gender is formulated culturally. The complex social structures that create gender must be dismantled, and the concept of gender unity must be revealed as false, which will in turn reveal the dichotomies of male/female and man/woman to be false as well. According to Judith Butler,

> When such categories come into question, the reality of gender is also put into crisis; it becomes unclear how to distinguish the real from the unreal. And this is the occasion in which we come to understand that what we take to be 'real,' what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality. (*Gender Trouble* xxiv)

The key to a politically effective theory of gender is the destruction of gender essentialism, since a unified concept of gender reifies the oppressive gender difference of patriarchy and heteronormativity. In order to deconstruct the naturalization and essentialism that is attached to gender, an essentialism that posits that males are
inherently masculine and females are inherently feminine, the performativity of gender must be acknowledged. Using Butler’s theories on the performative nature of gender, particularly as they relate to drag and masquerade, we can uncover the destabilizing effects of a number of figures that appear in SF television, particularly the cyborg.

In her seminal essay on scopophilia and the male gaze, Laura Mulvey argues that mainstream cinema is structured around a system of looking in which audiences derive pleasure from identifying with active male protagonists and objectifying passive female characters. One of the reasons for this gender-based identification is that

the mass of mainstream film, and the conventions within which it has consciously evolved, portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic phantasy. (Mulvey 835-836)

The pleasures of looking and identification in film rely heavily on the physical trappings of the cinema and on the narrative conventions of film narrative. Film attempts to create a fantasy world in which viewers can immerse themselves. However, as Mulvey argues, the presence of the woman, and her inherent reminder of the original trauma of castration, constantly disrupts this illusion. In order to escape from this castration anxiety, the film must either fetishize the woman or sadistically punish her. A number of critics have expanded upon Mulvey’s theories, particularly as they relate to audiences who are not, like the heroes of most mainstream cinema, heterosexual white males.

In many ways, television narratives rely heavily on filmic devices to create stories. They often follow similar narrative arcs and make use of similar production strategies and camera techniques to create an illusion of reality for viewers. Much of the pleasure offered by television also rests upon ideas of looking and identification, but these behaviors are complicated because even the most mainstream and conservative of
television programs does not—and cannot—portray the same kind of “hermetically sealed" world as film. Commercial breaks, weekly breaks, summer hiatuses, and occasionally even cast replacements all contribute to the ways in which the worlds of television narratives are particularly open. This is not to say that Mulvey’s concepts don’t apply to television; in many ways, television attempts to do exactly what film does in terms of reaffirming the symbolic order based on active/male and passive/female structures of looking. After all, the majority of television programs do feature male protagonists and often position women as significant mostly in terms of how they affect and interact with this male hero. But they are also continuously disrupting the illusion of coherence, forcing audiences to distance themselves from the text at fairly regular intervals. The identification process in television is not as smooth or seemingly straightforward as it is in mainstream cinema, owing not only to the disruptions in narrative coherence but also to the polysemy that occurs in television. In fact, studies like Fiske’s and Modleski’s show that television audiences often become more attached to and engrossed in television narratives than they do in cinema, forming a particularly intimate bond with characters on television series. The pleasures of identification and looking exist in television, but audiences are more likely to shift more readily their scopophilic positions between characters and storylines.

Furthermore, as bell hooks has argued, the “look” itself is often different for groups that are not afforded positions of power under systems of white patriarchal dominance. According to hooks, “subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that ‘looks’ to document, one that is oppositional” (116). In particular, hooks is interested in the question of the gaze as it relates to the black
female spectator, who is often marginalized both in the texts themselves as well as in theory on the texts. While some theories of female spectatorship argue that female spectators have only one of two options, what Mary Ann Doane defines as the masochism of over-identification in “feminine” genres or the narcissism of desiring one’s self in “masculine” genres, hooks points to the conscious rejection of these positions by viewers who do not wish to occupy either space. Identification with the white male hero, in other words, does not always occur, particularly for spectators who not only acknowledge the distance between themselves and the text but also construct an oppositional gaze in response (hooks 123).

This oppositional gaze is akin to Fiske’s theories about the active readers of television series. In discussing the experiences of women viewers of Charlie’s Angels (1976-1981), a series which seemed to uphold active/male, passive/female structures of looking, Fiske notes that:

women have told [him] how much they enjoyed Charlie’s Angels…and that their pleasure in seeing women taking active, controlling roles was so great that it overrode the incorporating devices that worked to recuperate the feminist elements in its content back into the patriarchy. (39)

Even if television attempts to create stories that uphold dominant ideological systems, viewers are able to actively choose which elements of a text they wish to identify with and which they oppose. Even these conservative texts can be read “against the grain,” particularly by audiences whose only options are oppression, masochism, or narcissism when read through binary systems of looking and identification.

In Men, Women, and Chain Saws, Carol J. Clover discusses the phenomenon of cross-gender identification in horror films. Though the genre is notorious for violence against women, identification for audiences (many of whom are white males) happens
across gender lines when the audience identifies with female protagonists. According to Clover, “it is not masculinity per se that is being privileged, but masculinity in conjunction with a female body—indeed […] masculinity in conjunction with femininity” (63). Identification, it would seem, is not necessarily constructed along the active/male, passive/female system, particularly in texts that do not conform to the classic Hollywood paradigm of the white male hero. A similar situation occurs in SF texts, a genre that has much in common with the horror films examined by Clover. Female heroes abound in SF, and though they are often sites of anxiety (particularly anxiety related to reproduction), audience identification in SF texts such as the Alien and Terminator series operates in much the way that Clover describes.

One central, recurring image in SF is the cyborg, a figure that has been identified as particularly transgressive because it denies the existence of the very binary systems on which the patriarchal order is based: male/female, active/passive, human/machine. According to Donna Haraway,

the cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity. (150)

Disrupting the binary systems not only of the physical world, but the cinematic world as well, the cyborg works to deconstruct any notion of a coherent, symbolic order. Cyborgs, shapeshifters, and aliens are the stuff of SF, and they are also the stuff of performativity. One of the genre’s most central questions is and has always been: what does it mean to be human? The answer, it seems, from texts ranging from Blade Runner to Battlestar Galactica, is that in order to be human one must act human. It is this concept, this being human through mimicry, that speaks most clearly to the
transgressive nature of SF. In a world where we are all becoming ever-increasingly mechanical (through both medical and communication technologies), the line that separates “us” from “them” and “human” from “machine” is being continuously elided. Furthermore, this question of what it means to be human raises other questions, particularly ones about the nature and construction of gender. Cyborgs are particularly important in this regard because

they are not simply an ‘other,’” but are a hybrid of self and other, human and machine; cyborg hybridity calls attention to the constructed nature of categories such as ‘human’ and ‘machine’ and exposes the permeability of the boundary between them. (Booth 33)

Critics have noted that this erasure of boundaries has led to a great deal of anxiety within SF, and one of the strategies used by a number of texts is to place those anxieties in the space of the feminine. In this way, the feminine is often used as an out by the texts and, in large part due to gender essentialism that places the feminine squarely in the realm of women, female characters tend to become sites of anxiety, repression, and sadism. In order to prevent this marginalization of female characters, it is therefore necessary to separate them from the idea of natural femininity. For decades, SF television has done the opposite, introducing “women’s stories” into the narrative and making sure to put all women there, where they won’t be in the way of the masculine action.

SF, because it is a genre about marginality and Othering, is a perfect tool for depicting the figures of transgression (aliens, robots, cyborgs, or 50-foot women). And while feminist SF has been a staple of the genre in literature since the 1960s, SF television and film has largely remained the realm of white men (both in front of and behind the camera). Women were either love interests or aliens or, occasionally, both,
but they were rarely the heroes.\textsuperscript{5} With the premiere of \textit{The X-Files} in 1993, this began to change, and the series marked an early example of the transgressive possibilities of hybridizing SF with other, more mainstream masculine genres. Though it seems as though these hybrids might excise women entirely from the storylines, as often happens in masculine stories, the opposite often occurs; women have more central roles than they had before and, what’s more, these roles don’t relegate them to secondary storylines about romance, feelings, and domesticity. Though these active roles often place women in the position of Other (most often as cyborgs, those figures of transgression and liminality), these sites neither deny identification nor require masochist punishment for the viewer. Both the women and the cyborgs in these SF hybrids explicitly comment on the performative nature of gender, which is particularly important in a genre that often traffics in notions of the performativity of “being human.”

\textbf{The Science Fiction Cop Show: The X-Files}

The heading above shows that if you have a subheading of a certain level, you must have more than one. The rationale is that you cannot have a list of only one item. In the 1980s, critics began noting the ways in which many traditionally masculine television genres such as police dramas utilized narrative tropes of feminine genres such as soap operas. In so doing, cop shows often depicted American society’s growing distrust of authoritarian and governmental institutions, while not straying too far from the comforts of the dominant patriarchal ideology. Building on the postmodern police dramas of the 80s such as \textit{Hill Street Blues} (1981-1987) and \textit{Miami Vice} (1984-1989),

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{5} An important exception is the \textit{Alien} series, about which much has been written, particularly with respect to the character of Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) and the ways in which the films work to reconcile the anxiety produced by her masculinity.}
The X-Files (1993-2002) utilized postmodern aesthetics and philosophies to create a gender-liminal police partnership that exposed the dangers and corruption of the patriarchal system. Though The X-Files is arguably the least progressive/transgressive of the series I'll be examining, it provides a model for almost all science-fiction series that followed, especially in terms of how a female character could function as an active hero and a site for viewer identification.

As one of the first SF series that caught on with a mainstream audience, The X-Files is useful in a historical, as well as an aesthetic and thematic, sense. Though The X-Files often essentializes gender (especially in its later seasons), there are also a number of characters and storylines that avoid essentialism, and I examine both the successful and less successful attempts to provide viewers with new ways of looking at gender and sexuality. Examining the ways in which sites of transgressive, non-essentialized gender can be located in the narrative will provide a model for examining the series that followed.

The Science Fiction Western: Firefly

Because of both its themes and historical setting, the Western genre is often considered to be the least open to progressive characterizations of gender; according to Pam Cook, “women can never really be heroes in the Western; that would mean the end of the genre” (297). The Western is a world of rigidly determined race and gender roles, and the Western, arguably more than any other genre, depends on iconography and tradition to define itself. The short-lived series Firefly (2002-2003) reconceptualizes a number of “Western” tropes while adhering fairly closely to the iconography of the traditional Western.
In particular, the iconography that is said to exclude women from heroic roles—for both historical and sartorial reasons—is reimagined in *Firefly* so that gender roles become more malleable. In much of the literature on female heroes in Westerns, the idea of drag or masquerade is constantly introduced around the issue of women, with the implication that female characters have to pretend to not be women in order to function as heroes of these stories. However, the issues of masquerade and transvestism are not reserved solely for the women in these stories. The masquerade is an integral part of the archetype—cowboys, for example, all look a certain way, and this look is consciously adopted by the cowboy.

In the case of *Firefly*, Zoe’s appropriation of the cowboy “look” is no more or less natural than the male characters’ appropriation of the same look. It’s more jarring in an historical setting because of what we think we know about gender roles in history; set this same story in the future (where we don’t know how women dress/act) and it seems less like transvestism than it did in the 19th century. Furthermore, by using the tropes of the white, male hero to characterize Zoe, the series offers a transgressive depiction of an archetype often used to reaffirm dominant ideologies based on gender and race. In addition to Zoe, River occupies an important role in the series, one that places SF’s monstrous female into a Western setting and, in the process, subverts the expectations for seemingly “non-frontier” women in Western narratives.

The other two female characters, Inara and Kaylee, are more problematic, especially as they are often confined to “feminine” storylines dealing with romance. These characters provide a contrast to Zoe and River, both of whom are more firmly situated in narratives that position them in two masculine genres (SF and the Western).
*Firefly*, therefore, uses a hybrid of masculine genres to illustrate the masquerade nature of all set character types and gender/sex roles in traditional Westerns, not just those of female characters.

**The Science Fiction Action Show: Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles**

The action film, which on the surface appears to be the most masculine of all genres, provides one of the most fruitful spaces to question the structure of gender systems as it relates to viewer identification. Working with Yvonne Tasker’s study of action films and their relationship to gender, I examine how *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* (2008-2009) raises questions about both viewer identification and the concept of the gendered “gaze” in cinema. Tasker looks at action cinema as complicating traditional gender/sex binaries in film studies because of the ways in which male subjects also act as visual objects for the audience. The question that arises from this is: if men can be objects, why can’t women be subjects? The answer is that they can; the site of viewer identification is less dependent on the sex of the character and more dependent on his or her actions. It is action, not sex, that defines subjectivity in these films.

Though action cinema does equate action with masculinity, it also shows the ways in which the gender/sex binary can be deconstructed. If female characters enact masculine actions, then they can function as subjects. In fact, much like male action stars, the women in *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* function as objects in conjunction with action (which brings with it subjectivity). In many ways, this series provides the most useful way to look at how gender is coded is these masculine-hybrid series since it is one of the few non-comedic SF series that attempts to create female sex objects who are also the most likely sites for viewer identification. My examination
of *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* focuses on two main ideas: the unstable position of subject/object positioning in viewer identification and the image of the cyborg as a means for understanding how feminism and postmodernism on television can create non-dualistic ways of thinking about sexuality and gender.

**The Science Fiction War Story: *Battlestar Galactica***

The problem with women in war stories is similar to the problem of women in Westerns: namely, that the image depends on historical facts. But whereas Westerns are often thought of as occupying a particular time and place (the Western United States during the 19th century), war stories are not bound by these same historical constraints. Imagining a future war is not a stretch for most viewers, as it's a common trope used by innumerable films, novels, and television series. As such, the war film seems to be more open to incorporating women in active roles; a woman in combat is less anomalous than a woman participating in the shootout at the O.K. Corral. However, despite the less anomalous position of women in war stories, the presence of women in war stories is still rife with anxiety—in large part due to the anxiety that currently surrounds the idea of women in combat. The hybridization of war narratives with SF helps to alleviate some of this anxiety. For example, viewers of the new *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-2009) must adapt to the “reality” of a race of humanoid cyborgs that are intent on mating with humans for their own nefarious purposes. In comparison, seeing a female fighter-pilot or president doesn’t require nearly as much suspension of disbelief. In other words, viewers of SF narratives understand that the text doesn’t have to conform to contemporary reality, and therefore the series allows for “unconventional” characters.
In many ways, BSG is the series most filled with possibilities of moving away from depicting sex and gender as binary systems. Set up very much like a traditional war film (albeit one in which the enemy is a race of robots and most of the action takes place in outer space rather than on battlefields), BSG is the best example of how two traditionally “masculine” genres can work to deconstruct the binary sex/gender system. The creators of BSG have striven to create a post-gender, post-race future, one in which all humans are equal and fighting against a common, non-human enemy. This isn’t to say that the series is entirely successful in erasing human difference (and, in fact, that it attempts to do so creates its own set of problems), but the idea that aboard the Galactica gender and race don’t matter presents viewers with a unique, progressive text. Because of the multiplicity of characters and storylines, BSG requires viewers to navigate multiple sites for viewer identification. What’s more, BSG establishes a narrative that deals explicitly with hybridity and the problem with binary categories; though it’s a metaphor embodied by killer robots, it nonetheless speaks to questions of how categories of identity are both structured and constantly shifting.

Television is gendered in two key ways: in terms of narrative closure and in terms of themes. “Feminine” narratives are open-ended and deal with issues such as romance and relationships. “Masculine” genres usually have episodic closure and are focused more on action than on relationships. Because television has a number of sociological connections, dealing with specific audiences, advertisers, etc., these gendered genres are often equated with specifically sexed audiences. This is problematic for at least two reasons: 1) it essentializes gender, saying that, for example, soap operas are more appealing to women because of their feminine storytelling techniques and themes, and
2) “women’s stories” have historically been, and continue to be, marginalized from broadcast television and are, in fact, becoming progressively less and less popular with almost all audiences, women included. Because women’s stories are disappearing from the television landscape—and because “feminine” storylines often work to reify gender differences rather than elide them—it is necessary to turn to the portrayal of female characters in masculine stories in order to see progressive depictions of women on television.

The recurrent disruption of the diegetic world is compounded in television series that operate as generic hybrids, particularly ones that adopt the narratives and tropes associated with SF, which itself calls attention to its own constructedness. Furthermore, hybrid texts can work to disrupt gendered images onscreen as well. A genre such as the Western, for example, which has long worked to position women in subservient, passive roles in order to naturalize their place in the symbolic order, is called into question when it is integrated with SF, a genre that celebrates technology and the future and which would seem to be at odds with one that idealizes a pre-technological past. These generic hybrids, like the cyborg, work to subvert active/male and female/passive structures of looking, in large part because they deconstruct binary systems in narrative.
CHAPTER 2
THE SF DETECTIVE SERIES: THE X-FILES

From Dragnet (1951-1959) and The Untouchables (1959-1963) to Hill Street Blues (1981-1987), NYPD Blue (1993-2005), and the Law and Order (1990-present) and CSI (2000-present) series, police and detective stories have long been a staple of television culture. And they have also long been the realm of men. Until fairly recently, the police procedural—for reasons ranging from attempts at realism to marketability—has almost wholly excluded depictions of women as active subjects. In fact, one of the first series to portray a female character as an active subject was The X-Files (1993-2002), a series about a male-female FBI team who investigated unexplained and paranormal phenomena. Because The X-Files combined tropes from a number of “masculine” genres—most notably the police procedural and the SF drama—it was able to create more transgressive characterizations of gender than any other television series up until that point.

Like all early television series, the first detective shows were episodic; narrative arcs existed for the span of a single episode, and each episode ended with narrative closure. Though this kind of episodic television was common through most of the 1950s and 60s, cop shows were one of the first genres to begin incorporating longer narrative arcs into their storytelling techniques. Because cop series often dealt with “real life” issues, the shows often reflected the lack of closure that is common in criminal investigations. If the cop series strove for realism—and realism has been one of the trademarks of the genre since its inception—then the narrative should realistically reflect the sometimes open-ended nature of police work. Series such as Hill Street Blues and
*Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993-1999) worked within this paradigm, marking cop shows as one of the more structurally progressive genres on television.

In addition to the movement towards more open-ended storylines, cop shows in the 1980s began to reflect the growing postmodern trend towards playful self-parody and pastiche. While early series tended to rely heavily on the “just the facts” mentality of *Dragnet*, the 1980s saw a rise in the popularity of “buddy-cop” narratives such as *Miami Vice* (1984-1989) and *Moonlighting* (1985-1989). These shows often mixed humor with drama and featured a pair of law enforcement agents who seem like incompatible opposites but work well together to get the job done, even while bickering and trading snappy banter.

If cop series were cutting-edge in terms of structure, they remained the territory of mostly white male protagonists well into the 1970s and 80s. The role of women in these shows was often supporting—young, attractive female officers worked alongside older detectives—though occasionally, in series such as *Cagney and Lacey* (1982-1988), women were given the lead. Like the genre’s interest in open-ended storylines, the male-dominated series can be attributed to the genre’s desire for realism. As of 1972, only one percent of law enforcement officials in the U.S. were women, though this number began to rise with the passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, which prohibited discrimination in hiring practices of local and state agencies (Mizejewski 18).

As women became more visible in law enforcement, so too they began appearing as police officers on television. One of the first series to feature a female police protagonist was *Police Woman* (1974-1978), which featured Angie Dickinson as Sergeant Pepper Anderson. In what would become a common trope of the female
detective series, Pepper spent most of her time working undercover, usually as a prostitute or other sexualized and scantily-clad woman. Pepper was a police officer, but she was always a woman first, and the series worked to highlight both her difference from her male colleagues and her sexualized femininity.

Like Police Woman, the more successful series Charlie’s Angels (1976-1981), a show about three female private investigators, highlighted the sexualization of women working in law enforcement. The “angels” were sex objects first, investigators second. Additionally, these women were defined by their subservience to male authority figures, in this case the never-seen “Charlie” who sent them on missions that required maximum sexualization and minimum investigative skill. Like many male-dominated genres, women existed in these series first and foremost as eye candy, as objects of sexual desire for the male gaze. This was supported both by the women’s physical appearance and dress as well as by the storylines. Both Police Woman and Charlie’s Angels had their lead characters go undercover in a number of episodes, often as prostitutes, waitresses, or other subservient roles that called for them to be clad in bikinis or miniskirts. This sexualization worked to alleviate some of the anxiety caused by women occupying traditionally male spaces.

There was also an attempt in the 1970s to bring Blaxplotation to television, though series that featured African-American women in law enforcement were both less successful and more problematic than their white-starring counterparts. Like the protagonists of Police Woman and Charlie’s Angels, the main character in Get Christie Love (played by Teresa Graves; 1974-75) was an undercover cop whose costumes consisted mostly of “unusually brief miniskirts” (Mizejewski 61). Also like those series,
Get Christie Love abandoned realism in favor of over-the-top fantasy action; the series was “less gritty realism than comic-book Zap! Pow! and Whap!” (Mizejewski 61). Realism, a trademark of the cop show, was often abandoned in these series. Instead, fantasy and comedy dominated, narrative elements that worked to reduce the anxiety caused by powerful women. Additionally, because of her race, Christie Love posed an even larger threat to the dominant ideologies than did Pepper or Charlie’s Angels. Not only was she a woman police officer, she was a black female police officer, and her sexualization and comedy was tinged with much more anxiety than that of the white protagonists of similar series. Get Christie Love, perhaps better than any other series, clearly illustrates the problem of the female detective on television. Because she is a woman in a man’s job, the female detective poses a threat to dominant ideologies of gender. Detectives possess a great deal of power in American culture—both physical and investigative—and women possessing this kind of agency (especially while investigating structures of the dominant ideology) was troubling to audiences at the time. In the case of Christie Love, her double threat of racial and gendered power required that almost all of her subjectivity be stripped through the inclusion of fantasy, glamorized sexuality, and physical comedy. Though the 1970s did introduce the female detective to mainstream television, these images were highly problematic and often worked to reify gender norms.

Arguably, the first “serious” female-driven police series was Cagney and Lacey, which ran from 1982 until 1988. Though progressive in featuring female characters in roles that were not overtly sexual, Cagney and Lacey also focused on the “soft” side of criminal investigations. Unlike police procedurals with male protagonists, Cagney and
Lacey delved into the personal lives of the detectives. The women often investigated domestic issues, and these storylines accentuated the nurturing, caring facets of the women. Though Cagney and Lacey did provide a space for characterizations of women in male-dominated professions, these women were usually still defined by their femininity. The overall message in these series was clear: women could not be traditional cops. Because of the supposedly inherent nurturing qualities of femininity, they were better served in storylines that highlighted their domesticity rather than plots that required them to be serious, rational investigators in the public sphere. This notion was supported by the structures of these series, wherein “the crime investigation of each episode was often less urgent than the ongoing investigation of personal relationships” (Mizejewski 81).

Similar issues dogged shows like Hart to Hart (1979-1984), Remington Steele (1982-1987) and Moonlighting, which featured male-female investigating teams. The focus in these series was the banter and romantic tension of the partnerships, and criminal investigations often took a backseat to the romantic misadventures of the main characters. Though the three series did attempt to complicate gender norms beyond merely placing a woman in a role of traditionally male authority, they were undermined by their screwball comedy bantering. The women in these three series were defined more by their participation in romantic relationships with their male partners than their skills as investigators. When the women did investigate, the focus was often on more “feminine” methods of investigation, such as deduction rather than action (Mizejewski 76). Even the protagonists of Cagney and Lacey—the most powerful of these women detectives—suffered from storylines that rendered them marginalized in the world of
criminal investigators. Women, it seemed, could not just be cops—they had to be lady cops, a label that helped to diminish any anxiety caused by women who transgressed the lines of what could be considered acceptable employment for their sex.

**Women in SFTV**

Like the “sexy” cop that defines females in law enforcement in popular culture, SF often relegates strong female characters to the roles of the “sexy alien.” Though SF seemingly provides a useful avenue for characterizations of powerful women, these women are often marginalized by their monstrous sexuality. It is this monstrous sexuality that has defined most representations of women in popular SF. Though powerful women do exist in a number of SF texts, this power is often alien or monstrous, highlighting the threat and anxiety produced by non-normative women. These characterizations privilege the male gaze and imply that female power is both dangerous and threatening. Despite the possibility for the reconceptualization of gender that is promised in its speculative storylines, SF most often works to accentuate the difference between men and women, often stressing the horror supposedly inherent in the reproductive possibility of the female body (Roberts 41-46).

The essentialization of gender is one of the most problematic elements of both mainstream and feminist SF. While male-produced texts point to the physical differences between men and women (and the horror implied by monstrous reproduction), feminist SF tends either to exclude male characters entirely or to focus exclusively on the positive qualities of essential femininity. One major issue with portraying essential femininity is that television is notoriously hostile to “women’s” genres and storylines, and these texts are often seen as inferior to ones that promote
masculine values. For women to be successful in SFTV, they must work within the constraints of non-feminist SF, embodying power in masculine ways.

In early SF television series, women were often given subservient roles and usually existed in one of two ways: as either “good” women who fulfilled traditionally feminine roles, such as nurses, secretaries, or mothers, or as “bad” women, usually characterized as sexually aggressive alien beings. Both types of women were also defined by their physical difference from men, a quality most often made apparent through costume. For example, in the original Star Trek (1966-1969), male crewmembers dressed in loose-fitting tunics and pants, while female crewmembers wore skintight mini-dresses. This difference extended beyond physical representation, and men were characterized as dominant and heroic, while women were characterized as either “meek and vacant” or as “sexually aggressive” aliens who “threaten the moral order” of the Enterprise (Wagner and Lundeen 82). Women were either omitted from storylines or included “as alluring, scantily clad objects of the erotic male gaze” (Wagner and Lundeen 83). Because a masculine woman produced a great deal of anxiety in 1960s America, they were denied the possibility of power in the future as well. As attitudes towards women changed, so did their roles in the “future.” Though by the 1990s women were still not seen as equal to men, the possibility of equality existed, at least insofar as it could be imagined to occur sometime in the far future.

In fact, the landscape of SFTV has often proved more hostile to women than most other genres, including the police procedural. Whereas the police drama strove to include women, as this represented the real-life trends of law-enforcement, SF felt no such need. Because SFTV aligned itself most often with fantasy and not reality, the
evolving roles of women in society were not reflected on television. Though SF has not been a mainstream element of television until fairly recently (a trend that began, not coincidentally, with series like *The X-Files* that strove to incorporate realism in SF), it has almost always existed in some form since television’s inception. Though *Star Trek* is often considered to be the seminal SF series, a number of other SF series preceded it, including *Buck Rogers* (1950-1951), *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964), and *The Outer Limits* (1963-1965), though these series were often even less open to progressive characterizations of women. The future, according to SFTV though the 1960s, was no place for women.

The 1970s saw a rise in the number of main characters portrayed by women in SF, though as was the case with the police procedural, these women were often placed in highly sexualized roles that stressed both comedy and fantasy. Series like *The Bionic Woman* (1976-1978) and *Wonder Woman* (1976-1979) were the SF equivalent of “jiggle TV.” Like *Charlie’s Angels* and *Police Woman, The Bionic Woman* and *Wonder Woman* were marked by their fantastic elements, as well as their propensity for depicting their protagonists in various states of undress. These SF women were highlighted not only by their superhuman strength but also by their super-feminine appearance and desires. As critic Susan Douglas notes, what audiences got in the Bionic Woman was the “bionic bimbo, the superhuman woman with lots of power, maybe even a gun, flouncy hair, a mellifluous voice, and erect nipples” (211). Though Jamie (the Bionic Woman) was more independent than other tough women on television in the 1970s, her strength was always tempered and undermined by elements of fantasy and by the character’s “stereotypical…femininity and…desirability” (Inness 47). Similarly, *Wonder Woman* (the
other powerful woman on SFTV in the 70s) was defined more by her feminine appearance and her attraction to her male colleague than by her strength. These seemingly powerful women on SFTV were little more than Charlie’s Angels with superpowers; moving beyond the constraints of realism was not enough for SF to portray powerful, transgressive women.

Though it’s clear that television in the 1970s was not interested in portraying strong women who existed outside the bounds of femininity, television series in the late 1980s worked to integrate women into masculine genres in more serious ways. Series like Star Trek: The Next Generation (1987-1994) and Quantum Leap (1989-1993) took a less condescending attitude towards SF women, though, like police procedurals during this period, women were relegated to secondary or tertiary roles. In Star Trek: TNG, women make up three of the eight members of the main cast, and “women turn up as prominent scientists, diplomats, military officers, terrorists, and even as the ultrapowerful Borg queen” (Wagner and Lundeen 90-91). While it’s clear that some of the women conform to the common SF trope of the monstrous alien or ruler, the three main female characters were a doctor, a psychological counselor, and a security officer. Yet these women still formed “a matrix of protection not unlike that which maternal mammals provide for their young” (Wagner and Lundeen 91). The women of TNG were not hyper-feminine jokes like the Bionic Woman or even the meek, vacant women of the original Star Trek, but they were still defined by their essential femininity. Even in roles of power and strength, they were resigned to supportive roles, providing comfort and guidance to the men in power. Dr. Deanna Crusher, for example, the ship’s counselor, was defined not only through her work in the soft (and feminized) science of psychology
but, in later seasons, as the mother of Wesley Crusher, her teenage son who is a cadet aboard the ship. Deanna’s role was ultimately written as mother; she was essentialized as not only maternal but as supportive, as Wesley became the more active and integral character. While later entries into the *Star Trek* canon include women who occupy a more central and less inherently feminized place in the narrative, these more gender-transgressive series did not air until a few years after *The X-Files* first premiered.\(^1\)

Unlike SF print fiction, SFTV has remained largely the realm of men. Most television creators and writers of SF series are male, and the result is that feminist SF (as defined in print fiction through feminist utopias) is almost non-existent on television. One explanation for this is that television is most interested in portraying and promoting the power structures of the dominant ideologies and, though feminist SF does promote the positive elements of femininity, these qualities are highly valued primarily in feminist utopias. SFTV is mired in the patriarchal structures that produce it, which proves a challenge to non-normative portrayals of gender. However, because of the speculative nature of SF as well as its distance from reality, SF does provide spaces for women that they are denied in more realistic genres. Though powerful women are often sexualized in SF (as they are in most masculine genres), SF does allow for gender-liminal characters. But in a cultural environment that does not see feminine strength as equal to masculine strength, positive characterizations of women often necessitate the masculinization of women. It is in this way that genre hybridity works in television to create positive roles for powerful women.

\(^1\) In *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995-2001), the Starship is captained by Kathryn Janeway (Kate Mulgrew), the first female StarFleet captain in any of the series or films. *Star Trek: Enterprise* (2001-2005) includes Commander T’Pol (Jolene Black), a female Vulcan and science officer aboard the Starship.
“You and Your Pretty Partner”: Gender and the Mulder/Scully Dynamic

When it premiered in September 1993, FOX’s The X-Files was an anomaly in a primetime line-up consisting mainly of sitcoms and cop shows. The series, which chronicles the adventures of FBI agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully as they encounter various forms of paranormal phenomena and wade through murky government conspiracies, developed a small following in its first few seasons and by the premiere of its fourth season had emerged as a mainstream television hit. The X-Files pervaded almost all facets of popular culture during its nine-year run; in addition to the show, there were numerous video games, novel tie-ins, comic books, magazines, various television specials purporting to reveal the “secrets” of The X-Files, a feature film, and countless internet websites, chat rooms, and forums devoted to the analysis of the show and its characters. In short, The X-Files was one of the definitive television shows of the 1990s. In order to explain why the series and its characters became “pop-culture touchstones, late-'90s litmus tests of ironic power” (“Veneration X” 26), critics point to the ways in which The X-Files mixes elements of horror, science fiction, and detective fiction to create a text that became one of the most popular television shows of its time.

As a narrative, The X-Files plays upon popular fears and concerns about technology, alien invasion, and the United States government in order to create weekly stories designed to “scare the pants off people” (Chris Carter qtd. in Kaufman).

Like most SF, The X-Files exploited society’s simultaneous obsession with and distrust of science and technology, and the inevitable changes technological progress brings. In addition, the Kennedy assassination, Vietnam, Watergate, the Iran-Contra scandal, and the Challenger explosion all added to the country’s paranoia and the
development of a conspiracy culture. *The X-Files*, coming at the end of a half-century of distrust and paranoia, merely made explicit the fears that dominated the cultural imaginary. While popular police shows such as *NYPD Blue* and *Law and Order* and political dramas such as *The West Wing* (1999-2006) purported to offer audiences a glimpse of the “reality” behind authoritarian structures, they often did so in a way that ennobled the police and the government. Because their heroes were often members of these dominant ideological systems, they tended to reassure viewers that authority was generally honorable and right. The stance of these police/law procedurals carried over into other genre television as well, including SFTV. Spaceship captains, paranormal investigators, and secret agents (usually male) tended to uphold dominant ideological structures, defeating (literally) alien others in the name of progress, heroism, and white patriarchy. Unlike these series, *The X-Files* strives to uncover the corruption of the American government, pointing to the danger of the hegemonic patriarchy. One of the key ways that *The X-Files* critiques the ideologies of the patriarchy is through the gender-liminal partnership of Mulder and Scully.

One of the defining characteristics of many masculine genres is the lone hero. From Westerns to detective fiction to SF, texts often feature a singular man whose noble spirit and heroic acts separate him from his peers. This lone hero is almost always a white male, though print detective fiction and SF film have begun including lone female heroes as well.\(^2\) Though previous texts have played with this archetype—

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\(^2\) One explanation for the prevalence of lone female heroines in print fiction, and their comparative lack in film and television is cost related. According to Linda Mizejewski, "while publishing has become less costly, television and film production costs keep going up" (10). Another possible explanation is that the visual impact is lessened in print fiction, so these texts have one less battle to fight with the masculine female: how she should be visually coded (as both sexually attractive to largely male audiences and masculine enough to be believable as a person in a position of power).
most notably the lone female hero embodied by Ripley in the *Alien* films and detective Clarice Starling in *The Silence of the Lambs* novel and film—*The X-Files* is unique in that it casts a man and a woman as (supposedly) equally important protagonists. Much of the gender criticism about these texts focuses on the implications of introducing a female protagonist into a traditionally male-centered genre. Like *Alien*, *The X-Files* offers a new twist on the standard hero archetype of both science fiction and detective narratives. Whereas many other texts attempt to subvert the lone male hero archetype by merely switching the gender association of the “lone hero,” *The X-Files* both adds a woman to the narrative and attempts to confuse the gender associations implied by a male/female partnership marked by isolation and codependence.

*The X-Files* takes the “lone male hero” narrative and twists it by adding another hero, a woman, to the narrative. On the surface, this introduction of another character would seem to necessitate the erasure of the “lone” part of the archetype. What the series does instead is to cleave the archetypal character into two. Mulder and Scully, though they do have each other, are still remarkably isolated characters, who, as a pair, work as lone hero(es). The two have no allies other than each other; they are physically separated from the rest of the FBI agents by their location in the basement of the building, and they are professionally separated from the other agents because of the nature of their work. No one wants to work with either of them; as Scully tells Mulder early in their partnership, other agents “don’t want [Mulder] involved, they don’t want to hear [his] theories,” at which point Mulder reminds Scully that she’s also hidden now in the basement. As a pair, Mulder and Scully are lone heroes—there just happen to be two of them, something that is further accentuated by the narrative’s emphasis on the
necessity of their partnership. Before he is partnered with Scully, Mulder is seen as a joke. As an agent, he is almost useless on his own, more focused on running after aliens than on solving crimes. Especially in the first season of the show, Mulder is characterized as almost manically irrational. He always refuses to acknowledge any rational explanation and immediately jumps to the most “out there” possibility.

Conversely, Scully is rigidly rational, and, even when confronted by paranormal activity, staunchly refuses to recognize it as such. Without Scully, Mulder is merely a lunatic chasing lights in the sky, while, without Mulder, Scully is nothing more than another government drone (she does function as a medical doctor, but this facet of her professional characterization is almost never seen apart from her law enforcement career). Mulder needs Scully to inject rationality into his insanity and to ground his forays into the unknown, and Scully needs Mulder in order to recognize the “truth” of the paranormal.

The Mulder/Scully partnership as isolated and necessary is established very early in the series and, as the characters evolve, the codependent nature of their partnership becomes more and more apparent. Mulder and Scully’s professional isolation from their peers and codependence on each other is first emphasized in season one’s “Squeeze.” At the beginning of the episode, Scully agrees to assist a former classmate on a case, and she asks Mulder to help with the investigation. Though originally Scully and Mulder are brought on to work with other agents, they quickly become marginalized, spurring them eventually to break off from the other agents altogether. When Scully expresses concern that she and Mulder might encounter resistance from the other investigators, he assures her that the others “will have their investigation, [Mulder and Scully] will
have [theirs], and never the twain shall meet.” The rest of the series follows the same theme of “Scully and Mulder against the world” that is established in this early episode. “Squeeze” is notable in that it is the first episode in which Mulder and Scully define themselves as a team separate from other FBI agents. Not coincidentally, this episode also depicts the first real “closing” of an X-files case; in the two previous episodes (in which Mulder and Scully had yet to solidify their working relationship), the case resolutions were shaky. The remainder of the first season works towards portraying the Mulder/Scully partnership as both necessary to the agents’ success as law enforcement agents and to their success in questioning dominant modes of authority, something that is further accentuated when the partnership is dissolved.

At the start of the second season, when Mulder and Scully have been assigned to different departments, both lose their effectiveness as agents. While Mulder chases after aliens in Puerto Rico, Scully returns to Quantico to teach forensics. As the scenes in these episodes show, once they are separated, Mulder and Scully are no longer “heroic.” Unlike other lone hero types, Mulder and Scully can only be successful with each other. This reimagining of the “lone hero” into the “lone couple” works to define the Mulder/Scully partnership as one of gender liminality, as long as their relationship remains professional. Other male/female detective partnerships highlighted romantic possibility between the partners (Remington Steele and Moonlighting being the best examples), which tended to reinforce heteronormative gender norms. Unlike the female law enforcement characters on mainstream television in the 1980s, Scully’s authority was not undermined by melodrama or screwball comedy. Because of the focus of The X-Files on politics, paranoia, and conspiracy theories, the tone of the series was quite
serious. Furthermore, because the characters’ personal lives were almost never mentioned (due to the show’s intense focus on the two “masculine” genres of police procedurals and SF above all else), Scully was not forced into storylines that highlighted her sexuality and emotional connections to men. Though the structure of the Mulder/Scully partnership was rich with sexual suggestion (made highly visible by media attention to the series), it’s important to note that the majority of this sexuality stemmed merely from the pairing of a man and a woman in a partnership. Unlike series such as *Moonlighting* or *Remington Steele*, romantic banter and tension were not explicit storylines for the series (at least, not until the final seasons). In fact, even though the romantic possibilities of the partnership became, for many viewers, the most important element of the series, it was not coded as such by the text. The two characters rarely touched, and even more rarely discussed their emotional states. Viewers tended to focus on what explicitly was not there, namely, any suggestion of romance between Mulder and Scully.

While it would be problematic to suggest that the show’s creators did not expect viewers (especially viewers familiar with screwball male/female partnerships) to bring expectations of romance to the series, it seemed throughout that the show’s creators were trying to work against this dynamic. As mentioned, screwball comedy in male/female partnerships often works to diminish gender anxiety that occurs when women occupy “male” positions and to reaffirm the gender norms threatened by these partnerships. Excluding comedy in favor of pessimism and paranoia left Scully and Mulder’s partnership largely free of the normalizing ideologies that pervaded series like *Moonlighting*. In fact, this lack of normalization helps explain why audiences focused so
intensely on romantic elements that were not there. By forcing the agents into a model of heteronormativity established in police dramas over the previous two decades, audiences could reduce the anxiety caused by such a gender-liminal partnership.

One of the elements of television is that the text changes over time, responding to cultural events and to audience reaction. While this is often a positive element of the medium, it can sometimes prove troubling to non-normative portrayals of cultural identities. For example, in the case of Cagney & Lacey, the character of Chris Cagney was recast twice in order to make her more glamorous and traditionally feminine. Some of the innovative elements of a character like Cagney—sexual, stoic, and stubborn—were lost because of outside demand. The X-Files suffered similar changes. Though series creator Chris Carter repeatedly said that Mulder and Scully’s relationship was not—and would never be—a romantic one, the characters did eventually become romantically involved, in large part due to fan demand. The result is that Scully’s character, like that of Chris Cagney, became feminized and began to conform to standards of female heterosexuality. Both Cagney and Scully lost agency as a result of audience demand that the characters more closely fit norms of gendered behavior, norms that were most easily achieved by glamorizing the actresses’ appearance as well as their characters’ romantic relationships. In addition to pointing to one of the drawbacks of fan feedback influencing a text, these transformations also point to the seemingly inseparable line between heterosexuality and the construction of gender.
One question that arises, then, is whether or not women can exist in non-normative ways in heterosexual relationships.\(^3\) Even though Mulder and Scully do eventually enter into a traditional family structure (and their genders are normalized accordingly), the first few seasons of the series demonstrate how a heterosexual couple can exist in a non-traditional gender system. Though Scully does eventually become highly feminized (and, as such, is coded as weak by the text), she possesses a great deal of agency in seasons one through four. Because the series does not operate as a realistic text, Scully's gendered qualities are not required to mirror “real” life. Though it might seem less realistic for a female to be taken seriously as an FBI agent, the unbelievability of other elements of the series—giant fluke worms, alien bounty hunters, liver-eating mutants—was much more obvious, rendering the presence of a powerful, masculine female FBI agent much less “out there.”

The women who occupied masculine roles in other police dramas on television were almost always marked by difference. From *Police Woman* to *Under Suspicion* (1994-1995), female characters were defined by their difference in a male-dominated field. These series also strived for realism, and the realism of the female law enforcement officer is that she is, in large part, defined by her difference. Police procedurals, then, were hindered by what was perceived as the reality of the female cop—that she was necessarily different from her male colleagues, both in terms of the way she dressed and in her actions. *The X-Files*, however, did not require this kind of across-the-board realism. Scully’s gender was a difference, but not so glaring as to

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\(^3\) Though *The X-Files* had difficulty following through on its promise of a gender-liminal heterosexual union, later series (most notably *Firefly* and *Battlestar Galactica*) would prove more successful in this regard.
require the text’s attention. In fact, the series also benefited from its small main cast, which consisted only of Mulder and Scully. Because Scully is not surrounded by a large group of men (as was often the case for women in police procedurals), her difference is again less remarkable. Though these elements of the series were not highly realistic—few FBI agents work in departments that consist of only two people, and none encounter extraterrestrials—they also afford Scully a way to embody the masculine power of an FBI agent without having to make the fact that she was a woman a focal point of her role in law enforcement.

While it would be disingenuous to claim that Scully escapes gendering or acts as a post-gender figure within the text, the series does create an important contradiction in terms of casting women as the object of the gaze. Though Scully is clearly set up as the original viewer surrogate, she also acts as a scopophilic object of the gaze; in other words, she seems to fill both the feminine and masculine roles defined by Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay on gender and voyeurism in Hollywood cinema: Scully is both the image and the “bearer of the look.” Because she is both a scientist and an FBI agent, Scully possesses the investigative gaze, but because she is a woman she is also an object of it. In order to illustrate the dual nature of Scully’s character, it is useful to consider an episode that situates her as both doctor and patient, investigator and victim. In season four’s “Memento Mori,” Scully learns that she is suffering from cancer. As a result of her abduction in the second season, she has developed a potentionally fatal brain tumor, a fate suffered by a number of other women who had also been abducted. The episode begins with Scully showing Mulder an x-ray of her brain, explaining her illness to him and pointing to the tumor. Here, Scully is both the object of the masculine
investigative gaze (as both she and Mulder examine her brain) as well as the bearer of the gaze (as she explains the medical significance of the image to Mulder). As the episode progresses, Scully actively investigates her own abduction (which led both to her cancer and her infertility) and enters a hospital to undergo treatment for her illness. Throughout “Memento Mori,” Scully occupies dual roles, one of which stresses her “masculine” subjectivity while the other highlights her “feminine” objectivity.

While Scully does not escape the constraints of femininity in this episode (or numerous others), she is not essentialized as inherently feminine. In fact, it is clear that both her femininity and her masculinity are equally important to her characterization, and that neither are inherent characteristics. *The X-Files* does not ignore or erase the gendered environment of American culture. Instead, it highlights the performative and constructed nature of this environment. Even while Scully’s body is a site of reproductive anxiety and alien technology, she retains the investigative gaze. Furthermore, because the series is never quite clear on who or what abducted Scully—either aliens, a shadowy government cabal known as the Consortium, or a partnership between the two—it highlights the problematic gender structures of most SF. Scully’s body is feminized and weakened by those around her; her femininity comes not from within but from her society’s perception of her body as an object for scrutiny. Unlike SF that characterizes female bodies as inherently horrific or alien, Scully’s body is made so only by the beings who abduct her. And if, as the series suggests, her abduction was the result of human intervention, her body is objectified because of their desire, not her own. In this way, *The X-Files* points to the dangers and evils of the patriarchal structure of groups like the Consortium (who act as a stand-in for the larger patriarchal
government), as it sees the bodies of women as sites for manipulation and medical rape. Additionally, though “Memento Mori” establishes women as the sole victims of this cancer, the series casts both men and women as the victims of abduction.

Scully’s abduction occurs in season two’s “Ascension” when she is taken hostage by a man named Duane Barry who claims to have been abducted by aliens more than a decade earlier. This episode establishes that whoever is abducting people is doing so regardless of biological sex. Barry takes Scully in order to avoid another abduction; he gives the abductors her in place of himself. Sex does not define the identity of the abductees even while the results of the abductions do have a gendered meaning. These alien abductions demonstrate the series’ anxiety over reproductive technologies, an anxiety that centers on both male and female bodies.

*The X-Files’* hybridity of masculine genres works to alleviate a great deal of gender anxiety that ordinarily exists in both SF and detective texts. Because Scully is not only a site of reproductive anxiety but also an investigator of that anxiety, her investigative medical gaze works to expose the crimes of the Consortium and gives important credibility to her and Mulder’s investigations. This credibility is in large part made possible by Scully’s active presence in and acceptance by the patriarchal structures of the FBI, the medical community, and the American government, which affords her masculinity, and thus power within the text. Unlike police dramas that blend masculine and feminine genres, *The X-Files* allows Scully to exist outside of traditionally defined feminine roles.

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4 This idea is illustrated throughout the series. Who or whatever is abducting people doesn’t discriminate along gender lines; Barry is abducted, as is Mulder later in the series and, like Scully, Mulder develops brain cancer. However, only women are used to create the alien-human hybrid clones and rendered infertile. It’s never made clear what the other biological material is for creating these clones, though it’s suggested that it is extraterrestrial in origin, an idea that suggests that the aliens are male.
Gender Hybridity and Storytelling Techniques

To see how the gender liminality of the series is affected by genre hybridity, one needs only to look at the two different narrative formats that the series utilizes. Every episode of the series falls into one of two categories: either mythology or monster-of-the-week (MotW) stories. The “mythology” is a continuous storyline about the government’s involvement in a plot to cover up the presence of extraterrestrials on Earth. The MotW episodes are stand-alone shows that operate much like standard detective or horror stories. In these episodes, a case is presented, investigated by Mulder and Scully, and solved at the end of the hour. These stand-alone episodes best illustrate the series’ ability to integrate different genre traditions in order to create a more mainstream SF text, since they owe a large debt to traditional detective and police procedural narratives. The mythology episodes of the series resemble a more straightforward take on SF, and mostly concern Mulder and Scully attempting to understand the government’s apparent connection to extraterrestrials. Because these episodes are less marked by genre hybridity, they are useful in understanding how genre hybridity and gender hybridity are related.

The mythology episode arcs began in season one and continued throughout the series, though arguably the most significant plot point of these episodes occurred in season two with “Duane Barry”/“Ascension”/“One Breath.” The first episode of this arc, “Duane Barry,” sets up Mulder as an active participant in a hostage situation, negotiating with a psychotic man who believes he has been an alien abductee. Scully’s role in the episode is a much more peripheral one—the X-files have been shut down, so

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5 The discussion of gender hybridity in this section refers specifically to gendered themes and storylines rather than narrative structures.
Scully’s connection to paranormal cases is tenuous at best since at this point she is working as an instructor at Quantico. She only becomes involved in the cases when Mulder asks her, and her role is merely to perform a background check on Barry. The majority of the episode features Mulder’s discussions with Barry and ends with Mulder successfully negotiating for the release of the hostages, while Barry is shot by police and then later escapes as he is brought to the hospital. The episode ends with Barry breaking into Scully’s apartment and violently abducting her as she screams into the phone (and Mulder’s answering machine) for Mulder to help her. The following episode, “Ascension,” begins with Mulder listening to Scully’s plea for help and rushing to her apartment. The remainder of the episode is Mulder’s quest to find Scully, a task with which he quickly becomes obsessed. In the final episode of this arc, “One Breath,” Scully returns and spends most of the episode unconscious in a hospital bed.

In their essay on gender pleasure and *The X-Files*, Rhonda Wilcox and J.P. Williams note this object-positioning of Scully in the season two episodes that depict her abduction, but then state that this Scully-as-object-body is unusual for the series—“the presentation of Scully as comatose victim—a beautiful body, pure object, unable to recount her perspectives and experiences—is highly unusual” (110). And it is unusual—in the MotW stand-alone episodes. However, Scully’s role in the mythology episodes is often highly passive. It is her body, and her role as a test subject, that matter in these episodes. Rather than existing as active investigator in these episodes, Scully’s role is both passive and secondary. It is stated repeatedly that it is Mulder in whom the Consortium are interested; Scully is only important because of her connection to Mulder and because of her body. In some ways *The X-Files* works as two distinct shows: one
about a pair of FBI agents who solve a series of paranormal-related crimes, and one about the Consortium’s desire to undermine Mulder and achieve global domination with the help of extraterrestrial beings.

Throughout the mythology episodes in the rest of the series, Scully remains in the role of object for Mulder, at times replacing his sister Samantha—who had been abducted when she and Mulder were children and never returned—as the object of his quest. As the series progresses, she is abducted innumerable times by both humans and aliens (usually as a way for another character to get to Mulder), given cancer (as a way to “make [Mulder] believe”), and used as a bargaining chip to get Mulder to do things for the Consortium. It is always Mulder’s actions that drive the plot of the mythology episodes—Scully is never seen as a threat to any of the characters, but rather as a means by which Mulder can be manipulated. Furthermore, either she or Samantha serves as catalyst for Mulder’s actions—everything that he does can be directly connected to a desire to find or save either his sister or his partner. The mythology is, in fact, built around the central theme that women must be rescued by men; Scully and Samantha are the two most obvious examples of this trend, but these episodes are filled with women who serve no other purpose than to motivate Mulder to act heroically. The mythology episodes are much less reliant on tropes of police procedurals than are the MotW episodes. While Mulder and Scully do investigate in these episodes, for the most part the focus is on understanding the goals of the aliens and the Consortium rather than investigative method. These cases are also never solved; the mythology of the series is complex and rather muddled, in large part because Mulder and Scully never actually understand what the government’s position is
in relationship to the aliens or even who in the government is aware of the existence of extraterrestrials. The mythology’s lack of genre hybridity is also tied to its lack of gender liminality; because Scully is not primarily a law enforcement agent or doctor in these episodes, but an object to be abducted or rescued, a great deal of her “masculinity” is stripped away. Her status as an FBI agent in the mythology episodes is not important; what is important is that she is a female body and that Mulder is invested in saving her.

Unlike the mythology episodes, the MotW episodes work to position both characters in a more gender-liminal state. Not coincidentally, these episodes are most closely tied to police procedurals; it does matter that Scully is an FBI agent and a doctor, and she is afforded subjectivity by these roles. The result is that, unlike the mythology episodes, Scully occupies a active/subject position in a majority of these episodes. Though the series began with a clear bias in Mulder’s world view (because he believes in the paranormal phenomena that the agents investigate), this bias evened out as the series continued. Scully’s science was often shown as integral to understanding the monsters and mutants they encountered in their investigations, so her role as an investigator evolved as the series’ storylines became more complex.

Much of *The X-Files*’ importance as an example of gender and genre hybridity relies on two basic tenets of the series: that the storylines of the narrative require one of the cop partners to be rational and well-versed in science and that the female partner fulfill this role. As mentioned, law-enforcement women on television tended to be defined by their stereotypical femininity. Scully was the first female cop character who was not defined by her sexy clothes or her interest in children or her desire to woo her male partner with her feminine wiles. Instead, most of her actions (at least through the
first few seasons of the series) could be characterized as “masculine.” Much of Scully’s masculinity is tied to her role as a rational scientist. Because she is a forensic pathologist as well as an FBI agent, one of Scully’s roles in the narrative is to autopsy bodies and examine evidence. In this way, she is able to embody the masculine traits of rationality and bearer of the gaze. The connection between gender and science is an important one in SFTV, and the female scientists who appeared in SFTV are often characterized as having an emotional and intuitive connection to science. For example, the female scientists on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* are “feminine” scientists: a psychological counselor and a family doctor. Scully’s science is defined not through an emotional or feminine connection, but through its rigid rationality. Though this rationality is not always appropriate, considering the fantastic crimes that Mulder and Scully investigate, it does work to position both agents as gender liminal.

The fact that Scully’s science isn’t always appropriate has been the source of some question over whether or not it provides a positive characterization of the female scientist. As the critic Lisa Parks notes, “*The X-Files* uses Mulder to challenge scientific methods and principles, suggesting that there is something ‘out there’ that scientific rationality cannot resolve” (124). However, the series nevertheless emphasizes that Scully’s rationality is integral to understanding what is “out there.” Without Scully, Mulder is not an effective agent; while he tends to make brilliant intuitive leaps in his investigations, he relies on Scully’s science to understand and interpret these leaps. There are, in fact, few episodes that depict crimes that exist completely outside the realm of science. Instead, the paranormal events can only be understood once Scully examines evidence and bodies. Her investigative gaze positions Scully as a woman
who is not inherently “feminine” and whose transgressive qualities are not negated or dismissed by the text.

Unlike women in previous SFTV, Scully’s subject position in the narrative wasn’t dependent on fulfilling a traditionally “feminine” role or job. She was not placed in maternal roles, nor was there anything other than her appearance that marked her as particularly feminine (and even her appearance tended towards the androgynous). However, it’s also important to note that Scully’s “masculinity” owed just as much to external markers as it did to her attitude and emotional state. Because of her profession, Scully possesses tools associated with men and masculinity. As a law enforcement agent, Scully carries a gun and a badge, both markers of masculine power that recur throughout much detective fiction. In this way, the genre hybridity of the series points to one way in which genre impacts character. In many other SF series, women occupy roles in outer space, often as members of a space crew. And, because a space crew needs a number of different kinds of workers, women are often placed in the most “feminine” jobs: nurses, counselors, or teachers. But because The X-Files is a detective story as well as SF, Scully is afforded a position as a detective, a role marked by masculinity.

As has been shown, however, women in detective roles aren’t necessarily marked as masculine. Placing them in “feminine” storylines denies them this masculinity and reifies gender norms. However, because of the hybridization with SF (another traditionally masculine genre), “feminine” storylines don’t work with the overall goals and tone of the series. The SF element of the series also helps to undermine another problem with women in detective fiction—the idea that their presence is marked by
difference and their femininity becomes a focus. In *The X-Files*, the paranormal elements are the most anomalous elements; a female detective isn’t as unsettling as a liver-eating mutant. Scully’s character benefits from the SF element of the series because her “difference” is no longer a defining element of her character.

As long as the series remained true to these ideas and focused on masculine genres rather than feminine genres, its gender liminality was successful. However, beginning in season five, the series began to shift its focus to more feminine storylines and narrative arcs. Though Scully is characterized in early seasons of the series as non-maternal, in season five’s two-episode arc “Christmas Carol”/”Emily,” Scully discovers that she has a daughter. Created by some unknown group using ova harvested from Scully during her abduction, Emily is a toddler when she is discovered by Scully. Despite having no other bond to the child than a biological one, Scully wants to adopt Emily. Though, in the end, the question of whether or not Scully would make a good mother is moot—Emily dies as a result of her part-alien DNA—her brief interactions with Emily are key to an examination of Scully as a mother as well as motherhood’s overall effect on her gender liminality and masculine power.

Scully’s turn toward the maternal coincides with two major story changes in the series: a movement toward comedy in the sixth season and a focus on the possibility of a romantic relationship between Mulder and Scully in the seventh season. As mentioned, one way that *The X-Files* is able to create a space for a masculine female is through the exclusion of feminine storylines that work to essentialize femininity in female characters. By omitting storylines about the personal lives and romantic relationships of Scully and Mulder, the series does not fall into the trap of forcing its characters into a
heterosexual relationship. Once the focus turns away from their investigations and to their personal lives, Mulder and Scully become a traditional male/female partnership, complete with bantering, flirting, and the naturalization of gender roles. Once Scully enters into a romantic relationship with Mulder, that is, once she becomes a part of a traditionally “feminine” storyline, she also loses a great deal of her authority and power within the show.

As Scully’s interest turns away from the masculine power of law enforcement and towards the feminine sphere of family and romance, the series loses its transgressive characterizations of gender. The eventual evolution of the characters, as seen in the second feature film *The X-Files: I Want to Believe* (2008), falls in line with stereotypical gender norms. No longer working for the FBI, Scully is now a pediatric neurosurgeon who spends her days treating sick children and her evenings staying home with Mulder, with whom she now lives. When the FBI requests her and Mulder’s assistance with a case, she becomes upset because her life of stable domesticity is disrupted. Though Scully’s role in the second film is quite important (in the first film, she only acted as bait for the bad guys to trap Mulder), it’s problematic in that it diminishes her importance as an investigator. Her role is defined almost exclusively through her romantic relationship with Mulder, her maternal connection to a young patient, and a religious crisis. Scully is no longer an investigator in this film; she’s still a doctor, but her investigative gaze is denied throughout the film.

*The X-Files: I Want to Believe* points to the series’ main tension with non-normative portrayals of gender and sexuality. Though it strives for transgression, it often merely reaffirms problematic stereotypes. Scully is the central character in this film, but
her investigative power has been almost wholly stripped. She is reduced to a stereotype, the tough woman who, once she loses the physical markings and tools of “masculine” power, reverts to her inherent femininity. The film exposes Scully’s attitude on the television series as an act; an attempt to cover up the true nature of her character: emotional, caring, and intuitive. Furthermore, because of the disjointed structure of the film, Scully doesn’t benefit from the plot’s genre hybridity. While Mulder takes on the role of investigator, Scully spends most of the film either at home with Mulder or in the hospital interacting with one of her young patients. The few times she accompanies Mulder into the field for the investigation, she refuses any subjectivity, saying that she’s “just along for the ride.” Once Scully is removed from the FBI, and from the detective-genre storyline, she is denied investigative power. Instead, she falls into the trap of many women in SF: she is the maternal, protective caregiver who must embrace her emotionalism and mysticism in order to be effective.

Because of its evolution from subversive text to mainstream hit, The X-Files provides a useful example of the effect of genre hybridity on expressions of gender in visual texts. Unlike previous series, The X-Files featured a male and female character who were equally important and who functioned in a kind of gender-liminal relationship. Once feminine narrative strategies such as romance and comedy were introduced into the text, however, the gender coding fell in line with the dominant ideology of heteronormativity. The series points to the necessity of genre hybridity and the exclusion of feminine genres if women are to be characterized as subjects and sites of masculine power.
Throughout the series, Scully’s character is always in a kind of gendered flux; she is both the masculine woman who rejects the essential femininity of many other detective women, and she is also the object of Mulder’s rescue, inherently passive and victimized. This tension does not negate the importance of Scully’s character for hybrid SFTV, but instead points to the difficulties in portraying non-normative women on mainstream television. Scully is both asexual (as demonstrated by her lack of romantic interactions with her partner or other figures), and highly sexualized (through her position as passive victim). The genre hybridity of *The X-Files* provides a complex characterization of gender. In many ways, the series conforms to gendered tropes of SF and detective stories that place men in positions of power and women in positions of passivity. But just as often, the series complicates these roles and points to the external forces that place men and women in these roles, as well as illustrates how gender is not inherent to biological sex.
CHAPTER 3
THE SF WESTERN: FIREFLY

Often considered to be the most masculine of genres, the Western is arguably the genre most resistant to non-traditional portrayals of gender and sexuality. The Western had its heyday on television and in film during the mid-20th century, from the 1930s until the mid 1960s, though the 1950s were considered by many to be the golden age of the genre. The post-WWII political climate in the United States, with its drive for patriotism and a return to classic American values, provided an ideal setting in which the Western genre flourished. In order to understand the significance of the Western, as well as its connection to science fiction, it is first useful to explore the reasons why the genre flourished in the 1950s but by the 1970s no longer held a central place on film and television.

The rules of the Western are both aesthetic and political. Typified by archetypal characters and a sparse American West setting, the Western is a world of rigidly determined race and gender roles that depends on standard iconography and tradition to define itself. In terms of plot, most traditional Westerns are about a lone, rugged cowboy (always a white male), who strikes out on his own to right some kind of wrong, relying on his courage, smarts, and independence to overcome both the harsh desert environment as well as the groups of villains he meets on his journey. The aesthetic rules of the Western are fairly straightforward; Westerns have cowboys, horses, and are set on large expanses of undeveloped land (usually in the American West). There are often gunslingers, Native Americans, saloons, and small frontier towns. Heroes are stoic, gun-toting, Stetson hat-wearing, white men. Villains are uncivilized, rove in
groups, and primitive. The Western is a battle between civilization and nature, a story of how the wild, primitive land was tamed and saved by a mythic American figure.

Though many Westerns appear to be simple morality tales, like all genre stories, the reliance on codes and symbolism results in a complex connection between visual imagery and audience identification. As a genre, the Western provided a model for film theorists to see the ways in which codes and symbols worked to translate aesthetic elements into moral or political ideas. Visual codes such as white hats (good guys) and black hats (bad guys) helped to reinforce the notion that audiences used visual cues to understand and identify with certain character types. The result is that a genre like the Western—considered by many to be simplistic and unsophisticated—represents the complex and sophisticated ways that film communicates ideas to audiences through visual coding.

Unlike other genres such as police procedurals or action films, the Western is historically grounded, about a very specific time and place—Western American frontier towns in the late 19th century. Though some Westerns were set in places such as Mexico or Australia, these non-American settings still looked like Western America and therefore fit the visual paradigm established early in the genre’s history. The importance of setting can be found in one of the genre’s central thematic conflicts—that between nature and civilization. Many early Westerns are centrally about this struggle, which explains the importance of setting for these stories. In order for the Western hero to be a true hero, he must be able to confront and conquer some kind of hostile, wild territory. And because of the history of American exploration and colonization, the type of wilderness that is most prevalent (because it is so distinctly “American”) is the desert-
like barren rockiness of the Western landscape. The significance of the frontier and the west is indelibly connected to the idea of American identity, something that can be seen at its peak in Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 “Frontier Thesis.” Turner argued that the idea and spirit of the frontier, of taming wilderness with civilization, produced a distinctly American identity, one tied to the desire for Western expansion. Turner called the frontier the “meeting point between savagery and civilization” and it is this notion that provides the basis for the majority of Western films. Turner’s remarks also point to the ways in which the Western exists as a distinctly American genre; even when Westerns are not set or produced in the United States, they still exist as products of America in the cultural imaginary because of this frontier spirit.

The history behind the frontier and Western expansion is integral to understanding the ideology of the Western. Because the frontier was constantly moving westward (at least until the settling of the western most states), the uncivilized side of the divide was marked by both the absence of white settlers and the presence of Native American tribes. In order to mark the line of the frontier (which Turner emphasized was indeed a physical boundary, albeit one that was moving further and further west), it had to be clear what constituted civilization and what should be considered savage wilderness. The answer, according to Turner and the Western, was that savage wilderness included non-industrialized land and Native Americans. Conquering the frontier was therefore a twofold task: land must be industrialized, and native people must be eradicated. The Western genre took this idea as its basic plot structure; all Westerns are about the expansion of the Western frontier. This image of the frontier further set the stage for other elements of the genre’s narrative structure. The idea of conquering a boundary is
common to all Western genre stories, and most Westerns make the connection between conquering a physical and a metaphorical frontier.

In many early traditional Westerns, the metaphorical frontier was very clearly tied to the physical one. As the cowboys moved west, so did the American cultural ideology. The cowboy in this scenario was a mythic figure standing for more than just a man with an independent spirit; he represented the expansion of American culture in the United States. The frontier itself “promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people” (Turner) and the cowboy’s pursuit and subsequent conquest of the frontier represent the further expansion of an American nationality. While the boundary of the continental United States eventually found an end by the early 20th century, the Western continued to allow audiences to observe and identify with an idea that is considered distinctly American. This historical reality further serves to explain the continued importance of setting in Westerns, since if a story is about the American frontier, it must be set before that entire frontier was colonized. History explains a great deal about the character types in Westerns. Because Westerns exist in a specific temporal setting, what can be considered “realistic” in these films must conform to popular notions of historical accuracy. For example, the cowboy hero in Westerns is almost always a white male, in large part because this seems to be the most historically accurate representation of a person who had the means and ability to live alone in a frontier town in the 19th century. In addition, the attempt to create a sense of realism in Westerns cemented other character types such as the Native-American villain and the love-struck, helpless woman. Reconfiguring these character types often proved difficult because of the genre’s apparent reliance on historical accuracy.
It is worth noting, however, that the “reality” of the Western wasn’t the actual reality of the cowboys, many of whom were Latino or African-American. In fact, the overwhelming whiteness of the Western was less about an accurate reflection of historical reality and more about using “racial types as justification for Manifest Destiny” (Williams 102). According to J. Hoberman, “the national demographics of the Western remained overwhelmingly white up until the eve of the genre’s demise—despite the fact that at least a quarter of the working cowboys in the late nineteenth century were of African descent” (86). The Western, like the majority of mainstream genres, has always been most particularly invested in creating a conceptual framework that upholds maleness and whiteness as inherently superior, powerful, and dominant. The Western has proven particularly resistant to change in this regard. Inclusions of race issues in even nouveaux Westerns tend to center specifically on the interactions between whites and Native Americans, rather than any other racial and ethnic groups who were, in reality, a significant presence during Western expansion in the nineteenth century. There were black cowboys in “race films” going back to the 1920s and occasionally in some mainstream films as sidekicks to a white male hero, but African-American cowboy heroes have been almost wholly excluded from popular films in the genre.¹

Though the mainstream films produced during the golden age of the Western tended to conform strictly to these character archetypes, some of the Westerns produced after this period attempted to create a different set of characters and identifications and/or relied on conventional iconography to produce unusual thematic

¹ Arguably the only mainstream Western that depicted black cowboy heroes is Mario Van Peebles’s *Posse* (1993). The film wasn’t particularly successful, either commercially or critically. One critic argued that “the movie has a decidedly 1990s cinematic style and sense of humor, which is frequently hard to rectify with the time frame” (Hettrick). The Western, it would seem, has to be traditionally mainstream or risk being dismissed.
results. These revisionist Westerns of the 1970s, 80s, and 90s sometimes featured non-white or female protagonists in an attempt to bring to light the lives and struggles of marginalized groups. However, not all revisionist Westerns featured non-white or female protagonists; in fact, most revisionist Westerns tended to keep the basic character archetypes (such as the lone cowboy, the saloon girl, and the minority villain), while at the same time attempting to demystify the myth of the noble cowboy. Revisionist Westerns that stayed fairly true to the character and narrative models set during the golden age of Westerns (such as Little Big Man [1970], Dances with Wolves [1990], and Unforgiven [1992]) often found critical and popular success, while those that disrupted the formula (such as Posse [1993], The Ballad of Little Jo [1993], and The Quick and the Dead [1995]) were often critical and financial flops. The Western, it seems, is not suited to revision along the lines of race and gender. The hero can be weak, he can be cowardly, he can be cruel, but he is almost always male and white.

Westerns, like action films, are traditionally male films. According to The BFI Companion to the Western, the Western is a necessarily male genre because “the central dramatic conflict in the genre invariably involved a trial of physical prowess [and] Hollywood could not in its heart believe in women who take up arms; especially in a genre which was, however notionally, set in the age of crinoline” (51). Despite this overwhelming masculinity, there have been recent (post-1980s) attempts to include active female roles in Westerns. However, whereas action cinema has found a place for the active heroine (albeit one marked by anxiety and confusion), the Western has not been as successful. Though the Western declined in popularity after the 1960s, the genre enjoyed a brief resurgence in the ‘90s. These “nouveaux Westerns” usually offer
a variation on the traditional Western paradigm and often feature more prominent roles for women and minorities. However, despite claims that these films illustrated a “profound disenchantment with the institutions and mainstream values of American society” (Lenihan 149), even the supposedly progressive and transgressive nouveaux Westerns tend to uphold traditional white patriarchal values.

In a study of these nouveaux Westerns that combine the narratives of classic Hollywood Westerns with “new” genres, critic Chris Holmlund found that the axioms of traditional Westerns were upheld and that “macho rules…white men dominate…[and] action triumphs” (66). So, even while there might have been a move towards a more “critical…vision of society” that “gave popular expression to growing intellectual and political reservations about corporate domination of American society” (Lenihan 160), these progressive Westerns more often than not merely celebrated white patriarchy in a slightly different way. While the frontier offered by nouveaux Westerns such as Unforgiven presents a narrative with a more pessimistic and cynical worldview than the easy morality of classic Westerns, that doesn’t mean they are any more progressive along gender and race lines than the earlier films. Instead, most of these films merely celebrate a new white patriarchal authority, one marked by cynicism and disillusionment, but one nevertheless still ruled by white Western men.

The Western on Television

The television Westerns of the golden age—including the long-running popular series Bonanza (1959-1973) and Gunsmoke (1955-1975)—flourished and relied on many of the same tropes and themes as their cinematic counterparts. The Western was a popular television genre until the mid-1970s, at which point the genre all but vanished from the television lineup. As was the case with film, a few revisionist Westerns
emerged after the 1970s, but on television the genre was even less present than it was in cinema. Westerns during this time included Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman (1993-1998), Deadwood (2004-2006), and Firefly (2002-2003), all of which relied heavily on the aesthetics of the Western, but told revisionist stories that often lacked the moral simplicity of earlier series.

Though more critical attention has been paid to Western films, these television series were not very different from the Westerns being produced for the cinema at this time. If anything, the Western television series seemed more stagnant than the films, and seemed to be a perfect fit for a medium filled with episodic narratives in which there was no clear passage of time or change in the lives of the characters. While this worked well for a genre that relied on not moving forward too quickly (because that would destroy the frontier trope on which it was based), as television changed in the 1970s and 1980s to series with ongoing storylines that lasted through many seasons, the traditional Western no longer worked. These Westerns were most popular on television at a time when series were episodic and continuing narrative arcs were rare. The Western worked well for this kind of narrative structure because it relied so heavily on one basic conflict, one usually involving a group of people in a developing frontier town. These series relied on the frontier town never developing past a certain point, so narratives that lasted for twenty years (in the case of Gunsmoke) could be set in towns that showed no forward progress or development. One Western that survived the change in the televisual climate of the 1970s was Little House on the Prairie (1974-1983), a series marked by its hybrid nature (part Western, part family drama) as well as its utilization of story arcs that lasted through multiple episodes and seasons. Though
“Little House of the Prairie” wasn’t succeeded by another successful television Western for another ten years, the genre-hybrid model it employed would prove to be the most useful for future Westerns on television.

The 1980s saw even fewer television Westerns than the 1970s and it wasn’t until the 1990s that the Western began to re-emerge on primetime television. One of the first popular Western television series of the 1990s was *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, which is the story of Dr. Michaela Quinn, a female doctor living and working in a Colorado frontier town in the 1860s. Like all Westerns, *Dr. Quinn* is about confronting life on the frontier, but it was also about a woman determined to conquer a different kind of frontier—many episodes of the series are about Dr. Quinn’s fight to show the townspeople that a woman can be a doctor. Though the plotlines of *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* tend to reaffirm the naturalization of gender (Dr. Quinn is very caring and maternal), the series also demonstrates how the gender configuration of the Western hero can change. Dr. Quinn is an example of a role rarely available to women in traditional Westerns, since the narrative is her journey, not that of her romantic partner. By allowing a woman an active role in the story, *Dr. Quinn* demonstrates the ways in which traditional Western character archetypes can be reworked to create a less conservative system of gender roles in this setting. *Dr. Quinn* is also a hybrid television series—it combines a traditionally male genre (the Western) with a traditionally female one (the family drama). The result, as is the case with many male-female genre hybrids is that traditionally “feminine” traits find a place in a male world. But, as is the case with other such television hybrids such as *Cagney and Lacey* and *Moonlighting*, these series
reaffirm binary systems of sex and gender because they imply that women can only succeed in feminine roles.

In order to escape these binaries, it seems that the presence of the “woman’s” genre needs to be avoided. If a key problem with the current systems of sex and gender is that they are necessarily oppressive to women because women are denied positive (i.e. masculine) qualities due to a theory of essentialism, then to avoid the women-equals-feminine trap, one must look beyond merely seeing women as possessing separate but equal qualities compared to their male counterparts. The problem of the woman in the Western seems to come down to a problem of the binary sex/gender system. Though women rarely have starring roles in Western films or television series—they are usually reserved for marginal characters and love interests—they're still present in the majority of Westerns. The role of the woman in the Western remains a problem, however, in large part because of their perceived natural femininity. Most critics agree that the Western is a genre about masculinity, which is the root of the only-men-as-Western-heroes problem. If the Western hero must be masculine, and if masculinity is designated the realm of men, then there is no place for a female Western hero. And yet, there are a small number of cases where film and television makers are able to overcome this gender naturalization. Hybrids that bring a feminine genre into the masculine space of the Western only uphold this dialectic because they imply that women can only be in the Western if the Western is feminized. Few texts allow women to become central characters without the inclusion of some kind of feminine genre or storyline. The binary sex and gender systems that deny women this place are supported
by historical context; these stories set at a time when “men were men” deny women a place in masculinity as a result of historical limitations.

**The Space Western: Firefly**

In 2002, the FOX network began airing *Firefly*, a short-lived science fiction-Western series which ran for only 11 episodes (though 14 were filmed). Firefly blends two traditionally masculine genres—the Western and the science fiction film—to create a space that upholds the traditional character archetypes of the Western, but does so in a setting that doesn’t require historical accuracy. The result is a program filled with cowboys and gunslingers that don’t fit the paradigm of the white male cowboy hero dictated by the culturally accepted view of American history promoted by the Western. Set in outer space 500 years in the future, the premise of *Firefly* is that an interplanetary civil war erupted when a conglomerate known as The Alliance attempted to unify all of the planets in the galaxy. Those opposing this authoritarian power began battling with the Alliance in order to maintain their independence. These Independents, known as Browncoats, lost the war, and *Firefly* follows the adventures of a group of these rebels in the post-war environment. Leading the crew is Mal (Nathan Fillion), a Browncoat soldier who now makes his living as a smuggler and space pirate, constantly fighting to avoid the control of The Alliance. The rest of his crew includes Zoe (Gina Torres), an old war buddy of Mal’s and his current first mate; Wash (Alan Tudyk), Zoe’s husband and the pilot of *Serenity*; Jayne (Adam Baldwin), a mercenary and career criminal; Inara (Morena Baccarin), a high-class prostitute; and Kaylee (Jewel Staite), the ship’s mechanic. Also aboard *Serenity* are three passengers: Shepherd Book (Ron Glass), a clergyman; Simon (Sean Maher), a former Alliance doctor; and River (Summer Glau), Simon’s sister and a former Alliance prisoner. River, a psychic and telepath, was
imprisoned by the Alliance and then experimented on in the hopes of turning her into the perfect military weapon. These experiments, in addition to making River a crack shot and brilliant fighter, also drove her insane. The main plot of the series involves the Alliance’s attempts to regain possession and control of River following her rescue by Simon. Like most contemporary television series, *Firefly* has an ongoing storyline that occurs throughout the season, as well as particular episodic storylines in individual episodes. The Alliance’s pursuit of River is the ongoing storyline of *Firefly* though there are also stand-alone stories about the frontier planets that are not related to the River-Alliance plotline.

Visually, *Firefly* looks like a Western—the outer rim planets resemble the American frontier with plains, deserts, and mountains, and both costume and dialogue owe a debt to traditional Hollywood Westerns. Furthermore, *Firefly*’s narrative follows that of the classic Western, centering on a “hero vs. badman” conflict (Fenin 31) and exploring the “process of frontier expansion” by a civilizing agency (Lenihan 13). The film relies heavily on tropes culled from the Western genre. Series creator Joss Whedon has said that he based his film on frontier stories using a “classic frontier paradigm,” and the striking narrative similarities between *Firefly* and John Ford’s *Stagecoach* have been noted. *Firefly* is a story about frontiers, about the taming of savage lands by a civilizing force, and about the triumph of American independence and power, all of which also characterize the traditional Hollywood Western. But despite all of these similarities,

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2 In an interview with Mike Russell, Whedon said that the film’s dialogue is “largely Western. It’s also Elizabethan. There’s some Indian stuff. There’s some turn-of-the-century Pennsylvania Dutch. Irish…. There’s absolutely anything that fits…Chinese…And there’s some John Wayne -- which is different than just ‘Western.’”

3 In “Stagecoach in Space: The Legacy of Firefly,” Fred Erisman traces the striking similarities between Whedon’s narrative and Ford’s classic film.
Firefly complicates the “clear moral choices” (Lenihan 11) of traditional Western films because it lacks a clear “good versus evil” moral structure and because it provides spaces for active female characters.

As noted, Westerns often used history to back up this naturalization of gender roles. However, since it is set in the far future, Firefly is not restricted by the rules of history and, as an SF text, it is expected to reimagine commonly held ideas and beliefs about society, identity, and technology. One of the central ways that Firefly does this is through the characterization of the two central hero-type characters aboard Serenity: Mal and Zoe. In many ways, both Mal and Zoe are traditional Western heroes: tough, stoic, attractive, and they know their way around a horse and a gun. Classifying Mal as a Western hero is a fairly simple translation—he’s in charge of Serenity and is almost always a leader in scenes of action and battle. He also fits the visual model for a Western hero in that he is a white male and dresses in a manner appropriate for a cowboy. Zoe, however, doesn’t fit the model for two very key reasons: she is female and she is black. And yet, she still occupies a hero role in the series, something that is heavily reliant on the hybridization of the Western with SF.

**Warrior Woman: Zoe, Race, and Gender**

Zoe occupies a place in the narrative that, while fairly unusual in the Western, is not without precedent, especially as it appears in other genres. Zoe is a masculine female, a woman who embodies traits usually associated with men (thought to be the natural vessels of masculinity). The masculine female is more common in genres such as action, horror, and the science fiction film than in Westerns. In her book on the role of gender in action films, Spectacular Bodies, Yvonne Tasker points to a number of masculine females who’ve appeared in these genres. These women are tough,
physical, and able to occupy a central role in genres usually associated with men. They also usually carry with them a great deal of anxiety, both within the narrative and for viewers of the narrative. This anxiety produced by the transgressive woman often manifests as either the character being cast in a humorous light or placed in the role of sex object for both the viewers and other characters. When discussing the place of a woman in bar brawl (which, with a male lead, is often common in Westerns), Tasker notes that bar-room “scenes are showpieces for the ritualised performance of a tough masculinity” in which male characters “use a public space to self-consciously strike poses, acting out stylised roles, in their desire to either instigate or avoid conflict” (22). Bar fights offer violence carried out in a specifically male public space, which makes the introduction of a female action hero into these sites particularly interesting. According to Tasker, in many American films of the 1970s, the female-led bar-room brawl was a comic moment in the film, often using humor as a way to navigate the anxieties which surrounded the inclusion of a powerful woman into a traditionally male space.

Because the bar brawl is so common to the Western, and because it occurs more than once in Firefly, it’s a useful situation to look at in order to understand the way in which Zoe is characterized in these scenes. While Firefly is not above using humor to tell its stories, it’s interesting to note that this humor is rarely present when Zoe is shown in combat scenes. Unlike many other female action heroines, Zoe’s physical abilities are not portrayed as a source of anxiety within the narrative through either humor or sexual objectivity. In “The Train Job,” the second episode of the series, Jayne, Mal, and Zoe get involved in a bar-room brawl. Though the scene doesn’t lack humor, this humor revolves around Mal and Jayne, but almost never around Zoe. Mal cracks jokes and
gets thrown out of a holographic bar window, but Zoe’s role is that of fighter. Nor is she, like many of the female action heroes in bar fights, underestimated at first. Zoe is not differentiated from Mal or Jayne by her gender. She is shown fighting as an equal, and her presence in the fight is not, like many women in the bar fights in film, “treated like a joke” (Tasker 23). There are a number of other scenes like this one throughout the series, and it is usually the same three characters that are involved in most of the fighting sequences. Zoe, however, never acts as a source of humor in these scenes and, in fact, is often shown to be the most competent fighter on the ship. While in a traditional Western, Zoe’s presence in these scenes would seem anomalous, the SF elements of Firefly work to show that gender is not an impediment to physical strength or dominance.

The first episode of the series, “Serenity,” begins with a flashback to Zoe and Mal fighting in a war. In this scene, Zoe is competent and tough—she is a soldier of the future—and the series immediately establishes her character as one who possesses the kind of tough masculinity thought to be necessary for combat. While women in combat may be a source of anxiety in contemporary real-world politics, setting the scene in the future alleviates some of this anxiety because viewers are aware that the circumstances surrounding this war are unknown, as are the people fighting in it. This is one of the key benefits to the hybridization of the Western with science fiction: the presence of cognitive estrangement in SF requires that viewers be aware that the narrative won’t follow the accepted rules of contemporary reality. This often requires viewers to accept the presence of aliens, futuristic warfare, and life on other planets, but just as often the requirement is much more mundane—for example, that women could easily and
competently serve alongside men in combat. Though it can be argued that the anxiety caused by Zoe’s position is relieved not through humor but through temporal setting, Zoe’s role cannot be easily dismissed simply because it is set in a futuristic society.

In fact, because this futuristic society is coupled with a pre-industrialized society (caused by the hybridization of SF and the Western), the anxiety that surrounds Zoe should be increased rather than decreased. And yet, at no time does the narrative treat Zoe as if she must be controlled, nor is she reduced to a sexual object. Instead, Zoe is characterized as a competent, active Western hero. In many cases, she’s the most capable of all the crew members, including Mal. Unlike the tough male cowboys, Mal and Jayne in particular, Zoe is always rational and level-headed. While Jayne’s hyper-masculinity characterizes him as unstable and untrustworthy, and Mal’s rigid moral code often leads him into trouble, Zoe’s role is to remain calm and together during their missions. And, while it is true that she takes orders from Mal, this position does not necessarily cast her in a subservient role. The aspects of Zoe’s character that could be described as weak—her position under Mal in the chain of command, a less ready tendency to charge into a fight—are always portrayed positively. In fact, the most obvious reason to dismiss Zoe’s power is because she is female and, for that reason, must produce some kind of anxiety in viewers. The question then becomes, how does this anxiety manifest? I would argue that the anxiety produced in the text surrounds many of the other characters in the film, but as it relates to Zoe does not negate or even reduce the progressive nature of her characterization. This progressiveness stems mostly from the fact that Zoe is a masculine character even though she is female and her masculinity is not diminished or condemned by the end of the series.
In addition to her masculinity as it relates to her past as a soldier, Zoe is also a particularly significant character because of both her race and her marriage to the white man Wash, the ship’s pilot. Unlike Zoe and Mal, Wash is not a particularly masculine character. He doesn’t carry a gun or engage in physical confrontations but instead remains on the ship, piloting it and cracking jokes when tensions aboard Serenity get too high. In some ways, Zoe and Wash’s relationship is gender-flipped, with Zoe fulfilling the masculine role and Wash fulfilling the feminine one. In “War Stories,” for example, Wash demands that he be allowed to accompany Mal on a field mission in place of Zoe. Mal capitulates to this request but only because, as he tells Wash, it’s a “milk run,” not a mission. Wash protests that he can handle whatever Zoe does, and the scene cuts to Mal striding through the desert followed by Wash, breathing heavily as he hauls a heavy box. The implication, of course, is that one of the things that Zoe does is physical labor, something her husband isn’t strong enough to do easily. The humor in this scene comes from the viewer’s awareness that Wash is being ridiculous in attempting to prove himself as physically capable as Zoe. Zoe, we know, is strong; she’s a warrior. Wash is a pilot; he’s the spouse who stays behind and keeps the home fires burning while awaiting his cowboy’s return.

“War Stories” does give Wash a chance to prove his claim that he’s “a large, semi-muscular man,” but he is only able to do so once he is rescued by his wife. In the second half of the episode, Zoe leads Wash, Jayne, and Book on a mission to save Mal, who is being imprisoned and tortured by an old enemy. Both Wash and Zoe are shown preparing for Mal’s rescue, loading guns and discussing their mission. It’s interesting to note that Wash is dressed like Zoe in this scene, trading in his trademark
Hawaiian-print shirts for a vest and gun belt (Zoe’s standard uniform). This scene emphasizes the performative nature of Wash’s masculinity; in order for him to be “a man” like his wife, he must first mimic her appearance, donning the trappings of masculinity.

In addition to the ways in which their relationship subverts the gender norms of traditional masculinity and femininity in marriage, the relationship between Zoe and Wash is also interesting because it is an interracial marriage in a genre that “is haunted by the fear of miscegenation” (Cook 297). Zoe is black, Wash is white, and though their races are never explicitly mentioned in the text, their marriage does provide a marked change from the depiction of interracial relationships in traditional Westerns. Though the presence of an interracial relationship does mark a transgressive romantic pairing for the Western genre, race is never explicitly addressed in the series. As Leigh Adams Wright notes, some critics see the uncommented upon racial differences of the crew as being “symptomatic of a society so far beyond our present-day equality struggles that making the couple’s difference explicit in the narrative just wouldn’t make any sense” (29). Of course, the problem with such an argument is that the series takes place in a society that is clearly marked by difference; the world of Firefly is not egalitarian, and it is problematic that the series merely ignores racial difference as a strategy to position itself as post-racial and post-ethnic.

In addition to the uncommented upon racial differences aboard Serenity, the series also has a particularly troubling attitude towards the depiction (or lack thereof) of Asian

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4 Gina Torres identifies as Latina, though she says when she auditions for roles, she generally auditions for those of African-American characters because of her skin color. Certainly, critics, on the rare occasions when they do mention race, characterize Zoe as either black or African-American.
characters. According to the series, the Alliance is an amalgamation of American and Chinese culture, a result of the fact that the victors in the war of “Earth that was” were the United States and China. Furthermore, while the characters may look like they belong in the American Old West, they also speak some Chinese (at least when they're saying things that wouldn't make it past American Standards and Practices). One of the problems with this post-racial, post-ethnic myth is that the series all but erases all Asian characters from the narrative, while at the same time appropriating Asian culture.

According to Modleski,

Of all the ethnic and racial types of men peopling the landscape of the Western genre, the Chinese man has been the most invisible. This invisibility is ironic considering the centrality of Asia and the Asian man to the construction of the great white myths of the West. (Old Wives’ Tales 164)

This is arguably even more true for Firefly, which not only constructs a future world of Western mythology built on Asian signs and culture, but then almost completely empties these signs of all meaning. In many ways, Firefly’s depiction of race relies on viewers simply accepting that the characters exist in some kind of post-racial future, without actually creating a post-racial world. On the one hand, the series does offer a positive portrayal of a black Latina hero, but on the other it relies almost exclusively on her presence to situate itself as diverse and racially progressive, while at the same time completely erasing Asian characters from the main cast.

“The Man They Call Jayne”: Masquerade and Gender in Firefly

One question that has long plagued feminist critics is how women can be introduced into typically male genres in active, central ways. Many critics argue that the way to do this is through the inclusion of feminine values—television series such as Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman and Cagney and Lacey follow this model. In order to have
women lead male-dominated stories, the focus of the story shifts from masculine values (independence, physical power, dominance) to feminine values (caring for others, emotional connections, family concerns). The problem with this strategy is that the result of this is an essentializing of sex and gender which implies that women can only function in these texts if the texts adopt feminine narratives. *Firefly* offers a variation on this strategy in that it adopts two masculine genres—the Western and SF action—to tell its stories. Because of this, the female characters are not necessarily reduced to only starring in plotlines about feminine values. The SF elements of the series work to create a more gender egalitarian environment, one in which women can be powerful central characters in plotlines involving masculine values.

It’s important to keep in mind that, because this show is set in the future and the world the characters inhabit has no clear ties to our reality, the characters would be aware of how cowboys looked and acted through exposure to cowboys in film, television, and literature. Their roles are based on the roles of the past, something that can be seen through the mix of technology and more primitive ways of living. Though it’s never made clear by the series why there has been a regression to the “wild west” way of living, it seems to be a product of the characters’ progress to the frontier planets and beyond. Though the series never explicitly states what has happened to Earth as we know it, it’s clear that the 26th century of the show’s world exists in some kind of post-apocalyptic future, one where characters occasionally refer to the “Earth-that-was.” The little back story we are given explains that there was a war between the Alliance and the Browncoats in the fairly recent past, and the Browncoats have rebelled against the fascist regime of the government. Scenes that are set in Alliance-run places (cities,
spaceships, etc.) are all markedly technology driven, with computers and futuristic weaponry and shiny metallic settings. The characters aboard Serenity are aligned with the Browncoats, and this group is shown to have embraced a kind of pre-industrial ruggedness as part of its rebellion against the hyper-industrialization of the Alliance. In this way, the series depicts a postmodern self-awareness of genre—on the part of both the characters and the show’s creators. When Zoe and Mal act and dress like cowboys, it is in response to a very particular political philosophy and way of life, one brought on by their choice to explore the frontier planets of the galaxy.

*Firefly* uses visual cues to send a particular message to its viewers, and these same cues are used by the characters within the film to communicate with each other. The crew members of Serenity are contrasted with the government employees of the Alliance through both their actions and their costumes. The members of the Alliance dress in futuristic-looking space suits like many characters aboard space ships in SF films and television show, and they tend to inhabit planets dominated by large cityscapes, another characteristic of the SF genre. The Western-type characters are contrasted with the Alliance characters, and all the Western characters have a similar way of life and thinking, one chosen by them because of their independent spirits. These characters are differentiated from the group-thinking Alliance not only by their politics but also by their costumes. In this way, *Firefly* demonstrates the way in which visual cues can be used in a postmodern text to create meaning.

It is also interesting to note the ways in which this costuming differs from the costuming used in traditional Westerns. Though the sartorial basics are the same—guns, cowboy hats, leather, horse-riding gear, and earth tones—their purpose is
different. In the traditional Western, characters dress to represent a kind of accepted historical reality; in other words, they dress the way “real” cowboys of that time dressed. They don’t wear non-natural fabrics because those fabrics weren’t available at that time. Their clothes are rugged and unfinished because they were often homemade or purchased from small general stores. But for the characters of Firefly, these are no longer issues. The world of Firefly is an industrialized one, and a variety of clothing is available (and can, in fact, be seen on many of the other regular crew members). Yet certain characters choose to wear rugged Western clothes in order to wear the mask of the cowboy, and this is a mask they wear consciously and with a particular goal in mind.

The postmodern self-awareness and intertextuality with Westerns should be obvious to viewers of the series. Just as the characters are making a statement about their political allegiance through their clothing, their clothing makes a statement about the politics of the world they inhabit. The dress of the cowboy is worn without regard for the sex of the wearer. The Western hero in this future world is not defined exclusively by history and therefore can be either male or female. And though the Western hero is still a very masculine role, it is not a role only enacted by men. It is here that the genre hybridity becomes especially important. If the series is a Western, it must conform to the rules and constraints of the Western. The Western is heavily reliant on character archetypes, visual cues, and iconography, and the genre’s paradigms restrict what the Western hero can wear. Yet because the series is also SF, it does not need to conform to historical accuracy. So even though Westerns often excluded female characters from active roles based on what “really” happened in the American West, this is the future, and the history of the 19th century no longer dictates who can do what. Because the
series is aware of its influences, it can transform the meaning of much of the
iconography of the traditional Western—but it needs the iconography of SF to do it.

The question of costuming is important for any genre with a dress code, especially
one as rigid as the Western. Dress is also an important element of anti-essentialist
feminist theory, especially as it relates to ideas such as drag and masquerade. In
*Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler works to denaturalize traditional concepts of gender,
arguing that gender is a constructed category that lacks any natural connection to
biological sex. Butler’s basic argument is that gender is performative and that there is
no natural basis for gender. While Butler does not deny sexual difference, her theories
question the connection between sexual difference and supposedly natural gender
differences. In “Imitation and Gender Subordination,” Butler argues that identity is a
constant process; the repetition is ongoing since it is always slightly varied and can
never achieve the ideal original, an original which never existed. Much of Butler’s
argument is centered on ideas of drag and masquerade, and she states that
masquerade is not a simple matter of dress and an attempt to hide one’s true self or
don a mask. Instead, masquerade is a complex idea, one that points to the
constructedness of the very thing it often visually works to represent: gender.

The traditional Western is heavily reliant on its audience accepting that the
meaning behind the masquerade of dress is natural, and characters are dressed in
ways that reify the connection between gender and sex. Western heroes are always
men, and they always dress in “men’s” clothes. In the Western, the clothes make the
man. The question then arises of what happens when a woman dons the dress of a
cowboy. Though this is a rare occurrence in Westerns, it does occasionally happen. In
traditional Westerns such as *Johnny Guitar* (1954) in which a woman imitates a cowboy, her attitude and dress are always exposed as a masquerade by the end of the film. This is usually achieved through the inclusion of a romantic storyline that works to remove the masculine female from her unnatural existence and return her to her proper place in the home. Even in revisionist Westerns such as Maggie Greenwald’s *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993), in which a woman lives as a male cowboy in the “wild west,” she is killed by the end of the film and the “truth” behind her masquerade is exposed. Male cowboys almost never suffer this fate—instead they resist domestic bliss, which would be antithetical to their macho independence. The male cowboy is never revealed to be enacting a masquerade; traditional Westerns refuse to expose the imitation in which the male hero engages, but won’t allow females to remain in an “unnaturally” masculine state.

Butler’s theories about masquerade are illustrated in *Firefly*. The wearing of frontier clothing is a masquerade carried out by a certain group of people, regardless of gender. Pants and a six-shooter no longer signal masculinity but represent political opposition to the industrialized Alliance. It is here that one aspect of the progressive nature of the series can be found. The masquerade of masculine Western dress in *Firefly* is a key element of the postmodern nature of the series, one that points to the constructedness of gender. The masquerade wouldn’t be as effective without the history of the Western behind it. Both the characters and the viewers of the series are aware of the basic iconography and ideals of the traditional Western. In this way, *Firefly* is able both to utilize these ideals to tell its stories—to signal to viewers that they should root for the characters dressed like Western heroes—and also to deconstruct them—by having
the traditional clothes of the cowboy worn by both male and female characters. *Firefly* upholds many traditional Western ideas: that the hero is a leader, stoic, active, and tough. But it does so without restricting these traits only to only males. Both Zoe and Mal are masculine characters, but the masculinity doesn’t come more naturally to one than it does to the other, and both are enacting a mimesis of the “natural” masculinity of the Western hero.

*Firefly* is not above essentialism, but this essentialism is often tempered through the use of postmodern strategies such as self-reflexivity, pastiche, and parody. For example, Jayne is the character most representative of the “naturally” masculine male. He is brash, tough, good with a gun, and the most independent of all the crew members—yet he’s also the least heroic. Unlike Mal, who exhibits feminine characteristics such as emotionalism and physical weakness, Jayne is at times comically masculine. It is this humor that points to the series’ awareness of gender stereotypes. Jayne’s name, for example, is feminine; though Jayne’s appearance and actions are masculine, his identity as given by his name is feminine. This contrast also points to the ways in which identity as it relates to gender is a masquerade. Jayne’s name—his identity—is feminine, though every action he performs is meant to deny any element of femininity in his character. Jayne’s masculinity is seen as both damaging and comical. His desire for big guns elicits eye-rolls from his fellow fighters, while his continuous mocking of and lack of sympathy for the mentally unstable River land the crew in trouble on more than one occasion. Jayne provides another example of how gender in *Firefly* is merely a masquerade, as well as how a moderation of gendered characteristics is necessary for stable and heroic characters. Once again, it is the
hybridity of Westerns and SF that helps to undermine standard notions of gender. Jayne behaves in a way fitting a Western hero, but his actions are not acceptable in this future world. Though he wants to be the lone cowboy hero, that image is a myth, one that has been adopted by the future society of *Firefly* and altered in a way that no longer values male machismo above all else.

**Little Girl or Big Weapon?: The Problem with River**

Much the criticism of Jayne’s actions can be related to his relationship with River. Though most of the crew aboard *Serenity* is unsure of River’s place and mental stability, they all treat her well, with the exception of Jayne. River provides a clear contrast to Jayne, and her expression of gender is an important element of the narrative’s treatment of how gender is constructed and the dangers of assuming that it is an essential element of biological sex. In many ways, River seems to be a feminine, victimized character: she is saved from torture from her older brother, she is young and pretty, and she is seemingly naïve. Yet, like Jayne, River’s appearance cannot be trusted. Though she looks, as Mal says, like “a little girl,” she is also a killing machine. Though River’s characterization is at times problematic, she does provide a very useful example of the many ways that gender and sex are tied together and the anxiety that occurs when they are separated.

A great deal of the series’ narrative revolves around River, and more specifically, around her body and its cyborg-like properties. The ongoing storyline of the series is that River has been experimented on by the Alliance in the hopes of turning her into the ultimate human weapon. Though this plotline is by no means wholly original, especially for SF, the genre hybridity of the Western with SF provides an interesting spin on the storyline. In terms of appearance, River is one of the few characters who doesn’t look
like she belongs in a Western. Though not all of the characters are as frontier-wearing as Mal and Zoe, most of them still wear clothes that pay homage to the American west. River does not. Nor does she value the frontier spirit in the same way that the other characters do. Unlike other characters who dress in leather and chaps and carry six-shooters, River is always clad in either flowing, diaphanous dresses or in skin-tight spandex, neither of which look like the frontier wear donned by the other main characters. Furthermore, she is usually shown on the ship or in urban settings rather than in the rugged, frontier-inspired settings of the outer planets. River is an interesting character because of the ways in which she deviates from the Western paradigm yet conforms to those of the female cyborg popular in SF. River’s presence reminds both the viewers and the characters that the “wild west” environment is a conscious creation of a future world attempting to escape the clutches of the industrialized Alliance.

Unlike Westerns, SF has a number of active and strong female characters. Films like the Alien series and Terminator 2: Judgment Day (1991), as well as television series like Battlestar Galactica (2003-2009) and Stargate SG-1 (1997-2007), feature strong, active women in positions of power. Yet, River does not seem to fit with these characters either. Though she is physically strong and dangerous, she’s also childlike and seemingly unaware of the power she yields. In many ways, River demonstrates the difficulty and anxiety of hybridity (in terms of both genre and gender). River is both a part of and outside of the Western—she’s the innocent girl captured by a nefarious tribe (in this case the Alliance), and she’s the dangerous cyborg who can’t be trusted. But to dismiss River’s character as simply another warrior woman whose body and femininity negate her strength would be too simplistic. Understanding River’s place in the narrative
can help to see the ways that genre hybridity affects the characterization of gender in the narrative.

In her work on science, technology, and gender, Donna Haraway argues that the cyborg is the image that should be looked to as a guide in deconstructing the sex/gender system. The cyborg is, by definition, a figure that lacks a unified identity. Part human, part machine, the cyborg can't be easily classified as either male or female, masculine or feminine. Cyborgs, a staple of SF, are for Haraway the best example of how a postmodern ideology can move towards a transgressive and progressive system of gender. The cyborg ensures that “the dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and cultures, men and women, primitive and civilized are all in question ideologically” (163). Because they do not conform to essentialized categories, cyborgs offer theorists a way to critique the dominant structures of ideology that are based on a series of binary systems. The cyborg offers a way beyond these dualisms, into a postmodern, progressive understanding of the sex/gender system. Ideally, the cyborg is beyond gender, though how this is actually expressed in texts that employ cyborg figures is often not so simple.

The female cyborg that appears in a number of SF texts is often a site of anxiety, one that is very much not beyond gender, but is instead used to reify gender essentialism. By making an active female character part machine, the cyborg image in film and television sometimes reifies gender categories because the assumption becomes that it is not anything natural about the woman that made her powerful, but it is rather the result of an outside force. In addition, this outside force is usually mostly (if
not all) male, again associating power with men. The cyborg in fiction is always created by someone, and that someone is almost always male. Furthermore, the issue with the female cyborg becomes tied to the idea of the monstrous female, another problematic construction of powerful women that occurs in a number of texts and genres.

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva defines abjection as “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (232). The abject is that which breaks borders and points to the fragility of the symbolic order. The abject also functions, through the process of exclusion, to assign the subject a place in the symbolic order. The abject is “not me” and works to “beseech and pulverize the subject” (Kristeva 232). Abjection, as it applies to horror films, is further explored by Barbara Creed, who notes that the role of the monstrous in horror is “to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability” (Creed 253).

Monstrousness in horror film exists at the boundaries that point to abjection, boundaries between human/inhuman, good/evil, normal/supernatural, and it is often represented through images of bodily filth, gore, and blood. River, because she threatens numerous boundaries, represents abjection. The borders between good/evil and between human/inhuman are embodied in River the little girl/weapon, the woman/creature. The fear of River is a fear of her threat to the symbolic order. Because she appears to be one thing—an innocent girl—but is actually something else—a “killer woman”—River occupies the space of the monstrous-feminine in *Firefly*. Throughout the series, River is seen as other-than-human—the crew members are afraid of her, and she is constantly straddling the line between "girl" and “weapon.” Because of the tests performed on her by the Alliance, River is no longer fully human. Instead, she has become a “time bomb,”
a weapon that could go off at any time, and whom none of the crew can trust or see as just a girl any more. Unlike the other women in the film, who do “take up proper gender roles” (Creed 253), River does not fit with the symbolic order. Zoe, though she is “masculine” because of her militaristic past and stoic demeanor, remains a part of the symbolic order through her marriage to Wash. Similarly, Kaylee, masculinized through her tomboyishness and skill as a mechanic, is clearly coded as feminine through both her crush on Simon and her reliance on Mal as protector. And Inara, who makes her living through sex, but represents no physical threat to any of the men, fits nicely into the symbolic order as well. It is only River who does not fit and who occupies the space of the abject and monstrous aboard *Serenity*.

River shifts between the progressive cyborg and the monstrous female, and at times her characterization does point to a deconstruction of sex and gender systems. With the exception of Shepherd Book (who is a clergyman), River is the only character who does not have a romantic storyline. She is not sexualized in the same way that many powerful women are, though she is often infantilized, which presents its own set of problems. Her lack of romantic storyline represents a disconnect between what is expected of powerful women in film and television and what *Firefly* offers viewers. Though it can be argued that River may become a sex object for some viewers, she is not necessarily characterized as such. She is, in fact, the least sexualized of all the women. In this way, River is able to avoid the fate of many powerful women in both SF and Westerns—she is not forced into a stereotypically “feminine” plotline. Romance is not an element of River’s story; she is always part of the action, even if, sometimes, her role in the action is rather passive.
What’s most interesting about River’s storyline is the way she switches between action active hero and passive object. In her study of action films, Yvonne Tasker points to the ways in which women are often relegated to passive object roles in these films to reduce the anxiety produced by both a powerful woman and male character whose body is sexualized. Both of these issues occur in Firefly; River’s position as powerful woman is tempered by her bouts of helplessness and passivity, though these bouts are often interrupted by her expressions of extreme violence. It is the moments when River is drawn into the Western narrative that offer the most useful images of the cyborg.

River, better than any other character in the series, illustrates the anxiety produced when attempting to include non-normative female characters in a genre-hybrid series. Unlike Zoe, who is able to function as a masculine female without being reduced to an object, River—who is less hybridized than Zoe—demonstrates the problems that arise in each genre alone. Because River is not included in a great deal of the Western narrative—her story is very much tied to the Alliance plot, and she has very little to do in episodes that highlight life on the frontier planets—she falls into the same trap as many powerful female characters in the masculine genres of action and SF. When River is given the opportunity to exist in hybrid storylines, she becomes more active and is less likely to be reduced to either an object or a monster. She illustrates both the progressive, postmodern benefits of the cyborg and the problematic, conservative view of the female cyborg as monster.

Unlike Mal, Zoe, and Jayne, who work to fit into particularly gendered roles, River seems completely unaware of them. She doesn’t attempt to be either masculine or feminine; she’s not concerned with her appearance or with possible romance aboard
Serenity. All River is concerned with is herself. Unlike the other characters, River has moved beyond the normal rules of society. Though the narrative is uncomfortable with making River a masculine female, the character does represent Haraway’s cyborg in that she no longer exists within the binary structures of the dominant patriarchal ideology. Many of the conflicts that occur do so because River doesn’t understand that she is expected to behave in a particular way.

Though the series does not necessarily portray River in a positive light, it is possible to see her in such a way. In a number of the episodes that deal with River’s past and her connection to the Alliance, she demonstrates the positive aspects of her cyborg nature. In “Objects in Space,” which aired as the series finale, an Alliance bounty hunter boards Serenity to capture River. Though the other characters are quickly captured and incapacitated by the intruder, River manages to outsmart him and save everyone on the ship. River’s strategy is to first connect with the assassin and then to trick him into believing that she has become a part of the space ship. A key part of her strategy relies on her cyborg nature (and on making the bounty hunter believe that she is more machine-like than she really is) and on her ability to think beyond the normal rules of combat. River’s goal is to rid Serenity of the bounty hunter without the use of guns, something that is clearly necessary given his superior fighting skills. It is clear that River, despite her insanity and her physical appearance, is able to exist on a physical and mental level that transcends that of the other characters. She is a cyborg, which makes her the best fighter on the ship, and she’s also a genius and able to outsmart the villains who can’t be bested by force alone. Though the series’ attitude towards River is
unstable and at times riddled with anxiety, she still demonstrates how the cyborg exists beyond the simple binaries of dominant ideology.

**Space Hookers and Mechanic Girls: Inara, Kaylee, and Traditional Gender Tropes**

In addition to Zoe and River, *Firefly* features two other central female characters: Inara and Kaylee. These characters, though the narrative attempts to make them somewhat transgressive, are much more traditional Western-genre stereotypes and, as such, lack the transgressive possibilities of Zoe and River. Inara is particularly problematic, as the series attempts to depict her job as a “companion” as a kind of radical feminist version of a courtesan or geisha. Inara, in fact, is a hybrid character, although she is a hybrid of feminine types, which lies at the heart of the problematic depiction of her character. Unlike Inara, Kaylee’s character is a kind of masculine-feminine hybrid, but her “masculine” qualities are superficial; basically, she’s good with machines but is otherwise merely a perpetuation of the “tomboy” trope common to Hollywood Westerns.

Joss Whedon has claimed that Inara, because she is the most respected and high-class member of the crew because of her profession (she is a Companion—something akin to a “geisha or Renaissance courtesan who is extremely well trained in the art of sexual release”), signals a more progressive look at women’s sexuality and agency in this future world.⁵ If this were the case, *Firefly* would manage to move beyond the traditional gender structures of the Western and would serve as a way to subvert the dominant ideologies that define most Westerns. Yet, this claim doesn’t hold up to scrutiny. We are told that Inara is highly respected and more than just a prostitute, but

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⁵ Interview with Devin Faraci.
she is rarely treated with respect and, in fact, Mal condemns her because of her profession, calling her a “whore” during their first meeting. And, though Whedon has said that Mal’s point of view is wrong, the narrative doesn’t support this reading. Instead, Inara functions as a conflation of the clichéd dancehall girl or whore-with-a-heart-of gold character and the plucky frontier heroine that abound in Westerns. She is defined through her sexuality, and her main role in the series is as a romantic interest for Mal. Additionally, though the series positions itself in a future where attitudes towards sexuality have become more evolved and progressive, Inara’s job is still, as she says, “symbolic,” a way of making her clients feel like “men.” Inara’s profession is based upon her ability to make men feel “manly” through their sexual prowess, which could be seen as transgressive, except that the series undermines any respect the character is afforded through Mal’s disdain of her.

Like Inara, Kaylee is another troubling female character. Though seemingly masculinized by her position as the ship’s mechanic, Kaylee is given very little to do in the series besides flirt with Simon and play little sister to Mal. Like women in the traditional Western, Kaylee’s role is mostly significant because of what she does for the male characters’ storylines. Kaylee functions much like women in traditional Westerns; “pull her out of the [narrative] and all that would be left is men giving in to their basest impulses—a spectacle of slaughter awash with pessimism” (Lucas 307). Kaylee, like the traditional Western woman, is there to love. Jewel Staite, the actress who portrays Kaylee, has said that the character is “the heart of the ship... She loves all of those

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6 Inara’s position in the narrative is also significant because she provides Serenity with a legitimate reason to land on planets where they would otherwise be unwelcome, however this requires no active agency on her part. Inara’s power is passive, particularly in relation to the active power of characters such as Mal, Zoe, Jayne, and River.
people. And she’s the only one who loves all of them incredibly genuinely.” In fact, this is a very succinct description of Kaylee’s character; she is there to love and to be friendly and warm and to support all of the other characters, particularly the men. Unlike the feminine Wash, Kaylee has no desire to fight or to prove her toughness. She’d rather put on a fancy dress and go to a party. Like Inara, she is there to affirm the men’s positions as men, and it’s telling that she is the only female character who gets a happy ending in the filmic continuation of the series, *Serenity*.

Both Kaylee and Inara point to the problematic results of hybridizing masculine genres with feminine ones. Rather than emphasize the importance of these types of “women’s stories,” the narrative is much more likely to sideline the characters, deeming them only important insofar as they matter to men. This type of hybridization tends to reify the naturalization of gender roles, though this is somewhat tempered by the depiction of female characters who resist this type of characterization.

Genre hybridity on television is not an easy solution to the problem of gender and sexuality as it is portrayed in popular culture. Yet television, with its polysemy and multiple sites for viewer identification, provides a space where genre hybridity can change the construction of how gender and sex are perceived. *Firefly* demonstrates both the positive and negative outcomes of attempting to place women in genres traditionally reserved for male characters. Whereas Zoe’s masculinity could be perceived as more “natural” because of costuming issues, River’s masculinity is much more problematic for the narrative. Because River doesn’t look like masculine—because of both her physical size and costuming choices—her masculinity seems monstrous. In order to take advantage of the postmodern, anti-essentializing theories of
gender espoused by critics like Butler and Haraway, popular texts must understand the importance of visual cues to contain meaning. And though television is more open to polysemy than most mainstream cinema—because of the fragmented nature of a season-long narrative, large casts of characters, and multiple storylines and character arcs—it is also often more conservative than film because it does need to appeal to as many viewers as possible.\(^7\)

Some criticism of *Firefly* argues that the series, because it is a Western (or a Western-hybrid), is inherently unsuited to transgressive or progressive depictions of female heroes. This argument relies upon a singular argument: that a Western “require[s] a male lead” (Holder 144). Though the argument is simplistic, it does seem to be fulfilled by *Firefly*—ostensibly, the lead character (Mal) is a male. And yet, the series does work to subvert the gendered tropes of both Mal and the other characters.

Television, because of its polysemy, doesn’t require audiences to accept the male lead as the only lead. Certain episodes of *Firefly* center on characters other than Mal; so, though “The Train Job” is mostly about Mal, “Heart of Gold” places Inara in the lead role, “Objects in Space” is about River, and most of the nine central characters have an episode devoted to their particular stories.

The necessity of a male lead is not inherent in the genre but in the desires of its audience. The genre itself certainly doesn’t require a man, though it does seem to require a masculine character. But to deny this masculinity to female characters is to deny any possibility of change in popular television and cinema. Even if audiences do require a white male lead in a Western, that can be attributed to what modern

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\(^7\) While film also needs to draw in millions of viewers, television requires not only viewers to tune in to one episode, but to keep coming back, week after week.
audiences consider to be the “truth” of the 19th century as created by the Hollywood Westerns of the early cinema. The myth of the West may situate it as a white man’s world, but SF is enjoyed by audiences specifically because of its utilization of “cognitive estrangement;” the cognitive estrangement necessary for a series such as Firefly may ask audiences to suspend their disbelief that a black woman can be the lead in a Western or that a futuristic spaceship can substitute for a stagecoach, but that is the significance of SF as a genre.
Although action films are ubiquitous in American cinema, the action television series has never been hugely popular. As with cinema, most action-adventure television tends to be hybridized with other genres—westerns, war stories, police procedurals, or SF—though, unlike cinema, action-adventure television is rather rare. As a genre, action-adventure is defined by “a propensity for spectacular physical action, a narrative structure involving fights, chases and explosions, and in addition to the deployment of state-of-the-art special effects, an emphasis in performance on athletic feats and stunts” (Neale, “Action-Adventure” 71). For reasons ranging from budgetary to practical, action-adventure (as a non-hybrid genre) has not flourished on television. From a budgetary standpoint, action is expensive; explosions and special effects require the kind of budget few television series have. One of the benefits of the weekly series is that it is, by and large, an inexpensive product. Action films can cost upwards of one hundred million dollars to produce, in large part because of special effects and action sequences. Because a single episode of a television series is made for a fraction of this money, action has never been well suited for the budgetary constraints of television. Additionally, since the focus of the action-adventure film is on action and stunts, an action-adventure television series would most likely be highly repetitive.

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1 Action series are generally referred to as “action-adventure” most likely because that makes them seem to have more depth of storytelling. They’re more than just action—they are also adventure! Similarly, most “action” television series are hybrids, usually SF-action or detective-action narratives.

2 Though budgets for television shows are not as readily available as those for films, an hour-long SF television series is produced from anywhere between $1.5 - $2 million per 42 minute episode (for Fox’s Dollhouse) to $4 million per episode (for ABC’s Lost). Comparably, the budgets for both Terminator Salvation (with a run time of 115 minutes) and Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen (run time: 150 minutes) were an estimated $200 million.
Action is about spectacle, and what makes spectacle is the unexpected and the unusual. A television series that showed explosions every week would eventually no longer work as spectacle; the spectacle would be routine and no longer as interesting to viewers. For these reasons, television series tend to value plot and character development over spectacle: it’s cheaper and more compelling to watch an involved storyline than repetitive spectacle. An action television series is, for this reason, a rather difficult narrative to continue and promote. The action genre promises audiences a reliance on spectacle over plot, and since television can rarely afford this, it must often turn from action towards different generic formulas. In fact, most action and SF series fail on network television (even while the genre remains highly successful in the cinema) arguably because of the inability of television to produce adequate action spectacle week after week, year after year.

One result of the paucity of successful action television series is the lack of critical attention paid to action-adventure television series. The heyday of action-adventure television coincides with the heyday of action film: the 1980s. And even in that decade, the number of action-adventure shows not hybridized with other genres is rather low: The Fall Guy (1981-1986), The A-Team (1983-1987), Airwolf (1984-86), and MacGyver (1985-1992) being the most successful. After MacGyver—arguably the most commercially successful of these series and the least reliant on a lead actor with a “tough guy” image—another non-hybrid action series didn’t air on television until 2001, when the FOX network’s 24 premiered. Furthermore, the relative lack of action series
produced even during this decade can be attributed to the defining elements of action, most of which are difficult to translate from cinema to television.³

Though action-adventure series are rare on television, action hybrid series are much more common. In particular, SF and police dramas are often successfully hybridized with action. Though police-driven action series tend to function like many series from each genre separately in terms of gender, some SF action series provide sites for transgressive depictions of gender. SF, with its inherent requirements for suspension of disbelief and its attempts to create utopian and/or egalitarian visions of the future, is often considered to be a genre rich with progressive depictions of gender. And yet this is often not the case, as women in SF are usually relegated to feminized roles and storylines. Action, however, provides a useful site for gender hybridity and non-normative portrayals of women since, as a genre, it highly values traditionally masculine behavior and storylines. For this reason, SF action provides for a greater possibility of transgressive depiction of gender than does either genre on its own. That said, the SF action genre often remains male-driven. However, some recent television series are more open to depictions of non-normative male and female characters. Of these recent series, including the remake of *The Bionic Woman* (2007) and *Dollhouse* (2009), *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* (2008-2009) provides the best example of the progressive possibilities of SF action hybrids. Continuing from the events of James Cameron’s *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), *T:TSCC* depicts the

³ For the most part, action-adventure television is a male-dominated genre; there were no female-led action series during this time, and shows with female leads in genres similar to action—including *Cagney and Lacey* and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*—left women out of action narratives, relegating them to storylines that highlighted traditionally feminine qualities, such as nurturing, maternity, and emotional support of male colleagues.
adventures of Sarah and John Connor as they continue their attempts to stop Judgment Day and save the human race from extinction at the hands of killer robots.

**Women in SF Action**

Though the action-adventure film has long been considered the realm of men, of hyper-muscular male stars like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, and Jean Claude Van Damme, the genre itself does not require a male star. Unlike westerns or war narratives, where the occupations of the heroes are ones traditionally held by men, “there is nothing inherent in the structure and the stereotypes of the adventure film to specify its central protagonists as either male or female” (Neale, “Action-Adventure” 76). Due to the most popular generic storylines of many action films, however, males do tend to occupy most of the action hero roles in Hollywood cinema, in large part due the traditional emphases of the genre. The action genre is connected first with the medieval cult of the courtly knight, second with merchant adventuring (and state-sponsored piracy) in the early modern period, and third with the spread of empire during the course of the nineteenth century. Hence its links with colonialism, imperialism and racism, as well as with traditional ideals of masculinity, run very deep. (Neale, “Action-Adventure” 76)

Thus early action-adventure cinema, produced from the early 20th century up through the 1970s, is heavily male-centric due to its connection to the historical epic. The historical epic fell out of vogue in the 1970s, and by the 1980s the “action-adventure film” had established itself in its current iteration. This new style of action-adventure focused less on particular kinds of stories, and more on spectacle and visual impact. In fact, rather than on any particular storyline or narrative

when critics talk about what constitutes action they focus as much on how the story is told as the type of story, setting or other generic elements. The specific qualities of action are, it seems, to do with pace, excitement,
exhilaration: a visceral, even sensual, evocation of movement and violence. (Tasker, *Action and Adventure* 1)

The action genre is a genre about appearance, one where looking is aligned with being.

This conflation of being and looking can also be applied to the characters in action as well, where heroes are heroes not only because of what they do but also because of how they look when they do it.

The presence of women in action-adventure cinema did not become especially notable until the late 1980s. The action-adventure film in its current form can be traced back to the 1980s when films such as *First Blood* (1982), *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) and *The Terminator* (1985) garnered popular and critical success. The evolution of the action cinema since the 1980s is marked both by an increase in the racial diversity of its heroes and by a supposed decrease in narrative as, “for some, the narrative of contemporary action is all but subsumed within the spectacular staging of action sequences employing star bodies, special effects, artful editing and percussive music” (Tasker, *Action and Adventure* 6). This sense of visual excess is the defining quality of contemporary action-adventure, one that goes beyond explosions and special effects and is written on the bodies of action heroes.

The action films of the 1980s were rife with hyper-muscular male bodies; bodies that rippled with over-large muscles, defined, cultivated, and displayed for the audience. These bodies, as Tasker argues, “put into play the two contradictory terms of restraint and excess,” two concepts that provide the ideological framework for looking at the gendering of bodies and identification in action-adventure films (*Spectacular Bodies* 9). Arguably the most reviled and dismissed of action movies, as well as those that best demonstrate the tension between restraint and excess in the bodies of their heroes, are
those that were produced and released in the 1980s. These films—most of which starred heavily-muscled, body-builder men—tended to follow the same basic generic conventions: a lone, marginalized man in amazing physical condition must overcome adversity to defeat some outside enemy. The films were packed with fight scenes and explosions, and the actors were valued less for their skill as thespians and more for their physical bearing. The meaning of these films seems fairly simple: tough men will destroy their weaker opponents and emerge strong and victorious. However, these films are much more complex than a mere celebration of machismo and masculinity.

Laura Mulvey’s theories on viewer identification in classic Hollywood cinema posit that the male character is the subject, while the female character is objectified. In this configuration, gender and sex are inherently connected. The male figure is the subject because he is masculine—he has strength, rational intelligence, and control—and the female figure is the object because she is feminine: she is weak, passive, and emotional. What this theory ignores is the possibility that not all male characters are masculine and not all female characters are feminine. While this often held true in classic Hollywood movies, and seems to remain true in the action films of the 1980s—where male characters drive the action and female characters are often relegated to the role of love interest or damsel in distress—these action films also depict male characters who exist as passive objects. Tasker addresses Mulvey’s claim that male figures “cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification” by pointing to a number of action films that cast the hero as sexual object (Tasker 114). The men in these films are positioned as sexual objects for viewers—and are therefore feminized—by the narrative’s focus on their rippling muscles and rock-hard bodies. This characterization is
problematic when looked at using gender binary terms of either/or, but as Tasker argues, a shift to “both/and” thinking can help critics and viewers to understand the complexities of the sex/gender system that is demonstrated in these films (Spectacular Bodies 114-116).

By looking at these films using a both/and perspective, the transgressive (and arguably progressive) nature of action films can be understood. Action films are, as Tasker argues, narratives about bodies. The action films of the 1980s were particularly about muscular, white male bodies, and it was across these bodies that the films addressed anxieties about gender, race, and class. The hyper-muscular men represented not only the triumph of machismo, but also the constructedness of gender as it is read through outward appearance. The films’ use of body-builders as heroes—and as ideal male bodies—pointed to the body (and, in particular, the muscular male body) as exaggerated and marked by excess. These men weren’t “normal”; they were muscular in a way that required great attention to bodily appearance and exercising physical strength. The result was that the action heroes of these films existed as both the subjects and the sexual objects of the narratives (Tasker, Spectacular Bodies 16).

Though these films do complicate the binary theories of viewer identification in cinema by positioning men as sexual objects, they often did so at the expense of female characters. As male heroes became both subject and object, female characters became increasingly marginalized (Tasker, Spectacular Bodies 16). In these films, gender is being transgressed, but only by allowing men to exhibit both masculine and feminine traits. As action films evolved, however, women began to occupy a more central role in some narratives. With these action heroines came a similar focus on female bodies and
musculature in action films; the issues that were once worked out over the male body could now be worked out over the female body. How these bodies appeared, however, is markedly different from the male body in action cinema. Though some female action heroes tended to look powerful—they were often tall, with visible muscles and/or weapons which marked their strength (and, not coincidentally, their nascent masculinity)—most female action heroes, despite an appearance of power marked by costume and position in the narrative, rarely appeared hyper-muscular like their male counterparts. According to Linda Williams, the appearance of women in action hero roles “has not generally been accompanied by radical bodily transformation” (170). In other words, for men to appear in action cinema, they must first look the part, but being a woman in action cinema requires no such change.\footnote{There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. Both Sigourney Weaver’s Ripley from the \textit{Alien} series and Linda Hamilton’s Sarah Connor in \textit{T2} are examples of tough women who look the part. Williams also points out that Demi Moore underwent a major bodily transformation to play a Navy SEAL in \textit{G.I. Jane}.} It is interesting to note, however, that many of these women who do not change their physique to act in action roles are also not seen as successful action heroes by most audiences.

The action heroines who are successful—Signourney Weaver’s Ripley in the \textit{Alien} series, Linda Hamilton in \textit{T2}, and Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis in \textit{Thelma and Louise}—don’t necessarily undergo a physical transformation on the same scale that male action heroes do, but they are marked by a sense of masculinization. As noted above, although this masculinization is not one of bulging muscles; it is, however, one of guns, cars, and violence. After all, “within many Hollywood action narratives, access to technologies such as cars and guns (traditional symbols of power) represents a means of empowerment” (Tasker, \textit{Spectacular Bodies}139). The body of the female action hero
can be read as not as physically powerful as a hyper-muscular male’s, but it is more likely that the reason women do not undergo the same bodily transformation as male action heroes is because their bodies already serve as sites for objectification. For men, the objectification comes with muscular excess; for women, it’s inherent in their traditional place in the narrative. For this reason, the body of the female action hero is a site of objectification and excess, and the addition of tools of power—particularly weapons and technology—provides the women with the masculinization needed to operate as heroes in these masculine genres.

**Gender Theory and the Cyborg**

The presence of women in masculine genres has led to a questioning of how best to create a transgressive and progressive depiction of gender in these genres. Some critics, such as Judith Butler and Donna Haraway, argue for the deconstruction of the sex/gender binary, while others, such as Marleen Barr and Tania Modleski, argue that the goal should be the valuing rather than the dismissal of feminine qualities and values. This latter goal assumes that women are inherently feminine and that there will never be gender equality until the two sexes are valued for their distinct interests and characteristics. Understandably, feminist critics who argue for the valuation of femininity as inherently female reject many of the constraints of postmodernism, particularly postmodernism’s rejection of unity and completeness. By looking towards non-essentialist theories of gender, as well as to the image of the cyborg, women can be seen to be not only naturally feminine but naturally masculine as well, without it being a masquerade or an unnatural affectation.

While essentialist feminist theory is useful in that it points to problems with texts that insist on sidelining female characters in feminine storylines that aren’t valued by the
narrative, a more productive way to look at gender in these texts is from a non-essentialist perspective. By denying a unifying characteristic that defines all women or all men, non-essentialist theories allow for women to occupy traditionally masculine roles and spaces without the stigma of transvestism. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that

> just as the psychoanalytic notion of gender identification is constituted by a fantasy of a fantasy, the transfiguration of an Other who is already a “figure” in that double sense, so gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin. (188)

The performativity of gender points to a particularly effective tool of SF for questioning the dominant ideology of gender norms, especially the idea that gender is in any way coherent or natural. This desire to deny coherence and unity is of particular importance to SF texts due not only to SF’s tendency to hybridize with other genres but also to the figure of the cyborg, an image that occurs in a number of SF texts. Donna Haraway’s argument that the cyborg can function to destroy the boundaries that create the dichotomies and false binaries on which many cultural categories are based is particularly useful for the *Terminator* series. By questioning the lines between humanity/machine, nature/technology, the cyborg also questions other binaries—male/female, masculine/feminine—that are of particular interest to feminist theory.

Because the cyborg is “a creature in a post-gender world” (Haraway 150), it illustrates how transgressive depictions of gender and sex can function in SF texts. The cyborg in SF demonstrates ways that female characters can move beyond a connection to nature and an essentialist grouping, and can demonstrate the mutability of boundaries, which can then be extrapolated to political identity. Cyborgs are figures that embody many of SF’s central questions and tropes, in particular the importance of
technology, the connection between man and machine, and the question of what is “natural.” Cyborgs illustrate the breakdown of boundaries that non-essentialist feminist theorists like Butler argue is necessary for a politically progressive understanding of gender. Their presence in popular SF texts helps to push these boundary-breaking ideas into the popular cultural imaginary; cyborgs are important figures for the depiction of transgressive images of gender, and in particular for the breakdown of the binary structures of sex and gender.

The Terminator Films

One of the most popular series of texts that addresses the question of the cyborg in SF action is the Terminator series. The first entry in the Terminator franchise, James Cameron’s film The Terminator (1984), is the story of John Connor’s beginnings. The film begins in the future, in a post-nuclear holocaust world where machines battle humans. John Connor, a fighter for the human side, sends a soldier named Kyle Reese (Michael Biehn) back in time to protect his mother (Linda Hamilton) from a terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger), a cyborg sent by the machine side to kill her. Reese finds Sarah Connor, they have sex, and Sarah becomes pregnant with John. Kyle dies in a battle with the Terminator, who Sarah ultimately kills. The narrative is predicated on a paradox: John is born only because he sends Kyle back in time to protect his mother; if Kyle is not sent back, John is never born. The next film, Terminator 2: Judgment Day (1991), takes place ten years later. Sarah has been institutionalized because of her violent behavior and her repeated warnings about killer robots from the future, while her son John is in foster care. Once again, a terminator (Robert Patrick) is sent back in time to kill John, while another terminator (Schwarzenegger) is sent back to protect him. The third film, Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines (2003), depicts the now-adult John
Connor’s (Nick Stahl) struggles to prevent Judgment Day, the beginning of the man-
machine war. Once again, one terminator (Kristanna Loken) attempts to kill him, while
another (Schwarzenegger) tries to protect him. The film ends with John safe, though he
fails to prevent Judgment Day. The most recent film, Terminator Salvation (2009) is set
in the future, and follows John Connor’s experiences in the human-machine war.

Because of its connection to this ongoing series, Terminator: The Sarah Connor
Chronicles should be examined not as an isolated text but as a part of the larger whole.
The series presents an alternate timeline, one that branches off after T2, but before
Terminator 3. The series begins in 1999, when Sarah (Lena Headey) and 15-year-old
John (Thomas Dekker) meet Cameron (Summer Glau), a terminator sent to protect
them. While attempting to flee a murderous terminator, the three characters time travel
to 2007—where they are now eight years younger than they should be in that year.
Further complicating the Terminator timeline is that, in Terminator 3, it is revealed that
Sarah dies of cancer in 1997. Far more than the later two films in the series, which
occur in a different timeline than T: TSCC, Terminator 2: Judgment Day is an important
precursor to the television series. In fact, both Terminator 3 and Terminator Salvation
remove Sarah Connor from the text, since they are both set after her death from cancer.

Much has been made of the feminism of the different Terminator films, T2 in
particular. Though T2 does depict Sarah as strong, active, and vital to the storyline in
ways that she was not in The Terminator, what exactly this strength signifies is
debatable. While in the first film, Sarah Connor was highly feminized and, until the
ending scene, fairly passive—an object in the struggle between Reese and the
terminator, valuable only as the mother of John Connor—by the second film she has
become both physically and mentally stronger. Though *T2* seems to be a positive portrayal of strong female characters, some critics have noted the possibly problematic coupling of Sarah’s strength with her role as a mother. For some, her strength is so connected to her maternal instinct that she is not “a representative of any recognizable form of feminism” but rather “the embodiment of something stranger and more primitive, the woman defending her child, the tigress fighting to defend her cub, which is also the future of mankind” (French 51). And yet, to dismiss her strength because of her connection to the maternal is reductive and dangerously close to denying any female action motivated by maternal connection as “primitive”: instinctual, natural, and not informed by choice. Rather, a reading of Sarah’s character in both films requires one to look beyond the mere fact that she is a mother (after all, Reese’s heroic actions and strength aren’t dismissed simply because he’s John’s father, and the Terminator’s paternal feelings toward John in *T2* don’t negate his active role in the text). Sarah’s role as a mother casts her as inherently female (but not necessarily feminine), while her heroic actions situate her as a masculine character. These two elements of her character (female and masculine) are neither mutually exclusive nor contradictory. While her motivations are maternal, Sarah is also the most active of all the human characters in the film. To deny her subjectivity based on her motherhood, as some critics do, works to deny women active power if they enact any kind of “feminine” action, particularly one denied to males. Maternal protection is necessarily female—only females are mothers—so to deny maternal characters control over their actions, to claim that these actions are merely primitive or instinctual (and, therefore, not an active choice on the part of the mother) is to deny subjecthood on the basis of sex.
And yet, still other criticism of T2 dismisses Sarah’s actions not because they are maternal but rather because they are not maternal enough. According to Susan Jeffords, the Terminator, not Sarah, is the true maternal figure in T2. Because Sarah was “locked away in a mental ward where she was not allowed to see [John],” she was “not present as a mother for him at all” (249), while her desire to be a “super-soldier” requires her to sacrifice motherly duties. The Terminator, on the other hand, seems to be “working on being a better mom” to John because he learns some slang and gives him a high-five (Jeffords 250). Sarah, it seems, can’t win. If she shows concern for her son and attempts to protect him, her character is nothing more than a primitive creature driven by instinct, denied subjectivity because of her naturalized femininity. If, however, she doesn’t show enough concern for John, then she is a failure as a mother and, therefore, denied a role in the film because the Terminator is a much better protector for John. Both readings of the film judge Sarah’s significance solely on her maternal abilities, and though each reading argues a different point—that she is too maternal or not maternal enough—both are used to deny her character an active role in the text.

In reading Sarah’s character, her role as mother often becomes the sole factor on which most critics judge her. And while her connection to her son is an integral part of the film series, it is troubling that, for many, it is the only part of her character that bears examination. This elevation of the maternal as the central focus of gender is often at the root of gender essentialism. In her critique of Kristeva’s views on gender, Butler criticizes this impulse to essentialize women based on motherhood, noting that, “[Kristeva’s] naturalistic descriptions of the maternal body effectively reify the motherhood and preclude an analysis of its cultural construction and variability” (109).
Sarah Connor is, for many critics, defined solely by motherhood. Her character is examined as it relates to her son, a tactic which is true not only for *T2* but also for the first film, a text in which John is wholly absent. The problem with seeing Sarah only in relation to her son is that it reduces her to a maternal image. Her character is critiqued based on how “good” a mother she is, not on how she functions as an independent character. In order for the *Terminator* series to be read as progressive in its depictions of sex and gender, it is necessary to evaluate Sarah as a character independent of her relationship to her son. This is not to say that her role as a mother should be ignored, but rather it should not be the sole focus of her character, nor should her “masculine” behavior—her propensity towards violence, her lack of explicit emotions, and her anger toward Skynet—be read as “forget[ting] to love her son” (Jeffords 249). Her masculine actions do not preclude maternity, even though they appear to be at odds with a “natural” view of motherhood and nurturing.

**Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles**

The premise of *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* is that, after their attempt to destroy Cyberdine systems in *T2*, Sarah and John have gone into hiding. At school, John is befriended by Cameron, a teenage girl who is particularly interested in his home life. After one of his teachers is revealed to be a Terminator and begins shooting up the classroom in an attempt to kill John, Cameron reveals herself as a Terminator sent to protect John. Unable to escape both the Terminator and the FBI (Sarah is wanted for the murder of Miles Dyson, a character killed in *T2*), Cameron constructs a machine that sends her, John, and Sarah eight years into the future. The series follows the trio as they attempt to prevent Judgment Day and the rise of Skynet systems, while avoiding FBI Agent Ellison (Richard T. Jones), who is determined to find
Sarah, and Cromartie (Garret Dillahunt), a murderous Terminator sent from the future to kill John. Though the series was short-lived, it garnered fairly positive reviews from critics who noted that Sarah and Cameron made “a thrilling team, upending motorcycles and smashing cyborgs” (Flynn), despite the fact that John is “so terribly average that even as he makes a critical decision […] the moment feels less like a boy learning to lead than a kid defying his mom” (Flynn). Other reviews also focus mostly on Sarah’s character, noting that she is the “real hero” of the show (Leonard).

Beyond Sarah’s heroism, many critics of the series are quick to point out her physical attractiveness. One critic calls Sarah “Rambette,” in reference to Rambo, that ultimate macho 80s action hero, and stresses that the series provides “impressive and abundant action with convincing effects” in addition to “plenty of eye candy between Glau and Headey” (Lowry). That the action stars of this series, like the stars of most action films, are not only tough but sexy is significant insomuch as these stars are women rather than men. It is this gendered difference that provides the most anxiety for critics, as it seems to detract from the action heroine’s subjectivity if she is also an object of sexual desire. As Tasker argues, however, this tension is a defining feature of all post-80s action films, regardless of the sex of the hero, and is one of the transgressive elements of the genre. Just as Schwarzenegger and Stallone provided “eye-candy” to audiences (both male and female), Glau and Headey do as well. But this does not mean that they are denied subjectivity; rather it demonstrates the liminal position of characters who are positioned as both subjects and objects and gendered as both masculine and feminine.
In the series, Sarah is clearly aligned with many other female action heroes of cinema, women who are constructed in narrative terms as macho/masculine, as mothers or as Others: sometimes even as all three at different points within the narrative. The maternal recurs as a motivating factor, with female heroes acting to protect their children, whether biological or adoptive (*Terminator 2, Aliens, Strange Days*) or in memory of them (*Fatal Beauty*). (Tasker, *Working Girls* 69)

Sarah is both mother and Other within the text; she is also the most likely site for viewer identification. It is this polysemy of positions (that is true not only for Sarah but also for other characters) that makes *T:TSCC* an important text for understanding progressive depictions of gender. Much as the series itself is a hybrid of action and SF, the characters within the series operate through character tropes from both genres. For example, Sarah functions not only as the female action hero defined through musculature and toughness but also as the monstrous female so common to SF. It is through this hybridity that the series not only criticizes rigid binary social structures but also questions notions of sex-based viewer identification.

One particular aspect of *T:TSCC* that makes it unusual from a SF-action standpoint, and is significant for understanding how viewer identification functions for the series, is that it has two female leads. Female action heroes are still uncommon and, when they do occur, often work alongside male partners; as Tasker notes, “sole female protagonists remain relatively rare” in the action genre (*Working Girls* 74). But *T:TSCC* has two female leads, Sarah and Cameron, while all the regular male cast members, John, Derek, and Ellison, occupy secondary roles. Not only are the female characters given a central role in the narrative, but the male characters are often either absent from much of the action or are bystanders to action sequences.
Because Sarah is the main character in the series and the one who controls the action, she is the most obvious site for viewer identification. She is the title character, and the series usually centers on her actions and is told from her point of view. The first episode of the series begins with a dream sequence and voiceover from Sarah, a technique the series relies on quite often. In it, Sarah says,

There are those who believe that a child in the womb shares his mother's dreams. Her love for him. Her hopes for his future. Is it told to him in pictures while he sleeps inside her? Is that why he reaches for her in that first moment and cries for her touch? But what if you'd known since he was inside you what his life held for him? That he would be hunted. That his fate was tied to the fate of millions. That every moment of your life will be spent keeping him alive. Would he understand why you were so hard? Why you held on so tight? Will he still reach for you if the only dream you ever shared with him was a nightmare? Would he know my love runs through him like blood? (“Pilot,” Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles)

These first lines of dialogue encapsulate one of the key themes of the Terminator series, as well as one of the most intriguing elements for critics of the series: Sarah’s relationship with John. For many critics, an evaluation of Sarah’s character begins and ends with a critique of her parenting skills. And, in fact, this voiceover touches upon many of the critics’ problems with her character. She is necessarily tied to John through maternity, implying that John is who he is because of the nightmare she shares with him, and she is also “hard,” not the soft, nurturing image of motherhood valued by society.

However, despite Sarah’s “hardness,” the series does not critique her attitude toward John. Part of the reason is that, unlike in the film T2, T: TSCC has time and opportunity to develop Sarah’s character more fully. So, while she is introduced in the first moments of the series as “hard,” she is also shown as invested and interested in John's happiness and wellbeing. Whereas critics found Sarah’s attitude in T2 shows her
dehumanization, the television series allows her to be both “hard” and maternal. The show explicitly references the idea that Sarah isn’t a traditional mother, but it also stresses that she is the kind of mother she needs to be if John is to grow up to save the world. In season two’s “Goodbye to All That,” Sarah is tasked with protecting a young boy, Martin Bedell, from a terminator that is attempting to find and kill him and any other young men named Martin Bedell. Much of the episode establishes that Sarah is not a comforting figure for Martin, despite her attempts to seem friendly and maternal. At the end of the episode, after the Terminator has been dispatched, Martin asks Sarah if “she’s a Mom.” When she replies that she is, he tells her that “[she] kinda suck[s] at it.” Sarah then tells him that “she’s working on it.” What is significant about this exchange is that the episode was about Sarah’s protecting this child from danger, sacrificing her own safety for his. In that sense, she is an excellent mother, as she is protecting the child from harm. But she’s not a good “mom” because she doesn’t enjoy reading books to the kid and isn’t sure what size clothes a small boy would wear. The narrative establishes, however, that the latter type, the “mom,” isn’t the kind of mother that John Connor needs if he is to survive to lead the resistance.

Very few critics note the importance of Sarah’s not being a traditionally feminine mother. Her desire to take out Skynet at all costs is seen as a problematic rejection of her motherly duties. However, the series establishes that Sarah must do this not only to save humanity but also to protect her son. In fact, many of the critics are not fair to Sarah when analyzing her attitude toward both the mission to stop Judgment Day and her attitude toward John. Rushing and Frentz state that Sarah becomes a “mechanically driven hunter stalking human prey” (189) in T2 and that “John has become to her, not
so much a son, as the means to an end” (188). They also say that, in *T2*, Sarah is “functionally equivalent to the Terminator in *T1*,” referencing the film novelization’s labeling of Sarah as “a terminator” (189). The problem with this analysis is a common one in the critique of Sarah’s parenting skills: if Sarah does not nurture John or act in a feminine way, she is a bad mother and, more than that, a bad person. According to Rushing and Frentz, Sarah’s character is only rehumanized when she “breaks down in tears and puts down her weapon” after attempting to kill Miles Dyson (190).

This same moment—when Sarah decides not to kill Dyson—has also been cited as the moment when Sarah is fully dismissed as significant to the story. As Sarah lectures Dyson about the destruction his company will bring, John interrupts her and tells her to be more constructive. This moment “relegates Sarah to the crouching, chain-smoking background bundle she becomes” (Jeffords 252-253). But denying Sarah an active place in the narrative simply because John at one point gains control is a highly problematic reading of the film series, especially since she is an active participant in the action sequences that occur throughout the rest of the film. And *T:TSCC* further contradicts this reading, because it shows that Sarah remains in control of both her and John’s fates, especially since there is no one else to do so. *T:TSCC* highlights this through its depiction of John as a future, but not current, leader. Furthermore, though Sarah’s relationship with John is a central element of the narrative, her character acts independently of him throughout the series and provides an important site for viewer identification.

Many critics dismiss Sarah in *T2* as a bad or primitive mother, one who does not garner audience sympathy and, as often happens with women in film, does not function
as a useful site for viewer identification. *T:TSCC* does not treat Sarah in this way. According to Laura Mulvey, classic Hollywood films focus on a “main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify” who is always male. In order to serve as a site for viewer identification, a character must be the “bearer of the look” and must serve as a “screen surrogate” for the audience (Mulvey 838). In *T:TSCC*, this character is Sarah, who more than any other character, drives the action. The repeated voiceovers and dream sequences shown from Sarah’s point of view require that the audience see the events in the series through her eyes. She is also the most active character, and takes on the role of leader, telling the other characters what to do and when to do it. Though she is met with resistance—most often from John and Derek—the series values her world view over theirs. Two of the running storylines in the second season depict how John’s and Derek’s refusal to follow her orders and their insistence at hiding information from her put them all in danger. Sarah, therefore, is important not only as John’s mother but also as the leader of the group. Though Sarah is in some ways Othered because she is a non-normative female, the action elements of the series allow her to move beyond this Othering. She is the central character and site of viewer identification in the narrative because she takes on the role of the action hero. The SF elements of the series further normalize her character, as she is aligned with the human characters and differentiated from the machines, which are, despite their sometimes heroic qualities, characterized as monstrous.

According to Tasker, early action film heroines “tend to be fought over rather than fighting, avenged rather than avenging. In the role of threatened object they are significant, if passive, narrative figures” (*Spectacular Bodies* 17). Though Sarah and
Cameron break from this traditional role, John Connor does not. For this reason, John’s character is by far the least masculine of the main characters. Unlike Sarah and Cameron (and, later, Derek Reese), John rarely takes a central role in the action elements of the series. More often, he is relegated to romantic teen angst storylines. In the first season, his major storylines involve trying to appear normal at school and to distance himself from his mother. He also seems to be struggling with an attraction to Cameron. In the second season, he meets Riley, a girl at school whom he begins to date. For the first half of season two, the majority of John’s storylines revolve around his romantic relationship with Riley and his mother’s disapproval of the relationship. Then, in the seventh episode of season two, it’s revealed that Riley is actually from the future and has been assigned to protect John from Cameron. John, like many female characters, is denied subjectivity because of his role in “feminine” storylines.

Despite this revelation about Riley, John is not presented with this information until almost the end of the season (in episode nineteen). Though he claims he realized much earlier that Riley was not who she claimed to be, this doesn’t correspond to his previous behavior towards her. John’s function in this storyline is representative of his role throughout the show; though he is constantly invoked as being the most important man in the future, in the present he is ineffectual. So though John claimed to have prior knowledge of Riley’s betrayal, he still spends the vast majority of the season acting like a love-struck teenager, not doing anything that would protect either himself or Riley from whatever mission sent her there. John doesn’t begin to fully express agency until the final episodes of the series, when both his uncle and his mother can no longer protect him. In the finale of season two (which also turned out to be the series finale, as the
show was cancelled shortly after it aired), John time-travels into the future. While there, he encounters a group of resistance soldiers (including Derek and Kyle Reese), none of whom have heard of “John Connor.” The implication in this episode is that John has time-traveled past Judgment Day, so he never becomes the leader of the resistance. In this final episode, John’s importance to the storyline—where he is most important as Future John—has been destroyed.

Throughout the series, there are references to Future John, the man whom everyone in the present is attempting to save. Future John is the leader of the resistance, an integral figure in the salvation of the human race. Present-day John is contrasted with him throughout the series. Whereas Future John is strong, independent, and able to make difficult decisions, present-day John is rash and resents having to make decisions independently of his mother. Though both Johns are technically the same person (both are John Connor, one is just an older, more experienced version), the characters talk about them as though they are different people. In one episode, Cameron tells John that he will need to kill her if she begins to malfunction. John asks Cameron what Future John would do, and she responds that “Future John isn’t here. You are.” This line encapsulates the major issue with John’s character in the series: all of the other characters talk about him like he is the most important and significant person in the narrative, and yet he does not actually fulfill that role. The John Connor that is that leader is absent from the narrative, and the John that is in the narrative is unsure, confused, and passive.

This isn’t to say that John is completely useless in the series or that he doesn’t do anything. John does help his mother in her quest to destroy Skynet and prevent
Judgment Day, although his role is much more peripheral than hers. Sarah, who has a
distrust of technology brought on by her experience with the various Terminators as well
as her knowledge of Judgment Day, relies on John to help her decipher the different
kinds of technologies she finds in her attempts to destroy any machines that could help
Skynet in the future. He also searches for things online for Sarah. But, beyond this,
John has very little active role in the storylines. On the rare occasions that he does
attempt to physically help Sarah and Cameron, he either endangers himself or everyone
around him—as is the case with his relationship with Riley—or whines about having to
participate in the war against Skynet, which he claims is ruining his life. John’s life is the
central object of the series, but the character is neither active nor engaging. As one
reviewer astutely noted, “he’s so overshadowed by the two women [Sarah and
Cameron], it’s difficult to invest in him as humankind’s last great hope” (Flynn).

The perpetual deferment of John’s importance in the narrative does two things: it
positions him as an object for those around him to protect, and it negates the power of
his position in the future. Though John will one day become the savior of the human
race and the leader of the war against the machines, this is not the way he acts in the
series. He’s still only a kid in the series (as the characters point out a number of times)
and is not expected to be as strong or powerful as he will one day supposedly become.
John does not look like a hero, nor does he act like one. An action hero is physically
and emotionally strong, and one of the key markers of the action hero is his body; as
Tasker notes, “within the action cinema, the figure of the star as hero, larger than life in
his physical abilities and pin-up good looks, operates as a key aspect of the more
general visual excess that this particular form of Hollywood production offers to its
audience” (“Dumb Movies” 233). The body of the hero is a central element of any action film. And, though action films have stopped featuring only hyper-muscular male bodies as was popular in the 80s, the action hero is still expected to look and act physically strong. John Connor is neither of these things. He’s a skinny teenager who is not particularly strong and whose body is not the site of the narrative’s anxiety or interest.

Rather, it is Sarah and Cameron who fulfill these roles. Like John, neither woman appears particularly muscular. But, unlike John, their bodies do provide significant physical spectacle in the narrative. The female body as spectacle is, of course, a common visual trope in a number of genres and, often, this kind of spectacle is seen to reaffirm femininity and to reflect passivity. The action genre, however, allows for bodily spectacle to be seen in a different way. In action cinema, the male figure functions in both the passive and active roles. The male action hero “controls the action at the same time he is offered up to the audience as a sexual spectacle” (Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies* 16). The idea that the male body does function as an object—even if the same male body is also characterized as a subject—is central to criticism on the action film. Action cinema relies on bodies, usually male bodies, in action. The heroes engage in “battles, fights, and duels of all kinds,” spectacles of bodily action, which means “that male figures on the screen are subject to voyeuristic looking, both on the part of the spectator and on the part of the other male characters” (Neale, “Masculinity as Spectacle” 16). Female action heroes are, of course, different from male action heroes given the long history of the marginalization of women in masculine genres, but they still remain important sites of identification as well as objectification. They are, therefore, more than just their bodies; they are also the characters who control the narrative.
Traditionally, films and television series that feature strong, female action heroes have felt a need to “explain away” the reasons for the female hero’s non-feminine actions (Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies* 20). This usually manifests as the character reasserting her femininity, as is the case in television shows such as *Charlie’s Angels* or *Cagney and Lacey*, in which women in positions of power are either hyper-sexualized or relegated to “women’s” storylines, both of which reduce the anxiety of their transgressive behavior. Another strategy often employed by these texts is to position the woman as attempting to model the behaviors of a powerful man, often her father. Though it could be argued that Sarah Connor functions somewhat in the latter way, in the sense that her behavior as a tough, masculine character is modeled after male characters like Kyle Reese, this argument doesn’t really hold. While Sarah does mention learning much of her skill set from various males she has encountered—a fact mentioned in both *T2* and *T:TSCC*—this does not mean that she is merely filling in for an absent male figure or emulating male actions. Rather, what Sarah’s transformation from feminine waitress in *The Terminator* to soldier in *T2* and *T:TSCC* demonstrates is the ways in which gendered behaviors are learned, not innate.

The suggestion that gender is not natural but learned or constructed is another common theme in the action genre, which is also highlighted by the spectacle of the muscular (male) body. The hyper-muscular male body common in action cinema “draws attention to both the restraint and the excess involved in ‘being a man’, the work put into the male body” (Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies* 119). Excess musculature is marked not as natural but as the result of bodybuilding, of excessive attention paid to the body. As Tasker notes, this interest in appearance has long been considered a feminine trait, and
bodybuilding both highlights masculinity (as large muscles are associated with men) and femininity (as attention to bodily appearance is considered feminine). The action film, therefore, complicates notions of masculinity and femininity that are often seen as inherently separate in our society. Hyper-muscular bodies point not only to a large amount of testosterone (associated with men) but also to an interest in being looked at and admired for appearance (associated with women). The bodily aspect of action, therefore, works to deconstruct the binary system of gender that has often defined film as being divided into active/male and passive/female roles.

As the male action hero fulfills both roles—as the character who drives the storyline and also as the body objectified as spectacle—the female action hero does as well. Both Sarah and Cameron function as action heroes in \textit{T:TSCE} because of their actions and their bodies. Unlike John, who remains fairly passive, Sarah and Cameron are involved in almost all the action sequences in the series. There are only a few action scenes that occur that do not feature either woman (and many of these feature another female character, the Terminator Catherine Weaver). As previously noted, one of the key elements of Sarah’s character is her motherly behavior towards John. She is not particularly nurturing, though she is highly protective. While some critics consider this another reason to dismiss her character as marginalized by the \textit{Terminator} series, as in the claim that in \textit{T2} Sarah is nothing more than a “primitive” mother whose emotions “stem more from her animal instincts than from any loving relationship between two people” (Jeffords 252), the series works to establish that Sarah’s lack of explicit emotion towards John is a result of her attempts to mold him into the leader he is to become. In some ways, \textit{T:TSCE} repairs some of the more problematic aspects of Sarah’s character.
from *T2*. It reaffirms that her treatment of John is not the result of a lack of love or ability to connect but rather a strategy to protect him from weakness and raise him to become more independent and tough. What’s interesting is that these same characteristics for which Sarah is condemned—strength, refusal to engage in overt displays of emotion, and a fiercely protective attitude towards a son—are the same ones used to highlight the heroic qualities of male action heroes, particularly Schwarzenegger’s character in *T2*. What Sarah’s character shows in *T:TSII* is that she is neither a solely good or bad mother, nor is she solely masculine or feminine.

Sarah’s attitude toward John, as well as her physical strength and presence in the action sequences of the series affirm her place as a gender-liminal character. Though she is clearly female, and her body carries with it the anxiety of female bodies threatened by violence, she is able and willing to participate in this action. Like the bodies of all action heroes, Sarah’s body is constantly threatened by physical violence, often in the form of a weapon of some kind penetrating her body. Though, as Tasker notes, the physical vulnerability of the hero’s body is “easily mapped onto the sexualized violence of rape” when the hero is a woman (*Spectacular Bodies* 151), *T:TSII* avoids this as an explicit threat to Sarah. Sarah is characterized as very capable of fighting and inflicting bodily harm on those around her, male or female. There are a number of episodes in which Sarah must fight a man who appears to be physically stronger than she is, and in a number of these scenes she handily prevails over her male opponent.

Even more than Sarah, Cameron’s character transgresses the traditional view of women as physically inferior to men. Like Sarah, the “tough mother,” Cameron fulfills a
more or less traditional female hero role, that of the cyborg. The cyborg is a common figure in SF-action texts, as it combines action’s interest in the body and violence with SF’s interest in technology and the alien. The cyborg is also common in SF because it provides a way for texts to “unpack and make explicit the metaphors by which stereotypes work” and to “attack [a] stereotype in a more direct, more vivid and more powerful manner” (Roberts 106). In the case of the Terminator series, the cyborg is used to unpack the metaphor of the monstrous machine and, in T:TSCC, it is also used to address the stereotype of the monstrous female.

For most viewers, the image of the Terminator cyborg is indelibly connected to Arnold Schwarzenegger. Schwarzenegger’s Terminators in The Terminator, T2, and T3 remain cultural icons, and his performance is arguably the defining element of the Terminator series. Despite his role as a villain in the first film, he still emerged for many viewers as the hero of the film. According to director James Cameron, audiences identified with Schwarzenegger’s murderous cyborg because,

there’s a little bit of the terminator in everybody. In our own private fantasy world we’d all like to be able to walk in and shoot somebody we don’t like or to kick a door in instead of unlocking it; to be immune and just to have our own way every minute. The terminator is the ultimate rude person. He operates completely outside all the built-in social constraints. It’s a dark, cathartic fantasy. That’s why people don’t cringe in terror from the terminator but go with him. They want to be him for that one moment. (qtd. in French 39)

Thus one reason for audience identification with the Terminator is because he does what everyone at some point wants to do. Another explanation is that the Terminator, as played by Schwarzenegger, looks like the hero: he’s muscular and emotionally detached, whereas the ostensible hero of the film, Kyle Reese, is much less physical and much more verbal. Reese isn’t the hero because “heroes aren’t meant to bleat
about heir own heroism. They just do it” (French 43). Furthermore, Reese’s relationship with Sarah serves to further weaken his character, as his “complicated emotions which should make him more sympathetic actually make him seem weak and neurotic” (French 43).

A similar contrast exists in *T:TS*CC as well. John functions much like his father did in *The Terminator;* he’s a character that we’re told is heroic, but who spends more time talking than acting. Audiences identify with heroes who seem strong and physical, who seem masculine. In *T:TS*CC, these characters are Sarah and Cameron. Though Sarah occasionally strays into Kyle Reese territory—too much talk, too little action—Cameron avoids this. Coming after three *Terminator* films (all starring Schwarzenegger as some permutation of the Terminator), *T:TS*CC begins with audiences ready to identify with the Terminator. The Terminator, who can do whatever it wants without any societal judgment, is the ultimate viewer fantasy. *T:TS*CC was faced with the challenge of creating a Terminator that would seem in line with the previous film versions, but was also a woman.\(^5\) Part of the series’ strategy in creating viewer identification with Cameron was to have her repeat lines and actions originally said by the Terminator in the film series. For example, one of her first lines to John, “Come with me if you want to live,” when she is attempting to save him from the murderous Terminator, repeats Schwarzenegger’s line in *T2*. And though Summer Glau is slim and not a bodybuilder like Schwarzenegger, many viewers would recognize her from her role as River on *Firefly*, a character who exhibited a great deal of physical strength and fighting ability.

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\(^5\) A female Terminator (called the TX or Terminatrix) does appear in *T3*. However, the TX is placed in opposition to Schwarzenegger’s Terminator in that film and does not share any of his heroic qualities. Rather she is, as Roger Ebert so succinctly puts it, “like [a] mannequin who keeps on coming.” Cameron is, then, the first fully developed female Terminator character of the series.
Cameron is also similar to the earlier Terminators in that she values action over emotion and is single-minded in pursuing her mission.

Like other cyborg characters that have appeared in SF, Cameron calls into question the accuracy of naturalized binary systems. Cameron, like most cyborgs, appears human. Nothing about her outward appearance suggests that she is part machine. Making the Terminator a woman in the series provides an avenue through which to see the cyborg in T:TSCC as a useful tool for feminist theory. As Haraway argues, “the cyborg is a post-gender figure because it lacks an origin story that depends on the myth of original unity” (150-151). However, it is arguable whether one could truly be post-gender, especially in a society that heavily relies on a binary system of gender and a patriarchal ideology. In the show, Cameron’s gender is only a factor to those characters who care about it. Cameron doesn’t seem to particularly care about her gender or question its importance or significance, but other characters do and treat her accordingly. For example, in the first episode, Cameron walks around the house nude. When Sarah requests that Cameron wear clothes after noticing John staring at her, the cyborg doesn’t understand why it’s necessary. Similarly, Cameron spends a great deal of the series attempting to “pass” for human, but because she is so emotionless and prone to demonstrating her immense strength, she scares people. Cameron’s attitude and strength contradict her appearance. While Schwarzenegger’s Terminator looked like a tough, emotionless killer, Cameron does not.

In her work on slasher and horror films, Carol J. Clover posits the “Final Girl,” a boyish female character in horror movies who provides mostly male audiences with a likely site for identification. One of the key reasons the Final Girl can cross gender-
identification boundaries is because she often exhibits masculine qualities and, often, because she is the sole human survivor among the characters at the end of these films. Despite the qualification that the Final Girl is the hero because all of the other characters are killed, Clover’s argument provides a clear example of cross-gender identification in masculine genres. Action, like horror, operates along particular visual tropes, tropes that often signal to audiences who the site of identification should be. As James Cameron noted, audiences identify with Schwarzenegger in The Terminator even though he is the villain because he conforms to the look and the attitude of other action stars in the 80s. This identification along visual tropes is also true in T: TSCC.

Though the two heroes are female, they remain sites for viewer identification. Sarah and Cameron are strong, active, and independent; they drive the action and aren’t merely objects, despite claims that Cameron “has been included in the [....] series to give teenage boys in the audience someone to drool over between chase scenes” (Leonard). In large part, claims that the women are there largely to be “drool[ed] over” are not supported by the series itself. The objectification of the women, when it does happen, occurs not because they are placed in that position by the narrative, but because that’s the role of women in much of popular culture. Luckily, because of the polysemy of viewer positions that television offers, this is not the only, or even the most obvious, reading of the women.

Unlike both John and Derek, who are involved in romantic storylines throughout the second season, neither Sarah nor Cameron are positioned as sexual objects within the text. On the few occasions when other characters attempt to position them as such, the narrative works to deconstruct these ideas. None of the female characters are
interested in romance—even John’s and Derek’s romantic partners are both using the romance in order to prevent the cyborg rebellion of the future. In the pilot episode, Sarah is engaged to a man named Charley, but she leaves him almost immediately in an attempt to protect her son. Though Charley occasionally appears throughout the series, it is clear that Sarah is not interested in pursuing a romantic relationship with him, as it would interfere with her plans to take down Skynet. Similarly, a number of male characters show romantic interest in Cameron, but her focus remains solely on completing her mission and protecting John from danger. Whereas, traditionally, television series have attempted to force women into feminine roles and storylines—almost always reverting to placing the women in romantic storylines that then become the focus for their characters—T:TSCC allows its female characters to remain key parts of active, masculine storylines.

In addition to Sarah and Cameron, the second season introduced another central female character, Catherine Weaver (Shirley Manson). First introduced as the CEO of the ZeiraCorp corporation, Catherine is soon revealed to have been sent from the future to research and produce the technology needed for the production of Terminator cyborgs. Though Catherine is supposedly a grieving widow and loving mother, she is actually a T-1001 model Terminator, comprised of liquid metal and able to change her appearance at will. Catherine is in many ways similar to the T-1000 of T2: both cyborgs attempt to pass for trustworthy, likeable people in an attempt to carry out their nefarious killer-robot schemes. In T2, the T-1000 assumed the guise of an LAPD police officer. Played by Robert Patrick, the villainous T-1000 looked normal, safe, and unassuming, especially compared to the hulking Schwarzenegger model. This appearance of
normalcy is part of what made that Terminator so frightening, and a similar effect is employed in the characterization of Catherine Weaver.

By introducing Catherine as a widow and mother, but then revealing her to be a killer robot in disguise, *T:SCC* deconstructs and complicates the notions of gender identity and gender unity. Like Cameron, Catherine is neither particularly masculine nor feminine. One ongoing storyline in the second season concerns Catherine’s relationship with her five-year-old daughter, Savannah. Like Cameron, Catherine Weaver illustrates how the cyborg can point to the constructedness not only of gender, but particularly of how gendered behavior can be taught and learned. Because she’s a cyborg (one who replaced the real Catherine Weaver when she died in a plane crash), Catherine is not at all maternal. Her daughter is scared of her and Catherine must learn how to treat her daughter lovingly in order to appear normal. Catherine is eventually taught, by a child psychologist and by Agent Ellison, how to be maternal—by hugging her daughter and telling her stories—and the second season ends with Catherine a more maternal and comforting figure for Savannah. Like Haraway’s cyborg, Catherine is neither masculine nor feminine, but rather a liminal figure that deconstructs ideas of coherence and unity.

This idea is further explored with Cameron, who spends a large part of the narrative attempting to pass as human. Because Sarah and John are attempting to blend in, and because the present day lacks cyborgs, Cameron must learn to act like a “normal” girl. Tellingly, it is John, not Sarah, who teaches her how to behave like a girl. Beyond telling Cameron to keep her clothes on, Sarah doesn’t assist in Cameron’s learned femininity or humanity. John, however, does. Many of their interactions consist of John telling Cameron how she is supposed to act. In this way, the series points to the
constructedness of gendered behaviors, particularly how those behaviors are constructed under a matrix of heteronormativity. A similar kind of teaching happens between John and the Terminator in *T2*, but in that film John simply had to teach the cyborg how to act “human.” Cameron must be taught not only how to act human but also how to act like a woman, and it’s clear that these are different things. Sarah further supports this when she tells Martin Bedell that she is “working on” acting like a mom, as does Catherine when she’s being taught how to be more maternal towards her daughter. *T:TSCC* points to not only the ways in which gendered behavior is dictated by society but also the ways in which female behavior is seen as something that requires special attention, particularly by male characters attempting to “correct” non-normative female behavior.

Though Cameron does function as Other because of her not-completely-human body, she remains a site for viewer identification. Sarah functions in a similar way, Othered by her masculinity (or her non-femininity), but the most likely site for viewer identification because she is the main character and the most active character, and the story is often told from her point of view. We see this in both her voiceovers and her dream sequences. Sarah’s reality is the main reality presented to the viewers. So, in episodes in which Sarah is unsure what is real and what is fantasy, so are the viewers. Similarly, Cameron is Othered because she is a machine and acts inhumanly, but as is true for the Schwarzenegger Terminators, this does not necessarily impede viewer identification. Cameron, more than Sarah, seems like a troubling site for viewer identification because she is both female and monstrous, and therefore othered in two key ways. And yet she remains an active site for viewer identification, in large part
because of the SF elements of the series. For one thing, she’s aligned with Schwarzenegger’s Terminators, who, despite their monstrosity, remain appealing characters for audiences. This is achieved not only through their attitude—acting as characters freed from the constraints of polite society—but also because, at times, the narrative is shown through their eyes. This kind of “Terminator-vision” appears in the first three films, as well as in T:TSCC. Though Sarah’s view is prioritized by the narrative, the show does occasionally slip into Cameron’s point of view. Additionally, Cameron, like Sarah, is an active character, and appears in a number of scenes in a heroic capacity. She is forever saving and protecting John, and much of the series’ active spectacle is a result of her actions.

At the same time, neither John nor Derek is a likely site of identification. As previously noted, John’s character is passive and objectified throughout the series. Since he’s also marginalized within the narrative—as part of teen romance storylines—he occupies a traditionally feminine role in the series. While Derek is not necessarily feminized, his character is introduced as an outsider, someone who is possibly working against Sarah, John, and Cameron, and he never fully integrates with the other characters. Often, he’s shown going on peripheral missions; he, like Sarah, is attempting to stop Judgment Day, but he does so in his own ways. And because the show is about Sarah, her actions and strategies are consistently valued over his.

Unlike a number of other SF and action texts, T:TSCC values the female characters’ storylines and points of view over the male characters’. A central reason for this is the series’ valuation of hybridity. Though Cameron is the most obvious example of a hybrid character, all of the characters in the series function as hybrids as well.
Sarah is both the all-American girl introduced in *The Terminator* and also the determined soldier she becomes by the end of that film. John is both the leader of the human resistance and a scared kid more interested in romance than fighting. A number of other characters are from the future and exist as both their future and present selves. These hybridizations reflect the show’s overall hybridity. As both a SF series and an action-adventure show, *T:TSCC* illustrates the transgressive benefits of liminality. The monstrous women of masculine genres—be it because of their muscles, their emotional fortitude, or their metallic endoskeletons—are able to exist as complex, hybridized characters who are sites not only of anxiety or objectification but also of subjectivity and viewer identification.
Though combat films were not unheard of in pre-World War II cinema, the genre didn’t gain popularity until the early 1940s. In her book on the WWII combat film, Jeanine Basinger argues that in order for a film to be considered a “war film,” it must have a set of recurring themes and characters as well as contain scenes of combat. Her study traces the evolution of the genre, pointing to generic conventions such as military costumes, military weapons, and a group of men who all work together to achieve a combat objective. Despite variations in the genre, all combat films include these basic conventions. Though the genre has evolved since the 1940s, the generic components of the contemporary war film remain similar to those of the WWII combat film.

For the purposes of my project, one of the most important conventions is that the war film almost always involves a group of men working together. While there are a few exceptions, women, for the most part, are absent from combat scenes in war films. When women do appear, they are often only in early (non-combat) scenes or will occasionally appear as nurses. In the few early women’s combat films, women appeared exclusively as nurses, in large part because “this [was] historical truth—the only women up front in close combat areas were nurses” (Basinger 40).

For this reason, women in these early combat films were very much marked by difference. They were different in appearance, in their lack of combat objectives, and in their lack of weapons. Though they were included in the war, their place was very much that of the feminine. These generic conventions of the combat film held strong through the late 1970s, when the Vietnam War became the focus of the Hollywood combat film. Though the Vietnam War occurred after the Women’s Rights movements of the 1960s,
Hollywood’s version of Vietnam was even less welcoming to women than was its version of WWII. The place of women in the Vietnam war film was never in combat—women were either the exotic “native” or the American wife or girlfriend waiting back home for her soldier to return (or, likely as not, to abandon their relationship while he’s in combat). According to Susan Jeffords, women were placed in this position due to the gendered concerns that surrounded Vietnam. War is characterized as a man’s space, and there is a fear that women entering combat would take away the role of “warrior” from men, a role that has been off-limits for women throughout American history (Jeffords 204). One of the most oft-cited “feminist” Vietnam films is *Coming Home* (1978), a movie set after the war, which focuses on the romantic redemption of its war-veteran protagonist. When women are featured in Vietnam films, it is almost exclusively in connection with a romantic interest in a Vietnam vet. *Coming Home* isn’t a movie about women in war; it’s a movie about how a woman can help save a man once the battle is over. Women often aren’t depicted as masculine in these films in large part due to the anxieties surrounding gender in Vietnam (both on an individual and national level).

It wasn’t until the Gulf War that women were shown to be soldiers engaging in combat in films. And, even then, these films were the exception rather than the rule, and often—like their WWII counterparts—stressed the difference of women in the military. Two films in particular, *Courage Under Fire* (1996) and *G.I. Jane* (1997), depict women as soldiers, and both films focus on the connection between sex, gender, and combat. Because both films work to represent a realistic portrayal of women in the military, they necessarily focus on the sex of their protagonists because they reflect what was
happening in the world of war outside of cinema. Furthermore, they confront the question of masculinity as it’s portrayed through female characters, including questions of “butchness,” perversion, and normality (Tasker, “Soldiers’ Stories: Women” 178).

What’s also significant about these two films is that, unlike previous depictions of women in war, the protagonists are not interested in feminine pursuits. Unlike the women of the WWII combat film, these women in combat have objectives directly related to combat, not romance or emotion or support for their male colleagues. In other words, they are not “women’s films” hybridized with the combat film but are instead combat films that star women.

It’s useful to examine the depiction of women in war films because war is not a common subject of television series. Though there have been a number of TV movies and mini-series about war—and about women in war—there have been very few weekly series. Well-known examples of the genre tend to be hybridized with “feminine” genres—in particular comedy (M*A*S*H, 1972-1983) and romantic dramas (China Beach, 1988-1991; Army Wives, 2007-present). Those series that weren’t hybrids with feminine genres often focused on the actions and lives of vets after the war, but rarely were they set during the war or in combat. Both The A-Team (1983-1987) and Airwolf (1984-1987), for example, feature military men as their protagonists, but neither show is about war or combat. Talking about the “combat television series” is therefore difficult, as it doesn’t really exist. Nonetheless, a series like the SciFi (now SyFy) channel’s 2003 “re-boot” of the 1978 series Battlestar Galactica can be read in the tradition of combat narratives. Furthermore, the series is particularly concerned with questions of what it means to be human, and, as is often the case with SF texts that question the nature of
humanity, *BSG* forces viewers to question the divisions within humanity, including gender.

Like the original series, the new *BSG* centers on a future war between the humans aboard *Galactica* (a military spaceship and part of the Colonial fleet) and a group of cyborgs called the Cylons, though the nature and origin of the Cylons differs greatly in the two versions. The 2003 miniseries begins with a series of title screens that briefly summarize the history of the Human-Cylon war. The Cylons, we learn, are a race of cybernetic organisms “created by man…to make life easier on the twelve colonies,” and who later rebelled against the humans, “decid[ing] to kill their masters.” An armistice was declared, and the Cylons “left for another world to call their own.” Though each year the humans send a Colonial officer to meet with a Cylon representative to discuss diplomatic relations, the Cylons never send anyone. While the title screens explain these events, the Colonial officer (an older male in military dress) is shown walking into the space station where he sits at a table and waits. Suddenly, a door opens, and two robotic beings (Cylon Centurion models, we are told) walk into the room, followed by an attractive young blonde woman (Tricia Helfer). The woman walks up to the Officer and asks him, “Are you alive?” He stares at her, before saying, “Yes.” She asks him to “prove it,” and then begins to kiss him. The screen pans out to show a larger space ship that sends a missile to bomb the space station. The woman continues to kiss the man as the missile hits; he jolts at the impact and stares up at her. She smiles and says, “It has begun.” She continues to kiss him as the spaceship explodes.

This opening scene establishes a number of important plot points for the series. It informs viewers about Cylon origins, shows that Cylons have somehow evolved from
large robotic Centurions to human-looking cyborgs, and shows the first strike in the human-Cylon war. The next few scenes introduce the rest of the main characters: Kara “Starbuck” Thrace (Katee Sackhoff), a maverick fighter pilot aboard Galactica; Commander (later Admiral) William Adama (Edward James Olmos) and his executive officer, Tigh (Michael Hogan); Laura Roslin (Mary McDonnell), the Secretary of Education and future President of the Twelve Colonies; Dr. Gaius Baltar (James Callis), a scientist and defense researcher; and two more Viper pilots: Adama’s son, Lee “Apollo” Adama (Jamie Bamber) and Sharon “Boomer” Valerii (Grace Park), who is later revealed to be a sleeper agent of Cylon Model Eight. We are also shown another Six model (all Sixes are played by Helfer)—one who appears physically identical to the same blonde woman from the opening scene—though this one is alive and romantically involved with Baltar.

Two of the female characters—Boomer and Starbuck—were also characters in the original series, though in that version both were male. The original series, in fact, had only four women in its main cast: Athena (Maren Jensen), Sheba (Anne Lockhart), Cassiopeia (Laurette Spang), and Serina (Jane Seymour), none of whom appear in the 2003 series.¹ As was the norm for the combat films of the late 1970s, all of the women in the original series fulfilled traditionally “feminine” roles, and the narrative struggled with their incorporation into the male world of combat. Of these characters, Cassiopeia embodies the most traditional female role for the combat narrative—she’s a “medtech,” or, to put it plainly, a nurse. Her storyline is closely tied to that of Starbuck (Dirk

¹ While there is a character named “Athena” in the re-booted series, she bears little resemblance to the earlier version. The original Athena was Apollo’s brother and Adama’s daughter and, though she was a pilot, was also a schoolteacher. The new Athena is another version of the Cylon Model Eight.
Benedict), with whom she falls in love. It’s also interesting to note that Cassiopeia is introduced in the pilot as a “socialator,” a prostitute. Though she quickly becomes part of the medical team, she remains a highly feminized character, defined through her sexual relationships and romance. Serina is a reporter who survives the Cylon attack with her young son, Boxey. Shortly after the beginning of the series, Serina quickly engaged in a romantic plotline with Apollo, one that culminates in their marriage. Though Serina’s early storylines are particularly feminized, she does take on a more masculine role when she becomes a pilot. Like women in WWII combat films, however, Serina is punished for her masculinization when she is shot down by enemy fire and killed. The other two female characters, Athena and Sheba, inhabit somewhat masculine roles—they’re both pilots. They both are also, however, the daughters of important male characters: Athena is Commander Adama’s daughter (and Apollo’s sister), while Sheba is the daughter of Commander Cain (the commander of the Battlestar Pegasus, another ship that survived the Cylon attacks), and both women are more involved in romantic storylines than they are in combat scenes.

It’s significant that none of these female characters appears in the 2003 series. While there is a character named “Athena” in the later version, she bears little resemblance to the character from the 1978 series. In fact, a number of the female characters in the re-imagined series were roles originally played by men. Most significantly, both the new Boomer and Starbuck are female, a twist that met with much resistance by both fans of the series as well as the actor who played Starbuck in the original series, Dirk Benedict. Benedict has been quite outspoken in his criticism of the
new series, saying that the casting of women in roles formerly played by men speaks to a problematic re-imagining of gender roles and that,

40 years of feminism have taken their toll. The war against masculinity has been won. [...] Witness the 're-imagined' Battlestar Galactica. [...]Women are from Venus. Men are from Mars. Hamlet does not scan as Hamletta. Nor does Han Solo as Han Sally. Faceman is not the same as Facewoman. Nor does a Stardoe a Starbuck make. Men hand out cigars. Women `hand out' babies. And thus the world, for thousands of years, has gone round. (Benedict)

Benedict’s issues with the transformation of male characters into female characters points to both the ways in which the 1978 series upholds gender norms as well as the ways in which the 2003 series works to subvert these norms. This isn’t to say that the later series lacks problematic representations of women, but the reimagined version does provide a more complex depiction of gender and, particularly, of how gender operates in the SF combat narrative.

Though Starbuck is arguably the most significant female character because of her history as well as her position in the narrative, BSG includes a number of other characters (both male and female) that depict transgressive ways of looking at gender in genre-hybrid series. Because BSG involves a complex storyline, with a large cast of characters, I’ll examine the central female characters in order to analyze how the series utilizes concepts of hybridity in order to create what was one of the most transgressive characterizations up to that time of women on television. For the purposes of this essay, the key female characters are Starbuck, President Roslin, Ellen Tigh, and the various incarnations of Cylon Numbers Six and Eight. The characterization of these women, as well as their relationships both to the mythology of the series and to the other characters, point to the significant ways that the hybridization of two masculine genres
(in this case, SF and the war narrative) create progressive and transgressive spaces for female characters on television.

One of the key repeated themes of the miniseries is that the Cylons are much more technologically advanced than the humans. In fact, the only reason that Galactica survives the Cylon attacks is because it is a “relic,” an out-of-date ship that lacks the computer networking of all other Battlestars. When the Cylons use their technology to infiltrate the fleet, *Galactica* is not taken down because the virus can’t infiltrate a non-networked system. This connection between technology and the Cylons continues throughout the series, as does a connection between femininity and technology. While Admiral Adama is proud that his ship doesn’t have a network (this is before the Cylon attacks even happen), Roslin criticizes him for this decision. Furthermore, the Cylons are often characterized as female; unlike mankind, the Cylons are a female-driven society, even if this is never stated outright. The first Cylon introduced is the Number Six model—she’s the face of the space station take-down in the opening scene of the miniseries, and she’s the one who infiltrates the planet Caprica, seduces Baltar, and orchestrates the destruction of the Twelve Colonies. Though there are a total of thirteen Cylon models—and eight of those are male—the positions of power in the Cylon society lie mostly with the women. In addition to Number Six, female Cylons include Number Eight (both Boomer and Athena are Eights); Number Three, represented by only one character, D’Anna Biers (Lucy Lawless), who acts as the “head” Cylon up until season three; and two of the “Final Five” (Cylons who have only one existing body, not multiple copies like the other model numbers): Tory Foster, and Ellen Tigh, the wife of Colonel Tigh, who is the final Cylon revealed. At various points in the series, all of these female
Cylons (with the exception of Tory) are portrayed as leaders of the group, while most of the male Cylons have more subordinate roles.

*BSG*'s attitude towards both gender and technology is complex. Though technology is aligned with femininity and, at least for the first two seasons, the Cylons are clearly depicted as villains, this relationship grows more complex as the series progresses. One of the more interesting aspects of the series is that it avoids a problem that many television series fall into (and that many of the more critical fans feared upon hearing about the new female Starbuck): it never delves into soap opera or focuses on romance above its war and science fiction narratives. This hybridization of masculine genres allows the female characters to occupy positions in masculine storylines rather than be relegated to traditional feminine narratives. This is not to say that there aren’t any romances in the series, but rather that these elements of the story do not take over the narrative for the female characters. Additionally, not only does the series utilize this kind of gendered genre hybridity, but its plot also emphasizes the necessity of hybridity for its characters.

In *Tough Girls*, Sherrie A. Inness points to the ways in which texts will often temper a masculinized female hero’s transgressive gender characteristics with overt references to her femininity in order to highlight the unnatural behaviors she exhibits. For example, Inness argues that Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in *Alien* “can be perceived as a man in a woman’s body” (107). Inness then points to that film’s final sequence—in which Ripley battles the monster while wearing only her underwear—as the text’s attempts to relieve the anxiety created by her masculine behaviors by reassuring viewers that “yes, Ripley is a girl” (107). This is common to how masculine women are
treated in traditionally masculine genres—their non-normative behavior is always tempered with some signal that they are, indeed, just girls and, therefore, are not truly threatening to dominant ideologies of gender. The question, then, becomes whether or not there is a space for a masculine woman who is not undone by overt references to her femininity and sexuality.

The answer, at least for BSG, is yes. One of the reasons this series succeeds where many other shows and films have not is its sprawling cast of characters. Whereas, for example, the Terminator and Alien franchises focus on small groups of people—one or two main characters—BSG has eight main cast members, both male and female, human and non-human. The result is that one character is not singled out from the rest and tasked with the burden of embodying some kind of gender ideal. Whereas both Alien and The Terminator make statements about gender through the body of the sole surviving characters (and their sequels merely expand the number of survivors by one—a child, in both instances), BSG allows for many characters to create an overall picture of how gender functions within the text.

One of the primary differences between BSG and a traditional war narrative is the presence of the science fiction story elements. BSG is set in the distant past, in a world similar to present-day earth in some ways but wildly different in others.\(^2\) Though the series presents the military environment aboard Galactica as post-gender—the pilots all share a large unisex locker and changing room, all pilots wear the same casual and flight clothing, and “sir” is used as a sign of respect regardless of the sex of the

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\(^2\) Though for most of the series, the narrative appeared to be set in the distant future (due to the technology of both human and Cylon societies), the series finale revealed that the characters were the ancestors of our current civilization.
person being addressed—the series never quite achieves this post-gender ideal.
Throughout the series, rape is used as a form of intimidation against female prisoners, and though the rapes are ordered by both male and female officers, they are only used against women and only performed by men. Such issues, though they are never explicitly addressed as gender-significant on the show, point to the uneasiness that comes with women in the military. This uneasiness is further illustrated in the visual coding of female military members, particularly Starbuck.

*BSG* gives the audience two traditional war protagonists in the first episode—both Starbuck and Apollo follow the common war narrative trend of heroes who are struggling with the tension between conformity and individualism. What’s unusual here is that the series inverts the traditional gendered expression of these traits. The male character—Apollo—represses his need to rebel against the violent nature of the military career he’s chosen. Apollo is incredibly straight-laced, refusing to joke around with the other members of the military and rigidly following orders given by his commanding officer (who also happens to be his father). Apollo is coded as somewhat “feminine” because of his inability to find a clear place in the military. Apollo doesn’t “fit” with the brotherhood of the military because he resents both his father (who is beloved, admired, and respected by his colleagues) as well as the martial nature of the military. It’s not surprising, then, that Apollo eventually rejects his military career in order to become a lawyer (and, later, Laura Roslin’s vice president). Rather than Apollo, Starbuck fulfills the traditional role of the masculine war hero. Her rebellion against her place in the natural order of the military is highly masculinized. She’s prone to violence, to acting before thinking, and to valuing the brotherhood of her fellow soldiers above specific
orders. Starbuck also serves as a kind of surrogate daughter to Commander Adama, whose older son, Zak, was once engaged to Starbuck before he was killed in a military flight accident. It is Starbuck, therefore, more than any other female character, who provides the most direct site for genre hybridity in the series.

**Starbuck: Rebooting Gender in BSG**

The gender-recasting of Starbuck points to the popular assumption that the presence of a central female character will somehow transform a “masculine” text into a “feminine” one. The conflation of gender and sex is one of the most troubling aspects of the backlash against the new Starbuck. In her essay on the gender politics of the Starbuck recast, Carla Kungl points to the reaction from fans that the new BSG would somehow be a wholly different show, not only in terms of storyline, but also in genre. The re-imagined series was labeled a “soap opera in space” by disgruntled fans, a label Kungl attributes to “the recasting of Starbuck as a woman” (200). It’s important to note that all of this outrage occurred before the miniseries had aired—it wasn’t that the new Starbuck was somehow portrayed in a way that made fans of the original series angry because of changes to her character or behavior, but rather the fact that the new Starbuck would be female made some audiences believe *a priori* that the character couldn’t possibly be similar to the original role as portrayed by Benedict. This speaks very clearly to a perception that women are inherently incapable of believably portraying the necessary masculinity of soldiers. This idea is at work in all war narratives—from the early WWII films that only allowed women to be part of the action if they were nurses or occupied other non-combat positions and demonstrated traditionally feminine traits (interest in fashion, romance, and domesticity) to the erasure of women in combat in Vietnam-era films. And while those earlier issues could be attributed to a desire to
maintain realism in their films, by 2003—the year the miniseries aired—this was no longer the case. Women were now allowed to perform in active combat positions in the military and, as noted, by the first airing of the miniseries there had been at least two popular films that portrayed women as tough, capable soldiers. However, some audiences were still not willing to accept a female Starbuck, mainly because of the assumption that a central female character would somehow turn what should be a masculine genre into a feminine one.

And yet, this did not occur. The new Starbuck, renamed Kara “Starbuck” Thrace and played by Katee Sackhoff, shares many traits with the original. She drinks, smokes cigars, plays cards, and is the best pilot in the fleet. The text itself rarely mentions her sex, and instead just portrays her as a masculine character. This strategy—almost post-gender—points to both the problems and benefits of placing female characters in masculine roles. Furthermore, because the series is set in space in another time, Starbuck’s biological sex is not commented upon by other characters because they inhabit a world in which women are not inherently feminine and, therefore, not inherently lesser soldiers. While this is progressive, it’s also somewhat problematic. Even though the world of BSG is more gender-egalitarian than that of the viewing audience, the creators of this series are still very much informed by the gender norms of the real world. After all, as shown in films like G.I. Jane and Courage Under Fire, audiences are not entirely comfortable with depictions of women in combat. Starbuck is, therefore, a rather contradictory character, and her sex can never fully be separated from her gender in the narrative.
In the miniseries, Starbuck is the first character aboard Galactica to whom the audience is introduced. After the destruction of the human ambassador and the space station, the camera moves to Galactica, where Kara Starbuck is in the midst of her daily jog. On her way through the ship’s corridors, Starbuck stops briefly to exchange quips with Admiral Adama, immediately situating her as an active character who has a close relationship with Adama. Starbuck’s physical appearance is also highly important in this scene. Not only is she shown engaging in physical activity, she is also portrayed as somewhat “butch.” Her clothing is androgynous—black-and-gray layered tank tops paired with drab-colored cargo pants, the standard off-duty uniform for all pilots, regardless of sex—her hair is cropped short and slicked back, and she isn’t wearing any make-up. Though the character is obviously female, it’s equally obvious that she isn’t being coded as feminine in her introduction. Clearly, the writers and producers of the re-imagined series were aware of the prejudice many audience members would have against this female Starbuck, and their strategy in assuaging those fears seems clear from this first scene, where she is shown to be both masculine and non-threatening, primarily due to her close relationship with Adama. Even though she’s a maverick, Kara respects Adama and will usually fall in line when he asks her to.

In many ways, Starbuck is the most interesting and important character in the BSG mythology. Like many women in military situations on film and television, Starbuck’s gender is an important part of her identity, particularly as it relates to threats of violence and sexualized violence. Though the series does tend to avoid many of the most common tropes attached to depictions of female soldiers, there is one that is still central to Starbuck’s character: the threat of sexual violence.
Though Kara’s gender is rarely commented on by other characters (with the exception of Baltar, who is depicted as sex-obsessed and morally backward), the fact that she is female becomes an important part of her character arc. Late in the first season of the show, Starbuck returns to Caprica in order to find the Arrow of Apollo, which President Roslin believes will help the fleet locate Earth. While on Caprica, Starbuck is injured and then captured by Cylons. When she wakes up, she is hooked to machines and soon discovers that the Cylons are attempting to use her for breeding purposes. Starbuck’s femaleness is, in the context of the SF text, a source of even more anxiety because not only is she a possible victim of sexual attack by the enemy, but any human reproduction with Cylons could, in the eyes of the fleet, result in the eventual decimation of the human species. And though the series later assures viewers (and the humans in the fleet) that this hybridization is actually a good thing – it will, after all, result in the future of humanity as we modern-day viewers know it – at that point in the series it is considered a terrible threat. Furthermore, though Kara does escape the breeding “farm,” the Cylons have managed to remove one of her ovaries. Much like Agent Scully in *The X-Files* a decade earlier, Starbuck’s enemies attempt to manipulate her through the introduction of a medically created daughter. Unlike Scully, however, Starbuck is much less interested in the possibility of motherhood. For much of season two, Starbuck is kept locked in an apartment with her supposed daughter, Kacey, by Leoben (Cylon Model Number Two), who is attempting to convince her that Kacey is their biological daughter. Much of his time is also spent trying to enact a traditional, heteronormative family scenario with Starbuck and Kacey, though Starbuck refuses to play along. Starbuck, it seems, is the martial but not the maternal type. She does soften
towards Kacey after the child is seriously injured in a fall, and once it is revealed that the girl is actually not Kara’s, but instead a kidnapped human child taken from New Caprica, Starbuck does seem quite upset. However, she never develops a drive for motherhood, and it is significant that the series depicts Starbuck as uninterested in being a mother. For both SF and war narratives, the threat of reproductive anxiety is a common one.

Starbuck’s storyline is similar to that of other fictional female soldiers in another important way: she is considered somewhat unwieldy, a person that doesn’t quite fit in to the regimented military masculinity. Though Starbuck is first introduced in the miniseries as a rebel whose superiors believe she needs to be controlled—in an early appearance in the miniseries, Starbuck physically attacks the ship’s XO (Colonel Tigh) when he insults her at a poker game—and is placed in the ship’s brig almost immediately, she is just as quickly released once the Cylon attack occurs. Starbuck, the series seems to be saying, doesn’t necessarily lack control; rather, she is respectful of authority, at least to those whom she deems worthy of respect (particularly Roslin and Adama). In this way, Starbuck resembles a type of male soldier of a number of military films and television series—the military maverick. From *Top Gun*’s Pete “Maverick” Mitchell to *24*’s Jack Bauer to *Stargate SG-1*’s Jack O’Neill, a standard trope in popular fiction is the military man who doesn’t play by the rules. In general, these characters are almost always men, owing not only to the fact that women in military texts are rare, but also to the fact that when women do appear in military stories, their storylines require conforming to some kind of masculine ideology. Starbuck is able to occupy this space in the narrative, rather than that of the traditional female soldier, because of the text’s SF elements. It is established immediately in the series that the military as it exists in the
world of *Battlestar Galactica* (whether that is the distant past or the distant future), is one of gender egalitarianism. None of the characters question Starbuck’s ability or place in the military based on her gender or sex, so it becomes easier for the audience to do so as well. That the miniseries in particular does rely heavily on visual markers of masculinity to characterize Starbuck seems to be an acknowledgement of the distance between the world of the viewer and the world of the characters.

Starbuck has something else in common with many women in films and television shown in military combat roles: she is a pilot. As Tasker notes,

> [t]his is the arena in which military women are perhaps most visibly engaged in combat activities. The role also has elite, high-achieving associates, in line with the typical characterization of film and television military women as exemplary and atypical. Additionally the distance of pilots from ground warfare allows a gendered redefinition of spaces that remain exclusively male or masculine. (*Soldiers’ Stories* 236)

Of course, the series has a clear reason for making Starbuck a pilot and not a ground combatant—namely, that there isn’t really any ground combat in a war waged against robots in outer space—but it’s still worth noting that the character fits a common image of the military women in popular visual media. It’s also worth noting that female characters in *BSG*, particularly Starbuck, Boomer, and Caprica Six, are among the few who actually engage in hand-to-hand combat.\(^3\) Furthermore, Starbuck is clearly identified as the best pilot aboard *Galactica*; Admiral Adama’s first decision once he hears of the Cylon attacks is to order Starbuck released from the brig in order to lead a defensive attack against the Cylon Raiders. Though Starbuck is a brilliant pilot, she is a disastrous leader because of her refusal to engage in any kind of softness towards her

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\(^3\) The few hand-to-hand combat scenes on the show take place on Caprica, and though there are a group of human soldiers led by a male character (Anders, who is later revealed to be one of the “Final Five” Cylon models), there are virtually no scenes of organized military hand-to-hand combat. An important exception is the fight between Starbuck and Caprica Six that occurs in the first season.
subordinates. Unlike many fictional military women, she is not tripped up by inherent femininity. It is her masculinity, rather, that tends to mark her as a problematic military figure. Unlike the “real” military as shown in film and television, the military of the fleet cannot afford to be highly exclusionary. The kind of badgering and exclusion of feminine recruits that occurs in films like G.I. Jane, Courage Under Fire, and Full Metal Jacket (where the ridiculed recruit is a feminized male) isn’t welcome in BSG if only because the presence of available, able-bodied recruits is so small.

As noted, Starbuck’s physical appearance, particularly in the first season, is somewhat masculine. Not only does she wear the “gender-neutral” uniform of a soldier in the fleet, but early in the show’s run her hair is cut quite short. Though it may seem inconsequential, “hair [is] a significant point of differentiation between male and female soldiers in an integrated military” (Tasker, Soldiers’ Stories 245). Starbuck’s hair marks her as somewhat masculine; though the uniforms of the military are gender-neutral, the hairstyles tend to conform to contemporary fashion. Most of the female soliders have longish hair (often, though not always, styled in a ponytail), while none of the male soldiers do. In fact, the only male character with longer hair is Dr. Baltar, who is also one of the more feminine males aboard Galactica. While on the one hand this difference in hairstyle points to the ways in which the world of BSG is not quite post-gender, it also does provide an image of a military that doesn’t demand masculinity in all areas.

Starbuck is not the only female soldier in the world of BSG, of course, and about half of the military personnel shown onscreen are female. The majority of the other

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4 This behavior is explained as a response to an earlier trauma. Before the series begins, Starbuck was a military flight instructor engaged to one of her students. Starbuck allowed her fiancé, Zak (Apollo’s brother and Admiral Adama’s youngest son), to pass the flight exam despite sub-par performance, and he was later killed during his first solo flight. As a result, she is particularly hard on her students when she’s put in charge of training after the Cylon attacks.
female characters are not nearly as masculinized as Starbuck, though they all do conform to a kind of militarized masculinity. Still, it is important that the female military characters are not isolated in the way that many other fictional military women are in films such as \textit{G.I. Jane} or television series such as \textit{M*A*S*H}, nor are they seen as somehow infringing on an all-male space. The barracks aboard Galactica are mixed-gender, and there are virtually no all-male spaces or groups in the fleet.\textsuperscript{5} This isn’t to say that the series lacks gender problems, but it does manage to avoid many of the ones common to texts about women in the military. The ability to sidestep the “problem” of military women is due to the SF aspect of the series; because this is a time far removed from the audience’s world, the idea that women are necessary and equal parts of the military structure is more easily accepted by viewers.

\textbf{The Schoolteacher: President Laura Roslin}

Beyond Starbuck, there is one other central human female character: President Laura Roslin. When the narrative begins, Roslin is not yet President—she’s the Secretary of Education for the Twelve Colonies, and the audience is first introduced to her in the lobby of a doctor’s office where she has just learned that she is dying of breast cancer. Roslin’s original role, therefore, is defined as feminine; she’s in a traditional profession for a woman—she is, as Adama calls her, “a schoolteacher”—and is suffering from what is seen in our culture as a woman’s illness. It is only after the Cylon attack decimates the rest of the political cabinet that Roslin becomes President (as Secretary of Education, she is next in line to succeed the President after all fifteen of

\textsuperscript{5} The filmic adaptation of Robert A. Heinlein’s \textit{Starship Troopers} (1997) featured similarly “mixed gender” barracks, though these seemed mostly to exist in order to show gratuitous coed shower scenes, rather than as commentary on any kind of post-egalitarian society.
those who outrank her are killed). Unlike Starbuck—who is defined as aggressively masculine—Roslin is quite feminized in this early part of the narrative. In addition to being a “schoolteacher,” there’s also a scene soon after she is sworn in to the Presidency where, moments before giving a press conference, she asks her assistant Billy how she looks. When he tells her she “looks fine,” Roslin laughs and asks, “You don’t know anything about women, do you?” This rather light-hearted exchange is fairly brief and off-hand, though it does position Roslin as feminine due to her concern with her appearance. In a series where all people in positions of authority are called “Sir” as a sign of respect, Roslin’s character clearly demonstrates the ways in which gender has not been completely elided in the series. Femininity (and women) are still seen as inherently different than masculinity (and men), though not necessarily inferior.

In addition to the markers of femininity assigned to Roslin on her introduction, she also occupies a fairly feminine position throughout the series. In the first season, there is a conflict between Roslin and Adama, the former representing the governing politics of democracy and the latter representing a kind of violence-driven martial law. Roslin is very clearly in the feminized position here, occupying a reactive (weak) defensive strategy. Her solution to the Cylon attack is that they run—that the fleet protect themselves by fleeing their attackers. Adama and Tigh are adamantly against this plan, arguing that the surviving humans must go on the offensive and attack the Cylons. Though Roslin’s plan eventually prevails, it’s important to note the power struggles that lead up to the final decision. First and foremost, neither Adama nor Tigh treat Roslin as though she is President, and both men repeatedly point out that she was not elected to that position, but instead landed in it by default. Though a female
President is somewhat transgressive (though not uncommon for Hollywood), Roslin wasn’t actually elected to that office, and there’s a clear implication that she is not able to handle the job, both because she lacks political experience and also because, as the audience is aware, she is dying. Much of Roslin’s power is, therefore, undermined by the way she gained that power.

Though Roslin and Adama eventually overcome their differences (and, by the final season, have started a romance), this tension between democracy and military rule is an important theme of the show, with Adama representing the “real” toughness of men. Unlike Starbuck, who is a masculinized female, Roslin’s masculinity is more thematic than physical and is often marked as a kind of less-than masculinity when contrasted with that of Adama and the other members of the military. Roslin’s authority is constantly challenged, not only by Adama but also by civilian members of the fleet, most notably by Tom Zarek (Richard Hatch), a convict aboard a prison ship who attempts to stage a coup to take control of the fleet. The Zarek storyline is also a meta-textual nod to the original series, since the character is played by same actor who played Apollo in the 1978 series. Zarek’s ideas are self-serving and out-dated (not particularly suited to the world in which the fleet finds itself after the Cylon attacks), and he repeatedly butts heads with Roslin. Their respective leadership styles are at odds, and by the point when Zarek attempts to rest control away from Roslin, Adama has been convinced that an alliance with the Cylons is necessary. Though Zarek does manage to gain the presidency after Roslin goes into hiding, he is soon executed for attempting to stage a mutiny against Adama, and Roslin returns to her position as President of the Colonies. What’s important here is that Roslin must constantly fight for
the power that has been granted to her, and this fight is consistently against traditionally masculine male characters: Adama, Tigh, and Zarek. Furthermore, even though Roslin is contrasted with figures of masculinity, the narrative often supports her position, particularly on matters related to the fleet. Though her search for Earth and her belief in the mystical is dismissed by many characters (the majority of them male), she’s later proved correct in her beliefs.

In addition to the rather complex depictions of Roslin’s political power and authority as it relates to gender, the series also comes dangerously close to reifying the divide between masculine reason and feminine irrationality. According to binary classifications of reason and madness, “if reason is to be represented as masculine, as it almost invariably has been, then madness, in hegemonic phallocratic ideology, is virtually by definition feminine” (Freedman 143). A less extreme version of this division can also be found in a number of SF texts, which as Robin Roberts argues, position women in the soft sciences—“psychology, sociology, even parapsychology”—while excluding them from the more masculine hard sciences (anything having to do with machines or biology). Roslin, for much of the second and third seasons, sees visions of Earth. As President, her goal is often to push the fleet to find Earth, despite the fact that many of the other characters (particularly the masculine, military characters) doubt its existence. This trend is continued even more obviously in Starbuck’s behavior after her return from the maelstrom in the season three finale. Both Starbuck and Roslin’s actions are characterized as dangerous and unstable, with both women acting irrationally as they claim to be leading the fleet to salvation. This association between women and “feminine” irrationality is later complicated when both Starbuck’s and Roslin’s actions
are depicted as necessary for the survival of the fleet, though the importance of their actions comes long after the series associates them with anxiety and a lack of masculine rationalism.

As mentioned, the series’ attitude toward technology—both in terms of its value and its relationship to gender—is rather complex, though in general technology is femininized. This is further supported by the connection between Roslin, technology, and the soft sciences. In season two’s “Epiphanies,” Roslin’s illness becomes much more advanced and she lapses into a coma. For the majority of the episode, Roslin remains passive and immobile, unable to act because of the cancer that is taking over her body. The solution to saving her is mystical—Roslin is thought to be the “dying leader” mentioned in the prophecies of the Gods, and a possible cure for her illness is referenced in the prophecies. This aligning of Roslin with the mystical further serves to feminize her character, once again providing a sharp contrast between her and the masculine power of the military. Later, Roslin’s illness is treated using a blood transfusion from Hera, the Cylon-Human hybrid child, making her, in some small way, part-Cylon. In this storyline, Roslin is once again aligned with the feminine—this time, the monstrous feminine as defined by the Cylons. However, even though Roslin is aligned with some of the more problematic characterizations of femininity that are common tropes in SF, her position as president in a war narrative makes this simplistic connection somewhat problematic. So while, for example, she is aligned with the soft sciences and with the monstrous-feminine in SF, the war being waged between the Cylons and the humans positions Roslin in a site of hybridity that is necessary for the
military success of the fleet. The series finale tells the audience that it is hybridity, more than anything else, that will save Earth.

**Cyborgs, Cylons, and Sexy Sixes**

One of the key elements of *Battlestar Galactica* is the presence of cyborgs. The cyborg has long been an image associated with hybridity, in large part because it is, by definition, a hybrid. The cyborg, a figure that points to false binaries and can work to break down barriers thought to be natural, has a number of transformative possibilities. According to Haraway,

> the cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence. No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the *oikos*, the household. Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other. (151)

This definition of the cyborg is perfectly applicable to the Cylons of the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica*. One of the central reasons the Cylons are such a threat to the humans of *Battlestar Galactica* is because they are almost impossible to identify; they look exactly like humans. In the miniseries, the viewers are shown one major difference—when Baltar and Six are having sex, her spine glows a bright, mechanical red. Because of the way she is positioned, however, Baltar can’t see this marker of her difference, so the characters are never aware of this seemingly simple method of identifying Cylons.

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6 The Cylons of the original series, however, don’t fit this definition. The cyborg must be more than merely a robot—it must be a hybrid of human and machine, organic and inorganic matter. While the “new” Cylons fit this definition (as do, interestingly, their more machine-like early models and their spaceships, both of which contain organic matter, despite the fact that they look like machines rather than humans), the Cylons in the original series are not hybrids; they’re robots. This element of the text—much like the male roles reassigned to females—point to the ways in which hybridity is necessary for transgression and transformation.
Interestingly, the characteristic is not used again after the miniseries, nor is it mentioned by the narrative in any future episodes.

Eventually, Baltar does devise a method for identifying Cylons, a blood test that is never actually used to successfully identify who and who is not a Cylon, in large part because Baltar himself fears that he may be a Cylon and fears exposing himself. BSG, like many SF texts with cyborg characters, features the trope of the cyborg that doesn't know it's not truly human and, therefore, must grapple with the question of what it means to possess humanity. A major plotline of the miniseries is that Boomer, one of the pilots, is a sleeper agent who is only awakened after the Cylon attack on the colonies occurs. Prior to that, Boomer had thought she was a “normal” person—she had memories of her childhood and had no indication that she was actually part machine. When she is finally “awakened,” she shoots Adama, seriously injuring him, and spurring a fleet-wide fear of the presence of other Cylon agents hidden in the general population. Both the miniseries and the early episodes of the series position the Cylons as the bad guys—Six kills an innocent baby in the miniseries, the Cylons effectively destroy the majority of the human population in their initial attack, and then devote themselves to trying to destroy the fleet, and Boomer almost kills the heroic Adama. However, as the narrative progresses, the Cylons become more sympathetic in a variety of ways, pointing to the manner in which the cyborgs are at first feared as “unnatural” and malevolent, but are soon revealed to be more complex and, in fact, more human as their true nature is revealed.

As many critics have noted, the figure of the cyborg as progressive transgressor of binary gender structures that is predicted in “The Cyborg Manifesto” rarely, if ever,
actually appears in mainstream SF texts. Rather, as Despina Kakoudaki notes in her essay “Pinup and Cyborg: Exaggerated Gender and Artificial Intelligence,” “instead of creating a space outside gender, or at least having a complicated relation to sexuality, male cyborgs are represented as invincible (see Terminator films), whereas female cyborgs are mostly sexy and sexually exploited” (166). In other words, many SF film and television texts use cyborgs to reinforce gender norms. The female cyborg in particular is troubling because it often “fetishiz[es] …femininity as pure phallic object” (Brown 95). Nowhere in BSG does this image of cyborg-as-male-fantasy-object seem more obvious than in the character of the Cylon Number Six. Six, who appears in at least seven different incarnations throughout the series run, is played by Tricia Helfer (a former model) and is physically coded as a standard “sexy” femme fatale. Many of the Six models sport platinum blonde hair and dress in tight, skimpy clothing. The standard uniform of the most common Six onscreen—Head-Six, as she is often called, because she seems to exist solely in the mind of Baltar—is a tight, low-cut red cocktail dress. Her physical appearance, with its exaggerated femininity and sexuality seems, on the surface, the ideal embodiment of male desire. And, in many ways, she is. The key, of course, is that Head Six is, in fact, Baltar’s ideal sexual object and—as she appears only to him—looks the part. Her role as object is further codified through her lack of a name, something that is explained by Baltar when he says that he has “forgotten her name.” This Six doesn’t have a name because Baltar doesn’t remember it; so it seems

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7 In total, there are over ten separate versions of Model Six, each with her own name, characterization, and appearance. Her character is the only Cylon model (other than two versions of Model Number Eight, Sharon “Boomer” Valerii and “Athena”) who is afforded a separate identity for different versions of the same model.
as though her appearance would be a re-affirmation of both the threat of the hyper-
féminine *femme fatale* and the sexy cyborg as phallic object.

The Sixes, though they may seemingly occupy a non-leadership role in the Cylon
lineage, are arguably the most important leaders in the Cylon army. Additionally, they
actually have *more* subjectivity than the other models, particularly the males, the clones
of which all seem completely interchangeable. Six is the only model with different
names for different consciousnesses. There are multiple Dorals and Cavils (the two
most seen male Cylon models), but they all share the same names, appearances, and
personalities. The Sixes, on the other hand, have, at minimum, ten separate characters
and personalities among them. This can be tied to their position in the military narrative
of the film as they, unlike many of the other Cylon models, can be seen as generals or
spies (in other words, as important military figures), rather than interchangeable soldier
models. In fact, the Sixes are the most important Cylons during the war, as it is a Six
(Caprica Six) who sets in motion the war on the colonies (by seducing Baltar and
learning the secrets to the Colonial Defense System he has designed), a Six (Gina) who
detonates a nuclear weapon and alerts the Cylons to the Fleet’s position, a Six (Natalie)
who initiates a revolution against other Cylon models, and a Six (Caprica, again) that
saves Hera in the final battle with the Cylons.

Furthermore, what complicates the characterization of Head Six in particular is that
she, unlike many of the other seemingly subject-less vessels of video games and other
gynoids in much popular, mainstream SF, is using her seemingly objectified status as a
military tactic. Additionally, the position of Six transforms throughout the series. Though

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8 It should be noted that Head Six’s role as military agent is somewhat complicated by the series finale,
which positions her less as a soldier or military leader, and more as a “messenger of god.” Although if one
she is introduced in the miniseries as particularly threatening because of her sexuality—she straddles and kisses the human ambassador during the very first Cylon attack and then seduces Baltar in order to gain access to the Colonies’ defense system—Six does not remain a sexually threatening character throughout the entire series. Additionally, the Sixes are arguably the most complex of the Cylon characters, because each version of Six has a clearly defined subjectivity, which is rare among Cylons. Furthermore, as Susan A. George notes in her analysis of the Six character, because the Sixes and other Cylons have the ability to regenerate if killed, “the relative state of equilibrium and reestablishment of patriarchal order achieved [...] with the death or imprisonment of the disruptive female never occurs in Battlestar Galactica, offering a far more complicated and challenging image of the strong and sexual woman” (167).

This, of course, isn’t to say that the series doesn’t attempt to kill, disrupt, or imprison the femme fatale of Six. As noted, BSG is not above using threats of sexual violence against its female characters, and this is especially true with one of the Six models, Gina. Originally sent to sabotage Pegasus, a battlestar helmed by Admiral Helena Cain (Michelle Forbes), Gina first infiltrates the fleet by befriending Cain. The two soon begin a romantic relationship, and, when Gina is revealed as a Cylon agent, Cain orders her locked up and tells her officers to interrogate her, using any means necessary, particularly “degradation, fear, and shame.” While in the brig, Gina is repeatedly gang raped by the officers and, by the time viewers are introduced to the character, she is little more than a shell, starved and practically catatonic. According to

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reads the show’s war as a religious war (which is a fair reading, considering that one of the key conflicts between the humans and the Cylons is the Fleet’s polytheism versus the Cylon’s monotheism, then this version of the character is the central leader of the Cylon military.
Tasker, “the military woman who is raped by her fellow soldiers is portrayed as betrayed by a masculine culture in which she had sought inclusion” (Soldiers’ Stories 257). The case of Gina is further complicated by the fact that, though the sexual violence against her is performed by male characters, her rape is ordered and sanctioned by another woman, and is clearly marked as revenge not only for a professional betrayal but also for a romantic one.

The series clearly situates Gina’s treatment as horrific—though the soldiers aboard Pegasus argue that Gina is not a woman, but a machine, the narrative doesn’t support this. Baltar and Head Six are the first to encounter Gina, and though Baltar at first seems most interested in her medical condition (she appears catatonic despite an absence of apparent “head trauma”), Head Six angrily tells him to “stop being a scientist…and look at the abused woman lying in front of you.” Gina is treated not as a machine of war being interrogated for enemy secrets, but as a prisoner of war, abused and tortured for the pleasure of the human soldiers aboard Pegasus. This is further emphasized in a scene in the Galactica barracks where a group of Pegasus soldiers gleefully recount their repeated rapes of Gina, all of which were encouraged by both Cain and her head interrogator, Lieutenant Thorne. Though all of the Galactica soldiers look disgusted, it is only the female soldiers who speak up; Cally, after one of the men laughs as he boasts about the rape, yells “Do you mind!” and walks out of the room, followed by a number of other women. The soldier merely laughs in response, calls her “frisky” and then begins to tell the Galactica crew (Tyrol and Helo among them) that their own Cylon prisoner (Helo’s wife, Athena) is in for the same treatment, bragging that “your little robot girl’s in for quite a ride!” This scene is intercut with one showing Lt.
Thorne arriving at Athena’s cell. As he enters, he orders her held down and he begins to unbuckle his belt. Athena screams and struggles, but he advances on her until the men Helo and Tyrol run into the room and attack the soldiers, ultimately killing Thorne.

The fixation on sexual violence against the Cylons is similar to the threat of rape for military women in a number of narratives, particularly the idea that “rape or the threat of rape is used to put military women in their place, to remind them of the gendered character of the hierarchies within which they seek to assert themselves” (Tasker, *Soldiers’ Stories* 268). There is clearly a sense of putting the Cylon women in “their place” throughout this storyline. The human soldiers gain a sense of pleasure and superiority through the rapes of these women. Furthermore, it is also worth noting that these assaults, sanctioned by the female leader of the ship, can be read as the crew’s transfer of their own misogynistic displeasure at being led by a woman who isn’t an appropriate leader. Throughout the short *Pegasus* arc of *BSG’s* narrative, Cain is repeatedly depicted as a bad leader; she’s overly violent and lacks empathy for those in her fleet and, while any violence against her by her own crew would be treason, they are free to attack other powerful women in their midst. This is further supported by the fact that none of Cain’s crew except one is female. Cain is ultimately punished for the attacks on Gina, when the Cylon sneaks into Cain’s quarters and assassinates her, shooting her in the head at point-blank range. Gina continues her rape-revenge mission later in the show, when she detonates a nuclear weapon, killing not only herself but thousands of others in the Colonial fleet.

As demonstrated both by the threat of sexual violence perpetrated against them and by their physical appearance, all of the versions of the Six model are obviously
coded as female and highly sexualized. It’s clear that they have not achieved the Haraway-identified ideal of destroying gender binaries, nor have any of the other Cylon characters. And yet, they are still a step in the right direction. Though a seductive blonde femme fatale in a tight red dress doesn’t seem particularly transgressive or progressive, the various versions of Six—as well as the other Cylon characters—do work to disrupt the binary systems so highly valued by the human characters in the series.

**The Monstrous Mother Messiah: Ellen Tigh**

In the final season of the series, *BSG* reveals Ellen Tigh (Kate Vernon) to be the final Cylon, the creator of both the humanoid Cylon models and resurrection technology. By choosing Ellen for what was arguably the most significant role in the series, *BSG* gives power to the construction of the feminine at the hands of the feminine. Furthermore, because her character (especially in seasons one and two) seems to be such an easily dismissed trope—a power-hungry bitch character who uses her husband for her own nefarious purposes—her later position as benevolent creator is particularly transgressive. In the end, Ellen is not merely a *femme fatale* seductress or a singularly powerful creator; rather, she is both at once, a hybrid of human fallibility and superhuman power, both the monstrous archaic mother and the savior of all humanity.

When she is first introduced in season one, Ellen Tigh is depicted as an angry, bitter, adulterous woman, one who is at least partially responsible for her husband’s alcoholism. Ellen’s power—particularly her power over her husband—is highly sexualized. Her ambitions are feminized through her use of her sexuality; she later is shown to have saved her husband’s life by granting sexual favors to the Cavil-model Cylons on New Caprica. In the last season of the series, however, Ellen is revealed as
the final Cylon model, the one who created not only the other humanoid Cylons, but also resurrection technology that allows the Cylons to “download” their consciousness into new bodies in the event of their death.

Throughout the series, Ellen is arguably the least consistently written character, as she shifts from bitchy adulteress in season one to power-hungry political wife in season two to hapless victim and possible traitor in season three and, finally, to benign creator/mother in season four. Though television characters often suffer from a lack of consistent characterization due to the multiple writers working on these narratives, Ellen is a particularly inconsistent character. Part of this is most likely due to the writers’ not deciding that Ellen would be a Cylon until season three. Once she is revealed to be the final Cylon, it is also revealed that any inconsistencies in her character could be attributed to the fact that Ellen’s memories had been blocked by Cavil, who hates her for creating Cylons that have feelings and emotions, characteristics he considers to be markers of weakness. Though this inconsistency is rather problematic because it often makes Ellen’s character appear irrational and untrustworthy, her ultimate characterization does afford the series with one of its more significant portrayals of female power.

After her husband is taken prisoner by the Cylons on New Caprica in season two, Ellen begins trading sexual favors with Cavil for his release. Her relationship with the Cylon is discovered and members of the fleet tell Saul that she will have to be killed for her crimes. Despite the fact that Saul Tigh knows his wife conspired with the Cylons out

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9 In an interview with the Chicago Tribune, Ronald D. Moore revealed that “over the course of the third season, Ellen came and went in my thinking in terms of who the final five were. It probably wasn’t until we settled on the final four that I knew it was Ellen. When we got to the final four -- Tigh, Anders, Tory and Tyrol -- then it felt like, ‘and Ellen has to be the fifth.'"
of love for him, he also knows that she will have to die for her treason. In order to save her from what would assuredly be a much more violent death at the hands of the fleet, Saul poisons her himself so that she can die peacefully. Vernon has said that Ellen knew her husband was killing her, and drank the poison willingly, effectively killing herself, a sacrifice that seems in keeping with a number of sexually uncontrollable female characters in literature. But, just like the other Cylon femme fatales, Ellen is resurrected.

Her resurrection in season four marks a new vision of Ellen’s character, and much of season four’s “No Exit” is devoted to explaining Ellen’s role in the creation of the Cylons. Though all Cylons (and humans) are, in the mythology of the series, the creation of an all-powerful deity, the humanoid Cylons are the creation of Ellen Tigh and the other Final Five Cylons. Ellen, like many of the other Cylon models (particularly the female models Six and Eight), demonstrates a lack of coherent identity that is common among all of the characters, both human and Cylon. This lack of consistency further highlights the significance of hybridity for both all of the characters and for the narrative itself. Ellen’s character also provides an interesting look at the question of bodily control as it relates both to the construction of gender and to the figure of the cyborg.

In a number of SF texts, the figure of the robot or the cyborg is closely connected to the feminine. In particular, cyborg texts allow an examination of “the basic issue of gender construction, or to be more precise, [of] the extent to which the feminine has historically been crafted and controlled, defined by forces outside of the feminine” (Telotte 17). In BSG, the question of the creation of the Cylons seems to speak to this very question, particularly since the characters are so fixated on the concept of
reproduction among the cyborgs. The revelation of the final Cylon in season four promised the audience an answer to who “made” the Cylons, who constructed them, and in what image. The revelation of Ellen Tigh as the creator of the cyborgs put the control of the feminine back into the hands of the feminine, at least in part. It’s also telling that one of the main reasons that Cavil – who is the most outspoken Cylon in the charge to eradicate the humans – rejects Ellen’s desire for a more humanoid version of the cyborgs because of their “feminine” qualities, particularly emotion, which he feels weakens them. The narrative, however, is clear in its rejection of Cavil’s charges; he and the other Cylons who do not want to come to peace with the humans are outdated and on a clear path to destruction. It’s telling that most of these particular Cylons are male and that their attempts to force binary divisions and patriarchy on both the other Cylons and the fleet result in their deaths.

Much has been written about the archaic mother and primal scene in SF, with critics pointing to the recurring image of the monstrous mother, an image that ranges from the phallic-shaped, razor-tooth monster of Alien to the gaping black hole of space in a variety of SF texts. In all of these narratives, one thing remains constant: the abject, archaic mother must be defeated and repressed by the end of the story. In Alien, the abject monster is defeated by Ripley, who is then reincorporated into the symbolic order through both her rescuing of the cat and the film’s emphasis on her body in the final scene. According to Creed, this “final sequence works, not only to dispose of the alien, but also to repress the nightmare image of the monstrous-feminine within the text’s patriarchal discourses” (“Alien and the Monstrous Feminine” 140). Though Alien is the most obvious example of this trope, the female in SF often highlights “the male desire to
break free from biological dependence on the female as Mother and Other, and to mark the male self as separate and autonomous” (Sobchack 108). This desire to break free is usually played out in some kind of Oedipal fantasy, one that transforms the mother from the subject of her own narrative to merely an object in the hero’s quest (Creed, “Alien and the Monstrous Feminine” 134). In BSG, the monstrous-feminine trope can be applied to all of the female Cylons, but especially to Ellen, who is the ultimate maternal figure not only to the humanoid models but to the future of humanity as well. The “original” Ellen Tigh, the one of Earth from 2,000 years before the series began, is both the original Jehovah and a messiah for the Cylons. Her resurrection will allow them to continue to use resurrection technology, thereby saving a race that would have otherwise most assuredly been destroyed.

In the first season, Ellen is shown to be human, ambitious, childish, and highly sexualized. She is a monstrous woman, cruelly taunting her husband and flouting the vows of their marriage. Her character begins to change shortly before her death, when she becomes the dutiful wife, sacrificing her body and her life to save her husband. She is resurrected in season four’s “No Exit,” the opening scene of which depicts her “rebirth” into a tub filled with a glowing, gelatinous substance. After emerging naked from the tub, Ellen is brought to a room and held captive by Cavil. Their conversations reveal that Ellen, who not only created the resurrection technology but also designed the humanoid Cylons, made the first models (the Cavils) in the image of her own father. The episode centers on their acting out of a complex oedipal drama, one in which not only has Ellen resurrected her own dead father in Cavil but also Cavil now is attempting
Cavil also tries to reject the “femininized” parts of himself by rejecting his emotions and arguing that the Centurion models—who are caricatures of hyper-masculinity (physically impenetrable, emotionless, and fearless)—are the superior beings. The storyline deals not only with the murderous impulses of the Oedipal and Electra dramas but also with the incest taboo. After all, it was Cavil with whom Ellen traded sexual favors for her husband’s life in season two, and Cavil, in addition to his rage at being forced to experience humanity, hates Ellen because he believes she loved another Cylon model more than she loved him. They are enacting the symbolic fantasy of rejection and possession, with Cavil representing the “conquering, potent, masculine and autonomous technology which values production over reproduction” (Sobchack 108) and Ellen signifying “the mother as origin of all life” (Creed, “Alien and the Monstrous Feminine” 129). Cavil’s behavior in this episode clearly fits with the tradition of attempting to destroy the archaic mother in SF, though his attempts at “boxing” his mother/daughter are unsuccessful, and it is he who perishes in the final battle, not Ellen. In BSG it is the woman—daughter and mother—who has the power to destroy and resurrect.

BSG, more than any other recent SF television series, is concerned with the ever-changing natures of both humanity and technology as well as the ways in which these two concepts interact. All significant female characters on the show are marked as hybrids in some way—either because they are Cylons (Six, D’Anna, Boomer),

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10 Torsten Caeners argues for the validity of applying “psychoanalytic concepts to the Cylons and their behavioral patterns” based on their identification with humans and their “development from machines into beings almost indistinguishable from humans” (370). Though Caernes’s argument works to understand the Cylons’ Oedipal drama in connection with its ambivalent attitude towards humans, the reveal of Ellen Tigh as the final Cylon (which occurred after the publication of Caernes’s article) allows for a similar psychoanalytic drama to be revealed in Cylon-Cylon relationships as well.
mystical hybrids (Starbuck, Roslin), or literal human-Cylon hybrids (Hera). The progression of the narrative pushes both the characters and the viewers to embrace hybridity, “challeng[ing] the boundaries of what it means to be human” (Cowan 228). The series also ends with the implication that all humans are descendents of Cylon-human couplings, and this type of hybridity is shown to be at once threatening and beneficial. Though many fans and critics resisted the implications of the final scenes of the series finale, the scenes do point to a triumph of hybridity. The future of Earth and humanity, the series claims, relies on hybridity. Binary divisions will result in nothing less than the destruction of life as we, the audience, knows it. What complicates this seemingly idyllic, progressive look at binary systems is the fact that the series ends with two of the most powerful female characters—Starbuck and Roslin—dead, and a return to a pre-industrial society. This society, every viewer knows, will be one defined by traditional gender roles and, once the humans return to earth, any hope of gender egalitarianism is gone. The final shot of the series is of Head Six and Head Baltar strolling together through a twenty-first century city, both of them dressed in gender-appropriate clothing (a tight red dress for Six and a suit for Baltar) and looking like a picture of heterosexual normalcy.

Despite this, and despite the fact that the show does occasionally fall into the trap of stereotyping its female characters (Six as femme fatale, Starbuck as emotionally closed-off masculine female, etc.), it also works to fully develop these characters so that they’re not simply ciphers. It may be facile to have the male characters coded as martial leaders (Adama, Tigh) and the female characters as nurturing leaders (Roslin), but these types are much more complex than they may appear on the surface. Starbuck is
the most traditional “action heroine” in the text, and she is often coded, like many action heroines, as “insane, without a place in American society” (Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies* 27). And yet the narrative works to subvert this trope, as Starbuck’s “insanity” is actually not insanity but is, in fact, the saving grace of the surviving members of the Twelve Colonies. Though she spends most of the show’s fourth season seemingly powerless (due to her insanity), the narrative unfolds in such a way that this insanity is transformed from (feminine) hysteria into power; arguably, the power itself remains feminized as it remains more or less in the realm of the mystical. Starbuck’s resurrection is never fully explained, though the comparison of her to Aurora, the Goddess of the Dawn, marks her as both mystical and feminine. Furthermore, the answer to the fleet’s seemingly unavoidable deaths lies in Starbuck’s ability to remember a song (“All Along the Watchtower”), and it is this artistic (read: “feminine”) knowledge—rather than militaristic (“masculine”) power—that will eventually save humanity.

All of the women in the series are positive figures, not just because of their hybridity of masculine and feminine power, but also in the ways in which they are neither hyper-sexualized nor desexualized. Even Six—the most overtly sexualized character on the show—is not resigned to object-only status. The “power” of sexuality is in no way new territory, but Head Six reaches almost caricature status, especially since her “look” is unchanging (thanks to her role as an image in Baltar’s mind). With the exception of Adama, women occupy the most significant leadership roles on the show. The President of the Colonies, the leader of the Cylons, the military’s best soldier, and the creator of the Cylons are all women; even the child-savior figure is female. Though there are a number of problematic depictions of women and femininity, *BSG* does
attempt (and often succeeds) at showing military women who are more than simply interlopers in the "male" world of war.

In the end, what is most useful about Battlestar Galactica is that it highlights the importance of hybridity above all else. Characters who are either too feminine (Cally, Baltar) or too masculine (Tigh, Starbuck) tend to create problems because they are unwilling to transgress boundaries. Though the finale was reviled by many fans, it does point to the series’ overall message and one that is arguably the most useful element of hybrid-genre SF: all of humanity is hybridized, and the desire for strict binary divisions (whether they be human/Cylon, or male/female) is nothing more than an illusion. 

*Battlestar Galactica* is about the problems of binary systems, and the ways in which these systems must be destroyed in order for the human race to survive.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF HYBRIDITY

The necessity of the hybridization of science fiction with masculine genres in order to create the most progressive spaces for gender transgression lies in its connection to the cyborg. It is this figure, with its close ties both to SF and to anti-essentialist gender theory, that provides a space and a model for the subversion of white patriarchal dominance. SF has, since its inception, dealt in marginalization, in the Other. Though early texts often spoke to the defeat of this Other by the white male hero, the genre did allow for the introduction of figures who, while they were not the subjects of the texts, provided audiences with sites of transgression. These robots, aliens, cyborgs, and 50-foot women offered a spectacle that went beyond mainstream cinema’s passive, objectified woman. And while many times these figures were sites of anxiety—and were punished as such by the resolution of the narratives—the evolution of the genre also saw the evolution of the Other into something more than a monster to be defeated at the hands of a man.

It is no surprise, then, that the series that most closely reflect the goals of anti-essentialist theory are the two series that are most about the cyborg: Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles and Battlestar Galactica. While the cyborgs of these texts are not precisely what Haraway imaged for the figure, they do represent progress in creating figures of liminality in mainstream television. It is also not a coincidence that these texts represent an evolution of earlier texts; unlike both The X-Files and Firefly, T:TSCC and BSG are based on series that originated in the late 70s and early 80s. The original texts are clearly identified as masculine, about men and for men; or, at least, that’s what they seem to be. What these series show, however, is that these worlds are
not reserved for men, but are—if not welcoming—then at least open to women. The presence of the cyborg in these texts underscores this openness and possibility for transgression. The cyborg is always performing, always attempting to understand and enact that which makes us human and, in so doing, reveals the performance we are all enacting, all of the time.

Laura Mulvey’s theories of identification offer an important way of thinking about gender on screen, particularly as it relates to texts that rely on generic tropes. Westerns, police procedurals, action-adventure, and combat narratives do tend to work to create viewer identification with a white, male protagonist, positioning female characters in roles that reaffirm their femininity. While this configuration does seem to uphold binary systems of gender, a number of critics (including Mulvey herself\(^1\)) have noted the ways in which this privileges the experiences of white male audiences. The presence of the female spectator complicates Mulvey’s theory, though many theories work within the same psychoanalytic framework to position female viewers as either narcissistic or masochistic bearers of the gaze. These theories, however, fail to account for the complex make-up of audiences and how marginalized viewers (many of whom are even further disempowered by the texts than are white heterosexual women) work through questions of pleasure and identification.

Television, because of its possibilities of multiple sites for viewer identification, encourages polysemy, due to the shifting perspective of the narrative and to the fact that the medium itself forces a disruption of viewer identification with the camera. Unlike

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\(^1\) In “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ Inspired by *Duel in the Sun,*” Mulvey addresses the female spectator through an examination of central female characters in the melodrama—a particularly “feminine” genre.
mainstream cinema that affords the camera a position of omniscient power created through framing and narrative coherence, television is constantly broken into fifteen-minute segments, shifting the viewer in and out of the narrative. Fiske has shown how the majority of television audiences consist of active viewers as well as how the shows themselves operate as open texts, inviting a number of possible interpretations. This alone does not create transgressive spaces for female characters and audiences, of course, but the hybridity of SF with other masculine genres on television does. Psychoanalytic theories of identification rely not only on the anxieties of the viewer but also on the construction of the texts. Texts that disrupt the “look” of mainstream cinema also disrupt the binary structures of looking, which is a necessary step in progressive depictions of gender. The disruption of diegetic coherence in television series works to reveal the entire system (narrative, camera, characters) to be a performance.

Furthermore, a number of these texts deal in performativity, in terms of both generic tropes (How does one become a cowboy? Dress like one!) and character construction. This is further compounded by the presence of the cyborg in all these texts; the figure of the cyborg not only disrupts naturalized binary systems but explicitly comments on the performativity of “being human.” These characters—River, Cameron, and the Cylons—are all required to learn how to “act” like people; in this way, the texts comment upon the very notion of humanity, questioning the division that lies at the heart of the binary systems of the patriarchal structure. The cyborg characters who struggle to appear human, as well as characters who are faced with the realization that they may not know whether or not they are human, all participate in this questioning of the nature of humanity. Though in some ways, this may position these cyborgs (who are often
depicted as female) as monstrous, it also forces viewers to question what it means to “be” human. What these characters show us is that acting human and being human are more or less interchangeable concepts. *BSG* is particularly effective in this regard, as the series ends with the suggestion that lines between what is human and what is not are fairly arbitrary, and that humanity as we know it is based on notions of hybridization.

The cyborg, therefore, is an important figure for transgressing notions of humanity and gender, but so too is the medium of television in presenting these figures. With the exception of *BSG*, the series examined in this project were all continued in films. *The X-Files: I Want to Believe* (2008) positions Mulder and Scully outside of the patriarchal structure of the FBI and undermines much of the series’ transgressive depictions of gender. The two are living together, engaged in a romantic relationship, and a great deal of the conflict between them is based on Scully’s reluctance to disrupt their life of domesticity. The film, like a great many SF and horror texts, also focuses on anxieties about reproduction and non-normative sexuality. The polysemy offered in the television series is very much reduced in the film; Mulder is the clear protagonist, and it is his actions and investigative gaze that drive the narrative. A similar issue arises in *Serenity* (2005), the film continuation of *Firefly*, with Mal positioned as the clear screen surrogate and River’s role as a monstrous female even more pronounced. In 2009’s *Terminator Salvation*, neither Sarah Connor nor Cameron are present. The few female characters in the film are relegated to supporting roles; there’s John Connor’s pregnant wife, Kate, who must be kept out of the action and protected because of her pregnancy, and another woman who is rescued by a Terminator from a sexual assault. *Terminator*
Salvation does, like the other Terminator texts, deal with questions of humanity and identity, but the film all but erases active women from the narrative.

One possible explanation for the erasure of transgressive (and progressive) female characters in these film continuations is that the structure of mainstream cinema is not as open to polysemy as is television. All of the films have a central white male protagonist who is the most likely site for viewer identification, while the other characters have little active role in the narrative. This is not to say that it's impossible for viewers to identify with characters other than Mulder, Mal, or John Connor, but it is markedly more difficult than in the television series that often allowed female characters to occupy the central, active role in the narratives. What these films show is that the hybridization of masculine genres with SF is not enough to create progressive depictions of gender, but rather this must be combined with narrative and visual structures that allow for polysemy. For this reason, television is a particularly useful medium, as its very nature creates texts that encourage active viewing and the possibility for multiple sites of viewer identification.

The current line-up of SF hybrids is rather anemic, with only two SF series currently being aired on a major network. Both the FOX network’s Fringe (2008-present) and Alcatraz (2012) are shows that continue the tradition of The X-Files, hybridizing the detective series with SF. In both series, the male-female partnership consists of a young female law enforcement agent who is paired with a male civilian partner. There is also SyFy’s Warehouse 13 (2009-present), which bills itself as “part The X-Files, part Raiders of the Lost Ark and part Moonlighting,” and is the story of a male/female FBI

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team who has been assigned to investigate the paranormal and supernatural. All three series hybridize the SF storyline with what is arguably the least inherently masculine of the genres described in this project, the police procedural. As was the case with *The X-Files,* the series align the female character with the investigative gaze and with the patriarchal structures of law enforcement, though they also temper this transgressive characterization through the presence of a male partner.

The majority of SF/fantasy series currently being shown fall under the rubric of fantasy—vampires, zombies, ghosts, and fairy tale monsters abound in the current television line-up. And while a number of these series do feature central female characters they, like many feminine genres, firmly attach these women to romantic storylines and traditional gender roles. Series like The CW’s *Vampire Diaries* (2009-present) and SyFy’s *Being Human* (2010-present) are essentially supernatural teen soap operas, where vampirism and incorporeality are used as impediments to romantic happiness more than anything else. What is problematic about the lack of masculine SF hybrids in that feminine storylines become “women’s stories,” which in turn become dismissed by the narrative in favor of the masculine action of men. In order for television to truly create progressive roles for women, it must first resist the essentialism that says that women want romance and domesticity while men want action and freedom. One of the most successful strategies for the conservative medium of television is to turn away from the idea that there are such things as “women’s stories,” while not turning away

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3 The most obvious offender here is AMC’s *The Walking Dead,* which is set in a post-apocalyptic world overrun by zombies, but keeps women firmly in the kitchen. In the finale of the second season, the one female character who consistently attempted to fight alongside the men (and who vocally protested being told that she needed to help with laundry and cooking in order to be “doing something”) was left behind after a zombie attack. The other main female character has spent the entire series hand-wrangling over a love triangle and the resulting pregnancy.
from women. The hybridity of masculine genres with SF creates spaces for female characters that are both active and transgressive. Without this hybridity, female characters are often relegated to storylines that disempower them, reifying notions of gender essentialism.

Furthermore, as the film versions of the SF genre hybrids demonstrate, genre hybridity alone is not enough. In order to best create stories that deconstruct essentialism and binary notions of gender, the performativity not only of the characters but also of the texts must be revealed. Both Haraway’s and Butler’s theories of gender require the exposure of the performance of gender, whether through cyborg figures or drag. Generic tropes and narratives require particular types of performance and masquerade, and the hybridization of these genres with SF helps to reveal the performance of character types; the cowboy, the soldier, the action hero, and the detective aren’t natural embodiments of masculinity, but are instead studied performances that are as reliant on costume as they are on behavior. SF works to reveal the myth of these tropes by showing viewers that such figures are not restricted by place and time. Television helps to further expose this charade through repeated disruptions of diegetic coherence, opening up polysemic texts for active viewer engagement. And though these texts aren’t necessarily cyborgs, they are, like the cyborg, hybrids that work to expose and subvert categories based on notions of unity, coherence, and absolute truth.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lacy Hodges grew up in Fort Myers and Orlando before moving to Gainesville in 1999 to study at the University of Florida. After receiving her B.A. in English 2003, she decided to continue her graduate studies at UF, where she earned her Masters of Arts in 2005. She has published work on genre and *The X-Files* and is currently teaching English at East Georgia State College in Statesboro, Georgia.