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Miss Cylon: Empire and Adoption in *Battlestar Galactica*

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Picture this: a white man, presumably American, in military uniform, presumably a soldier, is stranded behind enemy lines. He is aided by an Asian woman whose job, unbeknownst to him, is to seduce him and make him fall in love with her. Once they have consummated their affair, however, it is the Asian woman who falls in love with the white soldier and betrays her own people. Like Miss Saigon and Madame Butterfly before her, the Asian woman discovers that she is pregnant; she will do anything to protect her child. Wait, there's more. This old orientalist tale is given a new treatment. The white man is a lieutenant from the planet Caprica. And the Asian woman is not human; her spine glows bright red when she has sex. She is a cyborg, an exact replica of the same model that was a friend, crush, and fellow officer of the male soldier before her kind, the Cylons, attempted to destroy all of humanity. Not so familiar? This is one of the many storylines in the breakout television hit *Battlestar Galactica* (produced by Ronald D. Moore and David Eick), a storyline of importance as a colonialist reiteration within the contemporary moment.

The *Battlestar Galactica* series (*BSG*) has become the highest-rated program ever to air on the Sci Fi Channel, with more than 2.8 million viewers during its first season (Drumming). Not just popular with audiences, the show drew comments from sources as diverse as Stephen King and indie director Kevin Smith, and official accolades from the American Film Institute and *TIME Magazine*'s James Poniewozik, who named *BSG* *TIME*'s best television show of 2005. Critics and fans agree that *Battlestar*'s hard-hitting socio political issues (war, torture, refugees, suicide bombing, reproductive rights, religion and the state, etc.), space-battle action sequences, and PG-13 dalliances add up to a winning combination. A sudden, unexpected attack on humanity holds a particular resonance for a post-9/11 American viewing audience. *Rolling Stone* writer Gavin Edwards calls the show "TV's most vivid depiction of the post-9/11 world and what happens to a society at war." A growing body of academic scholarship has also materialized, most notably the recent anthology *Cylons in America: Critical Studies in Battlestar Galactica* (edited by Tiffany Potter and C. W. Marshall). While this is an undeniably important collection, it lacks an

analysis of the character Sharon (aka “Boomer”) as an Asian American figure. The essay by Robert W. Moore on Sharon does not examine issues of race, while the piece by Christopher Deis that formulates Cylons as racial others does not include Boomer.

I reflect on *BSG*’s popularity generally and the character of Boomer specifically, putting Asian American studies and science fiction discourses into conversation. I look most closely at the first two seasons of *BSG*, when Sharon and Boomer are interchangeable names for the Cylon Number Eight. I ask how the globalized, or post-Fordist, moment is reflected and addressed in the logics of *BSG* and how the character Boomer, read as an Asian American female, employs old tropes in new ways.¹ As science fiction texts shift from modern to postmodern, from utopian to dystopian, and from liberal to neoliberal, how are the constructions of “Asian” and “female” altered and reified? How are previous imperialist narratives of romancing the Asian female subject reconfigured in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s formulation of an emergent Empire, global and de-territorialized? The character of Boomer redeploys the *Madame Butterfly*/*Miss Saigon* narrative that renders visible the colonialist connection between the Vietnam War and the War on Terror. As a new articulation of the racialized and colonized female subject, Boomer shifts the figure of the cyborg from a white signifier of the other to an Asian American representation of the other. Specifically, Boomer occupies both the metaphoric and literal positions of miscegenation, most notably in the simultaneous embodiment of adoptee and birth mother.

Miss Saigon Redeployed

The breathtaking three-hour mini-series that launched the 2003 *Battlestar Galactica* television program included a surprise ending. First, a quick synopsis for those who missed it: the Cylons were robotic droids created by humankind to make life easier on the Twelve Colonies; the Cylons rose up against humans and after a long war, an armistice was declared; the Cylons left for another world and no one has seen them for forty years; on the day of the ship *Battlestar Galactica*’s decommissioning, the Cylons launch an all-out attack, destroying much of the human worlds with nuclear detonations; the dated-yet-sturdy *Battlestar Galactica* now leads the fleet of 50,000 human survivors. As one of the new twists of the “re-imagined” show loosely based on the 1970s science fiction series of the same name, the robotic version of the Cylons is joined by twelve humanoid models, with multiple copies of each one of the twelve. These human-appearing variants are a key component of the Cylons’ surprise attack, with the attending fear that “anyone could be a Cylon” preoccupying

the human survivors. At the close of the mini-series, the human fleet has jumped out of Cylon clutches, in search of the mythical thirteenth colony, Earth. Several of the humanoid Cylons bemoan this outcome and stress the need to give chase. The camera pans to Lieutenant Sharon Valerii, known by her call sign “Boomer,” played by Korean Canadian actress Grace Park. Smiling and confident, she says, “Don’t worry, we’ll find them” (1.M.02).² The version of Sharon aboard *Galactica* is unaware of her Cylon identity, and her impending realization that she is a sleeper agent is a major subplot in the transition from mini-series to regular television program. While much is made of the show’s “colorblind” casting of Park in the role of Boomer, her embodiment of the Asian American female and the character’s configurations as both model minority and yellow peril fuel dramatic tension in the show.³

The anxieties the series produces through the multivalent construction of Boomer are situated within the current moment of globalization, which may be characterized as “post-Fordist” or a period of “flexible accumulation.” In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey names flexibility as the marker of late capitalism, in a shift from the Fordist economic model of centralized mass production and workers as consumers to an era of flexible accumulation where greatly enhanced global financial systems benefit from the increased mobility of labor markets, production, and consumption. The world of the *BSG* series reflects a particular aspect of this flexible accumulation that Hardt and Negri formulate as Empire: “Along with the global market and global circuits of production has emerged a global order, a new logic and structure of rule” (xi). Hardt and Negri clearly differentiate the new disciplining function of this nascent Empire from the old system of imperialism, which relied on territorial expansion and the geographic boundaries of the nation-state. *BSG* follows this same set of logics: the territories of the home planets have been destroyed, the battlestars’ abilities to make FTL (faster than light) jumps connote a borderless crossing, and the disciplining of human, i.e. national, subjects occurs without geographic parameters. As Hardt and Negri assert, “Perhaps the fundamental characteristic of imperial sovereignty is that *its space is always open*” (167). Erika Johnson-Lewis connects this open space with *BSG*, asserting: “If the ‘War on Terror’ asks us to fight an imagined catastrophic future, *BSG* asks us to think about the ramifications this fight has on the present by de-territorializing civilization, leaving it to float in space” (28). Within *BSG*’s articulation of Empire, then, how do we account for the recuperated imperial romance of the Asian American female?

To answer this question, I take my cue from scholars who analyze the construction of Asian American representations within mainstream US discourses as implicated in the genealogies of Orientalism, racism, sexism,

and colonialism. As Robert G. Lee argues, “Six images—the pollutant, the coolie, the deviant, the yellow peril, the model minority, and the gook—portray the Oriental as an alien body and a threat to the American national family” (8). Lee’s research on these six images foregrounds the historic junctures at which each one appears. For example, by the early 1900s, the “yellow peril” image had come to dominate as national anxieties surrounding US colonialism articulated immigration as a threat to nation, race, and family. At the same time, these images are not rigidly fixed to certain epochs; they reemerge and overlap, as when the “yellow peril” image reasserts itself in times of US wars and interventions in Asia, most notably World War II.

Boomer is constructed through these various tropes. Lee’s images are emphasized in the numerous identical versions of Boomer/Sharon Valerii. The deployment of many copies of Boomer lends itself particularly well to notions of fixed and flexible representations. Boomer is fixed as the other, both the non-human Cylon, inauthentic and dangerous, and the Asian American. At the same time, her embodiment of these different images is fluid and changing.

The Boomer we first meet on *Galactica* does not know she is a Cylon. She is in a relationship with Chief Petty Officer Galen “Chief” Tyrol. Their relationship is illicit as she is his superior officer, thus bordering on what Lee calls “deviant.” Her deviancy becomes more blatant once the audience realizes she is a Cylon meeting the Chief for a secret rendezvous. Suffering from blackouts, Boomer unknowingly plants explosive devices on the ship. This can be seen as a metaphoric form of “pollutant,” contaminating the body of the fleet. Furthermore, as a sleeper agent, *Galactica* Boomer is the epitome of the “yellow peril.”

In contrast, the Boomer we meet on *Caprica*, which the Cylons’ attack has rendered post-apocalyptic, rescues her crewmate Karl “Helo” Agathon. Stuck on the planet soon after the Cylon attack, Helo is unaware that Cylons now take on a new appearance, and has no idea that *Caprica* Boomer is something other than human.⁴ This Boomer’s mission is straightforward: she is to exploit Helo’s crush on her to make him fall in love with her and have sex, thereby creating a human-Cylon hybrid baby. All three of the tropes apparent with *Galactica* Boomer are also present here: pollutant, deviant, and yellow peril.

Viewing the different tropes enabled by Boomer’s multiple and regenerative iterations underscores their mutually constitutive nature. *Galactica* Boomer is the “model minority” (as the yet unaware Cylon), while *Caprica* Boomer is willfully acting out the deceptive “yellow peril” role. Conversely, *Galactica* Boomer’s actions as the sleeper agent endanger the lives of humans onboard *Galactica*, while *Caprica* Boomer’s newfound

feelings of love compel her to rescue Helo from Cylon clutches. The point should be underscored, however, that these tropes are still disciplined: the deviance of both Boomers' contrasting images remains within the parameters of heterosexual, romantic love with a white man.

Gina Marchetti further complicates Lee's multiple images by looking at discourses of yellow peril in Hollywood portrayals of interracial romances. Marchetti posits that depictions of white male-Asian woman pairings represent the West's hegemony over an Asian other, whereby "romance and sexuality provide the metaphoric justification for this domination. However, any act of domination brings with it opposition, guilt, repression, and resistance, which also must be incorporated into these myths and silenced, rationalized, domesticated, or otherwise eliminated" (6). In the course of Caprica Boomer's successful mission to have a child with Helo, she helps him escape Caprica to rejoin the ship *Galactica*. In this way, the Caprica Boomer-Helo relationship rearticulates the *Madame Butterfly* and *Miss Saigon* narratives of the white imperialist fantasy/tragedy of white-Asian interracial love.⁵ Caprica Boomer's love for Helo demands her alliance to humans over Cylons, a cultural/ethnic renunciation that Susan Koshy argues started with *Madame Butterfly*; Koshy postulates further that this "structural feature of the story of white-Asian miscegenation became an integral element of the white man-Asian woman romance in many of its later forms" (49).

Of the *Madame Butterfly* rearticulations, the Boomers most closely resemble a *Miss Saigon* narrative, invoking the hit musical that tells the story of the Vietnam-era doomed romance between American GI Chris and Vietnamese prostitute Kim. Billed as the "classic love story of our time," *Miss Saigon* enjoyed a highly successful run on Broadway spanning a decade, with a final performance in 2001. Karen Shimakawa's study of *Miss Saigon* places the musical's formation within the genealogy of *Madame Butterfly*:

. . . the self-sacrifice of an Asian woman for the love of a white (Western) man has become an archetypal template, against which Asian women's sexuality is always measured in terms of self-denial/self-destruction (and often internalized racism). Thus it is entirely predictable—perhaps unavoidable—that, in wanting to tell *any* love story involving an Asian woman and a white man, Boublil and Schönberg (sic) were reminded of Puccini's heroine, ninety years and nationalities/national histories notwithstanding (26).

Boomer and Helo's relationship is as overdetermined as the overarching romance of *Butterfly*'s Cio-Cio San and Pinkerton, and *Saigon*'s Kim and Chris.

Celine Parreñas Shimizu asserts that "*Miss Saigon* reenacts on stage

the warring encounter between Vietnam and the United States through a narrative of interracial bodies enmeshed in sexual relations" (32). The twinned Boomers continue that encounter—the backdrop for their relationship is a war in which they are sleeping with the enemy. Similar to the Vietnamese prostitute in *Miss Saigon*, both of the Boomers are in a sense sex workers for the Cylons. Caprica Boomer's explicit mission is to seduce and have sex with Helo, while Galactica Boomer gains protection from her relationship with Chief, who repeatedly covers for her after her memory blackouts. The imbrication of sex and war is highlighted in the Season One episode "Litmus"; Boomer and Chief's romantic tryst in a hidden area of *Galactica* causes a hatch door to be left open and a Cylon suicide bomber enters the ship (1.06).

Not simply a reprisal of the interracial white-Asian romance, however, *Miss Saigon* recuperates the US's loss in the Vietnam War through Chris's love and ultimate rejection of Kim, and through Kim's suicide, committed so that their son can live out an ideal future with his Western father. Tellingly, the song preceding Kim's suicide is "The American Dream," sung by her Eurasian pimp the Engineer. Lyrics such as "What's that I smell in the air? . . . Girls can buy tits by the pair," and "The American Dream / Spend and have money to spare," celebrate the US's final victory over Vietnam vis-à-vis late capitalist globalization (Boublil and Schönberg). Thus, *Miss Saigon* reassures the past (Vietnam-era anxieties) with the present (flexible accumulation's ascendancy).⁶

How might we view Boomer's embodiment as a Miss Saigon figure in relation to the colonial past, present recuperation, and competing future visions? Lee reminds us that the image of the "gook" emerged during and after the Vietnam War, enabling the "dystopian narratives of post-Fordist urban America, [where] the Asian American is both identified with the enemy that defeated the United States in Vietnam and figured as the agent of the current collapse of the American empire" (190). At the same time, the Miss Saigon/Miss Cylon trope is in excess of Lee's configuration, pointing to the *gendered* racialization of Boomer that surpasses Lee's taxonomy, including that of the "gook." The conjuring of the *Miss Saigon* narrative in Boomer's relationships invokes the menacing revenge of the colonial masses that must be disciplined. This threat exceeds the configuration of the gook—in the alternate and co-constitutive expression of the alluring and deviant sexuality of the demure lotus blossom and the diabolical dragon lady. Tellingly, Hardt and Negri posit that, "From the perspective of the United States . . . the Vietnam War might be seen as the final moment of the imperialist tendency" before the US participation in the new system of Empire (178). As Walter Benjamin reminds us, articulating the past means seizing "hold of memory as it flashes up at a moment

of danger” (255). The trope of white-Asian interracial romance allows Empire to recognize its imperial antecedent; the anxieties such an image produces reinscribe the Vietnam War upon the War on Terror.

The Post-9/11 Oriental

Connecting the depictions of Boomer to past texts of hypersexual colonial narratives of the Asian female is productive, but *Battlestar Galactica* is not simply a conversation between past and present. Genre is important and *BSG* is constructed in future-time. While the colonies of Kobol exist in a separate space-time continuum (and may therefore exist in Earth’s present or past), the conceptual framework, complete with spaceships and human-created non-humans, places the *BSG* story in a futuristic realm with speculative attention to the racialized subject. Greg Grewell links “earthly” American and European colonialist literatures to the speculative genre, arguing that the “science fiction industry, with its tendency to (dis)place other-ness to a (de)familiarized universe out there, continues to promulgate through its use of the all-too-familiar colonial narrative, a narrative that both sanctions and justifies violence against ‘others,’ regardless of their planet of origin” (37).

To examine this further, I draw on studies of televised science fiction, in particular scholarship analyzing the television series *Star Trek*. Works such as Daniel Leonard Bernardi’s *Star Trek and History: Race-ing Toward a White Future* and the anthology *Enterprise Zones: Critical Positions on Star Trek* (ed. Taylor Harrison et al) situate *BSG* within a post-World War II genre of televised science fiction with liberal humanist underpinnings. With *Star Trek* as the first and most emblematic of this genre, the presentation of a racially integrated future expressed by the diversity of the crew denotes liberalism’s promise of equality (or at least tolerance) through capitalism. Meanwhile, Cold War (and later, de-industrialization) anxieties are projected onto the fears and triumphs of the Federation in their interstellar interactions with alien “races.” The human environs is imagined as a post-oppression and de-racialized future; simultaneously the series uses racist constructions to depict the non-human other. Hence, Sulu is an integrated Asian American member of the Federation while the non-human Vulcans embody Asian stereotypes of being rational and emotionless; likewise, Chekov is an affable Russian crew member while the Romulans represent the calculating, totalitarian race that wishes to destroy the Federation; and Uhura represents the African nationalist disciplined to a pink-collar occupation, while the Klingons embody the oversexed and warlike savage.⁷ As Bernardi explains:

[B]ecause cinematic Trek is a representation of our future, and because it so earnestly sticks to a coherent and intelligible diegesis, it is particularly adept at naturalizing the ideology in its historicity, and thus perpetuating myth. This myth is ultimately about a humanocentric universe that casts aliens as dark and treacherous Others whom our white heroes must battle, civilize, and overcome in the name of manifest destiny, divine evolution: white future-time. (104)

Deis emphasizes this formation within *BSG*, stating, “although racial difference and questions of the racialized Other are not overt categories of meaningful social difference between and among human characters, *BSG* is driven forward by a conception of racial difference where the Cylons are a carefully constructed Other” (157).

The figure of Boomer occupies the position of team player in the *Galactica*’s liberal humanist crew at the same time that her identity as a Cylon agent represents the alien other. The fact that *Galactica* Boomer is initially unaware of her Cylon identity underscores the instability of both her character and liberalism, illustrating liberal pluralism’s fracturing in the globalized moment. Ultimately, the Miss Saigon figure invoked by the plural Boomers is post-liberal, implying yet departing from the liberal premise of *Star Trek*’s final frontier. The *BSG* series opens with the liberal humanist tropes familiar to audiences of televised science fiction—a multicultural crew aboard a battleship that functions for humanitarian purposes rather than military ones. All that changes with the Cylon offensive, a thinly veiled metaphor for the World Trade Center attacks. Echoing Karen Shimakawa’s study of the Broadway production of *Miss Saigon* at the historic moment of the first Gulf War, how is the neoliberal figure of Boomer at once a static and flexible representation of the post-9/11 Oriental?

Star Trek scholars demonstrate that as the series shifted from Cold War protectionism into a post-Civil Rights liberalism, the figure of the Klingon morphed from a representation of Russian to Chinese to African American to Latino while remaining fixed as a racialized other. This flexible yet fixed racialization is also found in the figure of Boomer as other. In this post-9/11 moment, Boomer is marked by an Orientalism that casts her simultaneously as (South)East Asian and West Asian, specifically Arab. In the Season Two episode “Scar,” Caprica Boomer explains her viewpoints on Cylon “reincarnation.” Invoking orientalist tropes of Buddhist wisdom, Boomer states: “death . . . becomes a learning experience” (2.5.15). In a subsequent episode, death appears with a different connotation, when *Galactica* Boomer is congratulated as a war hero after being re-born into a new body, invoking orientalist stereotypes of Muslim fundamentalism and distortions of *jihad* as holy war (“Downloaded” 2.5.18).⁸ In this way, Boomer’s otherness is simultaneously emblematic of Buddhism and

Islam. This reading also complicates the relationship between an Asian Americanist articulation of Orientalism and Edward Said's original theoretical work, a connection most often collapsed through the similar interpellation "Orient/Oriental" for both East and West Asians. Instead, Boomer's fluid embodiment interrogates the differential intersection between what might be termed as "Orientalism" and "American neo-Orientalism."⁹

The treatment of torture on the show underscores the colonialist linkage to this flexible Asian/Arab other. *Entertainment Weekly* describes this post-9/11 theme on *BSG*: "During a ripped-from-the-headlines episode in season 1, Starbuck (Katee Sackhoff) brutalizes a fundamentalist prisoner à la Abu Ghraib." Depictions on the show include beatings, withholding food, and submerging heads in water, with numerous dialogue references to rape. "Thrown out an airlock" becomes synonymous with execution without trial. Importantly, these explicit treatments are reserved primarily for "white" Cylons such as Number Six or Leoben.

For the purposes of my reading, I turn my attention away from these overt portrayals of torture to focus on Boomer's more complex representation through such a lens. In the episode "Litmus" she is subject to War-on-Terror treatment, but her narrative as imprisoned subject overlaps with the *Miss Saigon* fantasy (1.06). In this episode Chief ends his relationship to Galactica Boomer (signaling the end of his protection and the cover their relationship provides) while Helo affirms his commitment to Caprica Boomer. "Litmus" takes place after Caprica Boomer finds Helo and they are on the run, but before they have sex and before he discovers that she is a Cylon. Helo thinks Boomer has been captured by the Cylons, though she has actually been recalled for a Cylon conference. She stands on a rooftop with two other Cylons (Number Six and Doral), observing Helo's reaction to her "capture." The Cylons detail Helo's fate: if he goes north looking for Boomer, he lives. If he runs south, escaping by himself, they kill him. After some hesitation, Helo runs north, letting the Cylons proceed with their plan of seduction. Caprica Boomer analyzes Helo's decision: "He's a good man. He always does the right thing" ("Litmus" 1.06). While this futuristic scene of cyborg surveillance may seem a far cry from *Miss Saigon*, the assessment of Helo's character mirrors *Miss Saigon*'s white hero Chris when Chris laments, "I wanted to save her, protect her / Christ, I'm an American / How could I fail to do good?" ("The Confrontation," Boubilil and Schönberg).

When Helo finally finds Boomer, she is hooded and shackled, being led by a robotic Cylon, or Centurion. Helo battles and destroys the Centurion, and then the camera pulls in for a close-up of Helo and Boomer sitting next to each other. Here the images of kidnapping and torture are revisited, but in a more unexpected setting. This is the scene of romance, even with

the subtext of the double cross. (And the treachery within this scene will soon be displaced once Boomer escapes/betrays the Cylons with Helo.) Helo unshackles and de-hoods Boomer. We see her bloodied and bruised face, and she is crying. As climax to this scene Helo kisses her; this is their first kiss ("Litmus" 1.06). Cinematically, this is the visual moment that recognizes Helo's love for Sharon. Just as Shimakawa argues that "the 'victory' in the Persian Gulf, combined with Boubilil's and Schöenberg's (sic) rewriting of Pinkerton as the saintly-heroic Chris, worked together to 'jettison' the abject feelings of guilt and shame" (53), this do-gooder rescue of Boomer by Helo recuperates the American project of the War on Terror, questionable tactics and all, through a lens of romantic subjectivity.

Boomer's double signification of (South)East and West Asian is developed further during her imprisonment. After going with Helo to *Galactica*, Caprica Boomer is put in a cell. She simultaneously represents Miss Saigon, the child-bearing partner to the military white man, and also the captured enemy. At times her cell resembles a prenatal hospital ward or a living room, but she remains behind bars. September 11 rendered the separation between the promise and threat of Empire negligible, and the Asian American female must be simultaneously disciplined as multicultural subject and terrorist threat. On multiple occasions, Boomer is temporarily released from her cell to help the crew of *Galactica* defeat the Cylons, creating a double and contradictory renunciation of her own people and of the effective military use of interrogation on an enemy combatant.

This reading of the text is a critical aspect of deconstructing the treatment of war and torture on the show. The *Galactica* is juxtaposed with another battlestar, the *Pegasus*, whose crew have physically and sexually abused their Cylon prisoner (a version of the leggy blonde model, Number Six) and who also attempt to rape Caprica Boomer in her cell on *Galactica* ("Pegasus" 2.0.10). A superficial reading of this demonstrates "good war" versus "bad war," that is, endorsing war yet opposing practices such as torture. Upon closer examination, however, one could consider Number Six's treatment akin to that at Abu Ghraib and Boomer's to practices from Guantánamo. That is, Number Six's abuse reveals bruises on her face as visual proof of the physical beatings she endures. The Abu Ghraib narrative extends in Number Six's case as torture defined as "excessive force" against prisoners-of-war, with the ancillary debate surrounding blame—were the foot soldiers or the commanding officers at fault? Unlike Six, Boomer's abuse is less apparent and remains obfuscated. While imprisoned on *Galactica*, Caprica Boomer is hit, kicked, and has a gun drawn on her, but she doesn't display the visual markers of abuse that Six does. This parallels the relationship between circulated internet photos of Abu Ghraib torture and Amnesty International's report of abuse during

“secret and prolonged incommunicado detention” at the US Naval Base at Guantánamo (4).

Furthering the white-savior arc of *Miss Saigon*, the rape of Caprica Boomer by *Pegasus*’ Lieutenant Thorne (known on his ship as “Cylon Interrogator”) is averted by the arrival of Helo and Chief, Boomer’s white lover and ex-lover (“*Pegasus*” 2.0.10). While Boomer’s rape is stopped, the right to control her own body is jeopardized in a later attempt to force her to have an abortion against her will (“*Epiphanies*” 2.5.13). Rather than contrasting Boomer and Six, sexual abuse connects them, elucidating the spectrum between rape of prisoners and gendered discipline. Here the sexual violence of colonial conquest exceeds racialization, nation, and gender, paralleling the tacit sanctioning during Operation Iraqi Freedom of the sexual assault of male “enemy combatants” and the rapes and murders of US female soldiers that are classified as “noncombat related injuries.”¹⁰

The logics of this new Empire as witnessed via the treatment of Boomer link the myth of global economy’s inevitability to the violent consequences of post-9/11 anxieties. Reading *BSG*’s open space back onto Hardt and Negri’s formulation of Empire reveals a preoccupation with re-territorialization even within the post-national paradigm. Human settlement of New Caprica, a barely habitable planet, proves disastrous; the resulting Cylon takeover serves as a metaphor for the occupation of Iraq (“*Lay Down Your Burdens, Part 2*” 2.5.20, “*Occupation*” 3.01). Territorial anxieties eclipse desires for land, however, and extend to the national body, as when human hostages are taken to protest Boomer’s presence on board *Galactica*. The hostage takers’ leader proclaims, “The colonial fleet has become Cylon-occupied territory” (“*Sacrifice*” 2.5.16). Rather than applying Hardt and Negri’s conclusion that under Empire’s historic and epistemological break “no identity is designated as Other, no one is excluded from the domain, there is no outside” (194), we might locate the traces of colonialist othering within what Grace Kyungwon Hong terms the “*flexibly* neocolonial” state (144). Through a woman of color feminist reading practice in conversation with racialized immigrant women’s culture, Hong maps capital’s transition from a national to global expression. She elucidates the ways “flexible accumulation’s strategy of mixing nonmodern and modern forms of production depends on and reproduces racialized and gendered exploitation” (115). While Empire’s separation from imperialism occurs, its grounding in the (neo)colonialism of Boomer as the doubly configured post-9/11 Oriental continues.

Cyborg as Adoptee

The representation of Boomer in *Battlestar Galactica* at once reaffirms

and redeploys the cyborg archetype. Here I depart from the genealogy of televised science fiction to engage with the cinematic figure of the cyborg, most notably the rise of the cyborg in US films of the 1980s. At just the moment when liberal multiculturalism finds its post-Fordist expression in colorblindness, the cyborg emerges in films such as *The Terminator*, *RoboCop*, and *Blade Runner*. The colorblind ethos eliminates race from the surface text, but as these films demonstrate, race remains the subtext. *Blade Runner* is perhaps the most iconic in this aspect, with its replicants, or “skin jobs” (the same epithet used in *BSG* for humanoid Cylons) serving as the white embodiment of the racialized other. Several scholars have noted how the Aryan-looking replicants represent, alternately, escaped slaves, “docile” Mexican workers, and the Asian American model minority (Carr 134-43, Lee 191-96, Abu-Lughod 378-79).¹¹ *Blade Runner* remains the most cited cyborg film of its era and the most foundational; however, Boomer intervenes in the iconic form of the cyborg in such foundational texts. She is not the white signifier of the racialized other, but an Asian American representation.

Complicating Boomer’s double signification as metaphoric and literal other is the scholarship on the cyborg that suggests this figure represents the mixed-race individual or the tragic mulatto. As LeiLani Nishime elucidates, the cyborg’s hybridity differentiates it from the alien. Nishime argues:

As a hybrid, the cyborg is not completely the Other. Rather, its narrative power comes from its ability to blur boundaries by blending the Other and the human. . . . This uncanny mixture infects the portrayal of both mixed-race people and cyborgs. It is only a short leap, then, to read anxieties about the incoherence of the body of the cyborg as a parallel to the confusion and concern that centers on the body of the multiracial human. (35)

While all Cylons share humans as allegorical parents, Boomer’s intimacy with humans underscores her hybrid status, her miscegenation typified by her proximity to white/human lovers. She can be read not only as Asian American, but also as biracial, with attendant issues of biculturalism and misidentification. Because of Caprica Boomer’s relationship to Helo and subsequent allegiance to humans, Cylons and humans think she is “one of them,” highlighting her status as a “passing” subject. Galactica Boomer, before human detection of her Cylon status, has fears of being a Cylon, worrying that her crewmates are “gonna think I’m a Cylon agent” (“Water” 1.02). Her fears and ultimate self-discovery place Boomer’s identification not only within the miscegenated space between human and Cylon as mixed-race, but also within adoptee discourse.

In Sara K. Dorow’s recent work on US adoption of Chinese children,

she names an “impossible contradiction, namely, *fixed and flexible racial imaginaries*; mutable characterizations of Asianness coexist with histories that have continually invented ways to fix and contain it” (20-21). This construction of adoption also emerges within the *BSG* texts. Galactica Boomer starts to question her identity while on a mission to bomb a Cylon ship; there, she is confronted by multiple versions of herself. As the many Boomers proclaim, “We love you, Sharon. And we always will,” ominous music sounds. Boomer responds, “I’m not a Cylon. I’m Sharon Valerii, I was born on Troy. My parents were Katherine and Abraham Valerii” (“Kobol’s Last Gleaming, Part 2” 1.13). Even after she is killed and “downloaded” (the *BSG* term for Cylon rebirth), she returns to her apartment on Caprica with photos of her friends and family, and even though she is told she is a copy of Number Eight, she will only go by the names Sharon or Boomer. Number Six visits her, trying to persuade her to embrace her new identity, and asks about a set of carved elephants on Sharon’s coffee table.

BOOMER: My mother gave them to me the day I left for the Fleet Academy.

SIX: Is this her? [holding up photo]

BOOMER: Supposed to be. Of course, none of it’s real. All fabricated for my mission. It’s all a lie.

SIX: God loves you.

BOOMER: [holding up photo of herself with *Galactica* crew] This is love. These people love me. . . . I loved them. And then I betrayed them. I shot a man I love. Frakked over another man, ruined his life. And why? Because I’m a lying machine! I’m a frakking Cylon! (“Downloaded” 2.5.18)

Even as *Galactica* Boomer professes her love for Adama, *Galactica*’s leader and her adoptive father figure, Caprica Boomer refuses Adama’s repeated requests to name the remaining Cylons hidden within the human survivors. Sharon will not choose an absolute alliance, demonstrating the ultimate falsity of essentializing her identity as either human or Cylon. As a liminal subject, she refutes the human-Cylon binary. Adoptee writers and scholars in the anthology *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption* articulate Boomer’s strategy: “By the very nature of our circumstances of birth and adoption, we cannot be contained by national borders or simple dichotomies” (Trenka, Oparah, and Shin 14). Not only making a post-national assertion, the editors of this volume also provide the embedded materialism that speaks to Boomer’s speculative identity as an adoptee, which reveals “transracial adoption as the intimate face of colonization, racism, militarism, imperialism, and globalization” (7).

Boomer's simultaneous construction as birth mother further complicates the figure of her as adoptee. Almost as soon as Caprica Boomer arrives on *Galactica*, both Cylons and humans claim her unborn child. Number Six appears as a vision to the human scientist Gaius Baltar and from the beginning of Season Two starts prophesizing about "their child." When Boomer returns with Helo to *Galactica*, she is immediately placed in prison. Baltar listens in as Helo tells Boomer, "It's just . . . I don't want our baby born in this cell." The following conversation ensues:

BALTAR: Their child?
 SIX: I told you a child would arrive. I told you it would be born right here in this room. How could you ever doubt me?
 BALTAR: Boomer is going to bear . . . our child? ("Home, Part 2" 2.0.07)

This conversation occurs in the foreground between the two white characters, the renowned scientist and newly-elected Vice President of the Colonies and the statuesque Cylon with bleached blond hair. Future-time's adoptive white parents proceed to talk about "their baby" with Boomer in the background, out of focus. The human characters debate the fate of the baby without concern for the Cylon mother. The President of the Colonies, Laura Roslin, wants to terminate Boomer's pregnancy, until a blood transfusion from the fetus saves Roslin's life ("Epiphanies" 2.5.13).¹² When the baby is born, political and military leaders call a meeting.

ROSLIN: If the baby does survive, the question is, what do we do with it?
 BALTAR: Do? What are you suggesting? That we throw it out of an airlock?
 ROSLIN: I don't make suggestions, Mr. Baltar. If I want to toss a baby out an airlock, I'd say so.
 BALTAR: Well, it's really gratifying to know that infanticide is not on the table.
 COL. TIGH: Do I have to point out that this is not a baby? It's a machine.
 BALTAR: No, it's half machine, half human. I suggest we all keep that half in mind.
 ADAMA: The Cylons went through a great deal of trouble to create this thing. It should go without saying that if it's good for them, it's gonna be bad for us.
 ROSLIN: I completely agree. And I take it as a given we can't turn it over to Sharon to raise. That would be disastrous. ("Downloaded" 2.5.18)

Whether Cylons or humans make the decision, the prospect of Boomer raising her own child is foreclosed. The figurative biracial, Boomer gives birth to Hera, the “half machine, half human.” Adoptee becomes birth mother, and her daughter is taken and given to a human mother to raise. The president further complicates this adoption scenario by misleading the human adoptive mother into thinking that the birth mother is a high-ranking human and lying to Boomer that her baby died soon after birth. In this way, the metaphor’s transition to literal re-occurs—Boomer, the cyborg “mulatta” adopted by humans, is the birth mother of Hera, the hybrid Cylon who “passes” for human. If, as Deis suggests, “the Cylon threat can be interpreted as embodying deep and long-held fears by white societies regarding miscegenation and racial passing” (157), this is nowhere more evident than in the anxieties produced by Boomer and her daughter Hera.

What are we to make of Boomer’s representation of the adoptee cyborg, in the transformation from allegory to actual? What has occurred since the 1980s articulation of colorblind multiculturalism that enables the departure from the white signifier of racialized other? Victor Bascara argues in *Model-Minority Imperialism* that “both multiculturalism . . . and globalization . . . have begun to unravel in recent years, revealing that they bear uncanny resemblance to the very ideologies and practices they had emerged to displace,” and that this unraveling “shows us how the post-colonial Oriental under globalization converges with the Asian American under multiculturalism” (xvii). Boomer’s literal embodiment of the racialized other demonstrates that in the post-9/11 moment the contradictions of multiculturalism and globalization no longer hold their organizing logics in place, especially for the colonized subject both within and outside US borders. Koshy asserts, “the white man-Asian woman dyad emerged from a history of interracial intimacy in which the Asian woman was identified with forms of extraterritorial desire that are excluded from the moral order of marriage and nationhood” (32-33); both Cylon and human anxieties afflict Boomer and her mixed-species child because the romance of the colonialist adventure cannot be completely disciplined by either domesticity or nation. The attempt to discipline the othered subject within a nation with porous and precarious borders produces a distressed redeployment of tropes that elides Empire’s project; ultimately, however, these tropes render visible the disavowal of the colonialism that creates racialized and gendered difference.

To conclude, I posit the nonnormative possibilities of *BSG*’s reiteration of *Miss Saigon*. Within the repeating storyline of *Madame Butterfly* the Asian birth mother kills herself, setting the path for the adoption of the child by the white father and his white wife. Galactica Boomer follows in this orientalist tradition—she is shot and killed in Season Two

while being transported as a prisoner amid shouts of “bitch” and “traitor” from the crowd (“Resistance” 2.0.04). While this is a yellow peril/dragon lady articulation of Boomer, who is in prison for shooting the captain of *Galactica*, the tragic, interracial romance is recovered as she lies dying in Galen Tyrol’s arms. He repeats, “No, no, no,” and her last words are, “I love you, Chief.” Her story ends, however, without the “ultimate sacrifice” of Cio-Cio San or *Miss Saigon*’s Kim. She and Chief do not have a child together, and her death is but a temporary moment before she is downloaded into a new body.

Referring to the heroine of *Miss Saigon* and the actress who played her on Broadway, Bascara argues, “The image of a Kim/Lea Salonga, about to commit suicide for the sake of her Eurasian child’s better life in America, can be read as an attempt to write over previous and forthcoming empires” (139). How, then, does Boomer rewrite imperialism back into the narrative? Caprica Boomer gives birth to Hera, and, very much alive, turns her anger on her colonialist captors. Believing her child was killed by humans, she shouts, “You’re all murderers!” and chokes the doctor who delivered her baby (“Downloaded” 2.5.18). Here the silencing violence enacted on the *Miss Saigon* figure is redirected at imperial powers.

The oppositional figure of Boomer is domesticated, however, in Season Three of *BSG*. This domestication occurs through the lens of family with her marriage to Helo and through the lens of nation as she becomes confidante to military leader Adama. Wife and mother, Boomer is also re-made/re-born an officer and given the new call sign “Athena” (“Torn” 3.06). Sharon’s assimilation always carries the threat of yellow peril; this threat promises to play itself out by the end of *BSG*’s fourth and final season. Even in Season Three, the new Mrs. Sharon Agathon inverts the fateful/fatal suicide scene in *Miss Saigon*:

- SHARON: I’m begging you to do this. Find the courage to do this for both of us, okay?
 [Sharon gives a brave smile through her tears. Helo takes her face in his hand, with tears in his eyes as well. They embrace, Sharon sobbing.]
- SHARON: I love you.
- HELO: I love you too. (“Rapture” 3.12)

The camera pulls back to show them in each other’s arms. Helo shoots Sharon; blood splatters on the wall behind her. The music swells. Helo catches her—her eyes are closed; she is dead. He cries, then screams in agony. This scene invokes the sentimentality of *Miss Saigon*’s suicide, and the Asian woman’s supposed sacrifice. But in this case, Sharon’s death is not to assure her child’s place in an assimilated future without her.

Helo shoots Sharon to facilitate her rebirth aboard the Cylon base ship so that she might steal her daughter from the Cylons that have taken her. Perverting the colonialist romance of the Asian American female, Sharon deadpans to Number Six in an ironic statement of heterosexual romance, “They [the humans] wouldn’t let me see my daughter, so my husband shot me.”

BSG complicates the intersection and repetition of miscegenation and adoption with the simultaneous embodiment of adoptee and birth mother in the figure of Boomer. In the musical *Miss Saigon*, mixed-race children of GIs and Vietnamese women receive sentimental treatment in the “Bui Doi” number. Accompanying slides of Vietnamese orphanages, former GI John sings the following: “I never thought one day I’d plead / For half-breeds from a land that’s torn / But then I saw a camp for children / Whose crime was being born / They’re called Bui Doi / The dust of life / Conceived in hell / And born in strife” (Boublil and Schönberg). As Marchetti argues, “these narratives allow their American heroes another opportunity to fight the Vietnam War and win, this time, by staking a patriarchal, blood claim to Vietnam’s children. The absorption of the Amerasian children of war into America argues against any residual charges of American racism, cruelty, or heartlessness” (100).

Miss Saigon’s adoption narrative renders the larger colonial connections invisible and constructs both children and mothers as victims. Kim’s vanishing through suicide facilitates her son’s vanishing into multicultural America. *Battlestar Galactica*’s newly employed text of a wartime interracial white-Asian affair makes the connection between birth mother and adopted child mutually constitutive, pointing to the simultaneous obfuscation and articulation of neocolonialism within the emergent global Empire. Marchetti reminds us that from *Madame Butterfly* forward, “The Butterfly becomes the emblem of excess—emotionally, sexually, culturally, racially—that cannot be recuperated into this picture of domestic tranquility” (88). It is precisely this irreducibility of the figure of Boomer that makes *BSG* a pleasurable text to read/view. *Battlestar Galactica* may employ racialized and gendered tropes, but the global order’s fracturing demonstrates that its totalizing has always been a fiction, and the unruly contestation of this narrative by the Asian American female refuses to disappear.

Notes

I would like to thank Jigna Desai, Josephine Lee, Erika Lee, Kelly Condit-Shrestha, Shannon Gibney, and Thien-bao Phi for their generous and insightful feedback on this essay.

1. I use the term “Asian American” carefully here, aware of the multiplicity of the term in which a Korean Canadian actress plays a role that is not racially articulated but obviously racialized as Asian American to audiences. Similarly, *BSG* is produced in Vancouver with an overwhelmingly Canadian cast, yet is shown primarily to a US viewing audience. While not the focus of my study, these interesting complexities demonstrate the limits of usefulness for terms such as Asian American, and in the context of *BSG* American might be best understood as “North American.” Similarly, the actor who plays Sharons’s lover/husband Helo, Tahmoh Penikett, is a mixed-race Canadian of British and White River First Nation ancestry. This complicates the representation of a white-Asian love affair, yet demonstrates that such intricacies are lost to more overdetermined tropes.
2. This notation refers to the Miniseries, Part 2, which was released on DVD as part of Season One. Subsequent citations for the series will follow a similar format. For example, “1.06” refers to Season One, Episode 6; “2.5.13” refers to Season 2.5, Episode 13.
3. The role in the original 1970s series was played by African American actor Herb Jefferson, Jr. While outside the scope of this paper, the recasting of Boomer from a black man to an Asian American woman might yield a productive comparative inquiry.
4. I use a dated “canon” to name these two versions of Cylon Number Eight, or Sharon. The names “Galactica Boomer” and “Caprica Boomer” were used for the first two seasons of *BSG*, while from Season Three forward, these characters are more commonly referred to as “Boomer” and “Sharon,” or “Boomer” and “Athena.” I consciously use the old formulation for several reasons: 1) these appellations more closely match the doubling configurations from the first and second seasons; 2) I resist renaming Caprica Boomer as “Sharon” because it implies that only the human-identified Cylon has personhood; 3) “Athena” does not receive this call sign until Season Three; and 4) separating “Sharon” and “Athena” from “Boomer” distances the assimilated wife, mother, and officer from a more messy and entwined relationship with the Cylon first known aboard *Galactica*.
5. For readers unfamiliar with this genealogy, Susan Koshy cites John Luther Long’s short story “Madame Butterfly” (1898) as the first American articulation of a white-Asian interracial romance. Long based his story of the doomed romance between an American sailor and a Japanese geisha on the 1887 travelogue *Madame Chrysanthemum* by French author Pierre Loti. Later incarnations of this narrative include Giacomo Puccini’s opera *Madama Butterfly* (1904) and the musicals *The World of Suzie Wong* (1957) and *Miss Saigon* (1989) (Koshy 29). In the US, Puccini’s libretto (David Belasco’s script) is commonly referred to as *Madame Butterfly*.

6. These lyrics were sung on Broadway by the actor Jonathan Pryce in “yellow-face,” an action that sparked widespread protest within Asian American communities. For more on casting complaints and other protests of the show’s stereotyped representations, see Shimakawa 43-56, Yoshikawa 275-94, and Zia 109-35.
7. I stress the racial components within this liberalized vision of future-time even though this simplifies issues of gender. For example, while Sulu and Uhura are assimilated within *Star Trek*’s logics, this assimilation renders Uhura the sexualized black female and Sulu the emasculated Asian American man.
8. The translation of the Arabic word *jihad* in English is “supreme effort,” meaning a struggle or undertaking for a worthy or transcendental cause. This translation has become simplified and distorted to mean “holy war.”
9. Thanks to Jigna Desai for both pointing this out and offering the term “neo-Orientalism.”
10. Retired US Army Reserve Colonel Ann Wright charts the recent rise of rape and murder of US women soldiers in connection with the war in Iraq and the US government’s unwillingness to investigate.
11. *Blade Runner* holds particular significance for *Battlestar Galactica*. Veteran Latino actor Edward James Olmos starred in *Blade Runner* as the futuristic beat cop Gaff, and he was arguably the biggest name in the cast of the re-imagined *BSG* series. Many fans also note the similarity of Cylon Number Six to the role of Pris in *Blade Runner*—a statuesque, sexualized blonde played in the film by Daryl Hannah. Potter and Marshall cite replicants as predecessors to Cylons: “In previous science fiction, the closest parallel is provided by the replicants in *Blade Runner*, artificially created synthetic beings with living tissue and cells” (2).
12. The child Hera takes on the stereotypical endowments of hybridity. As Deis comments, “Hera, a mulatto, and the product of an ‘interracial’ relationship, is imbued with fetishistic attributes. In examples ranging from metaphysical (Hera has appeared in visions and dreams of the central characters), to the almost magical (her blood has temporarily healed President Roslin’s terminal cancer), Hera symbolizes a child of destiny and a key to resolving the human and Cylon conflict” (164).

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