

“If you can’t tell, does it matter?”:

Race, Gender, Sex and the Cybergaze of *Westworld’s* Gynoids

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Abstract: HBO’s *Westworld* is a widely viewed and critically acclaimed network television program centered on robotic characters in a science fiction setting. *Westworld’s* success has been attributed in part to HBO’s trademark use of onscreen violence, sex, and brutality, as well as the show’s supposed engagement with themes of personhood, gender, and emancipation. However, *Westworld* has also been critiqued as problematic in its depictions of race, gender and sexuality – in particular its characterization of robotic women (also called ‘gynoids’). This thesis interrogates these portrayals of women further with the research question ‘what androcentric and colonialist parameters inform the portrayal of filmic gynoids, as seen in HBO’s *Westworld*?’ In answering this question, this thesis draws upon critical race theory, feminist theory, objectification theory and gaze theory, and asserts that *Westworld* relies on hyper-sexualized, racist, colonial and hegemonically gendered conceptions of femininity and humanity in its representation of gynoids.

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Introduction

"When I first began watching television," says Emily Nussbaum, television critic and scholar, "there didn't seem to be much to argue about."¹ Although Nussbaum is a child of the 70s, I also, as a child of the 90s and 2000s, grew up with a view of TV as light entertainment. As a child television was, for the years my family owned a television, essentially the equivalent of junk food – to be consumed in moderation, dispensed in small amounts as a reward for good behaviour, or devoured in secret late at night with the overarching fear of being caught. I was raised to think of TV as a treat, something that would rot you from the inside out if you ingested too much of it. As a teenager, my fascination with television and film developed as much as it narrowed in on science fiction. I now understand this interest in sci fi resulted from alienation from the majority of characters in more conventional dramas that did not reflect my reality. There is something to be said about identifying more with the fictional creatures and narratives of distant realities than with stories about the world you supposedly inhabit yet are excluded from. It was not until I was older and truly understood the reality of being a mixed-race woman that I began to understand the narratives I had come to love were not made for me. Almost all of them centered around the lives of white men (*Star Wars*, *Stargate* and *Minority Report*, for example, spring to mind as frequent Space Channel reruns I consumed). These films and television programs were designed for white men to watch and were predominantly written, directed and shot by white men. To view them, to be granted a space in their fandom, was essentially a privilege extended by this white male industry with the understanding that me, in my mixed-race female body, was a guest in *their* world.

¹ Emily, Nussbaum, *I like to watch: Arguing my way through the TV revolution* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2020), 3.

I am no longer a television-obsessed teenager, and I have watched over the years as my favourite science fiction programs have either been concluded or cancelled, only to be replaced by a newer generation of boundary-pushing, science-infused narratives. With each new wave, I hope to see a familiar being on that screen instead of yet another white cis man exploring the seemingly endless final frontier. A story with which I can identify, both in character and narrative, which would justify at last my presence in those fandoms as more than a guest. HBO's *Westworld* was one such show with the potential to examine the issues of identity I was craving to see on screen. Thus, here we are. An investigation several years in the making, which is itself the opening of a door to a larger project I hope to continue with past this thesis that deals with identity, race, gender and the search for belonging in the science fiction realm of television I have come to love.

I would like to briefly position myself as the author of this work, as a mixed-race woman. The voice I aim to bring to this work is an intersectional one that addresses race alongside gender and sexuality, acknowledging intersecting layers of privilege and disenfranchisement.

Central to my thesis is the term gynoid which "was coined in 1984 by Gwenyth Jones in her novel *Divine Endurance*."² The popular culture term "fembot" is often also used in general vernacular; however, gynoid is used primarily in scholarship as it is broader in scope. It denotes a femme gendered robot, or sometimes other femme cybernetic beings such as cyborgs. In this thesis, I use the term gynoid to reference the female-presenting versions of robots which *Westworld* terms 'Hosts' – humanoid-like robots, programmed to behave like humans. These

² Takayuki Tatsumi, *Full Metal Apache: Transactions Between Cyberpunk Japan and Avant-Pop America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 214.

Hosts are all played by human actors and are often indistinguishable from human (an element central to the narrative of *Westworld* and its underlying mysteries).

In his work "Femme Futures: one hundred years of female representation in SF cinema," Conrad surveys female character tropes in science fiction films. He finds that the gynoid emerges as an ultra-sexualized creature, created to appeal to the male viewer: "sexualization of the man-made female has a long history in SF cinema."³ In her book *Anatomy of a Robot: Literature, Cinema, and the Cultural Work of Artificial People*, Kakoudaki posits that the literal body of the cybernetic being is central to why and how we create fantasies about robots. As she articulates, "all these fantasies pivot on the robot's mechanicity."⁴ In centring the gynoid body, Kakoudaki acknowledges the importance of the gynoid's physical aesthetic in amplifying both its sexualization and gendering. It is often the gynoid, not the android, who becomes the subject of more intense sexualization: "the presence of technological or mechanical imagery indeed accentuates the stereotypical gendering of artificial bodies, with artificial men presented as strong silent types and artificial women as oversexualized, idealized depictions of a perfect woman."⁵

In her book *My Fair Ladies*, Julie Wosk situates this interconnectedness of sexualization, technology, and mechanicity as a reaction to the anxieties about various technological advancements in the 20th century. Because of these concerns and our collective cultural

³ Dean Conrad, "Femme Futures: one hundred years of SF representation in SF cinema," *Science Fiction Film and Television* 4, no.1 (2011): 83.

⁴ Despina Kakoudaki, *Anatomy of a Robot: Literature, Cinema, and the Cultural Work of Artificial People* (Rutgers University Press, 2014), 75

⁵ Kakoudaki, *Anatomy of a Robot*, 81

obsession with technology, sex became a core theme for gynoid characters. Prominent in mainstream television in the 60s and 70s, as well as "throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first century – sex and technology often go hand in hand."⁶ This review of literature exposes the exclusive focus on sex and gender in the world of gynoid scholarship. As I have found in my wider literature review, it is nearly impossible to find work that addresses the gynoid figure without addressing sex in some capacity.

It is disappointing that in my review of the literature addressing gynoids, there is a distinct lack of commentary on race. The connections between artificial humans, commodification, power and objectification and their relevance to issues of race are hard to ignore. There is, of course, much writing about robotics and race, about androids and race, science and technology and race; however, when it comes to the connections between female coded robots and race, especially in fiction, there is a glaring absence. This thesis, using critical race theory, will thus address this lack and focus on the connections between race, sex and gender in the figure of the gynoid in *Westworld*. As such, the entirety of the first half of this thesis uses a critical race theory framework to address race and gynoid characterization issues in *Westworld*.

The scholarship has been integrated and referenced throughout this thesis to better synthesize existing ideas surrounding gynoids and *Westworld*. Amongst the scholarship are many

⁶ Julie Wosk, *My Fair Ladies* (Rutgers University Press, 2015), 107.

popular press reviews of *Westworld*, which have been instrumental in gathering critical perspectives of the show as it continues to be released.⁷

The original thesis dealt with an original research question much broader in scope than what this Master's project eventually narrowed to examine. Future research will expand upon the proposed 'cybergaze' theory this thesis will briefly introduce. The original question was as follows:

What androcentric parameters and desires construct the portrayal of filmic gynoids to create a distinct form of filmic gaze (a 'cybergaze')?

As this project was narrowed through its iterations, it pivoted to explore this question within a qualitative discussion of the HBO television show *Westworld*. Although outside the scope of this thesis, I hope to eventually pursue research on the question of the cybergaze. As such, a modified version of the original research question was created:

What androcentric and colonialist parameters inform the portrayal of filmic gynoids, as seen in HBO's *Westworld*?

In response to this question, this thesis asserts that *Westworld* relies on hyper-sexualized, racist, colonial and hegemonically gendered conceptions of femininity and humanity in its representation of gynoids. Additionally, while *Westworld* tries to create political and social commentary, it often fails and ends up using the gynoid merely to depict onscreen violence,

⁷ Methodologically, this thesis uses close readings of *Westworld* through literature and textual analysis, informed by feminist theory and critical race theory. Analyzing and engaging with this vast pool of scholarship has been critical in this approach.

racism and misogyny, which appeal to HBO's dominantly cis white male heterosexual viewership.

In exploring *Westworld*, this thesis takes an intersectional approach, acknowledging interconnected aspects of identity such as race, class, gender and sexuality and the unique lived experiences of those who live in the crossovers of marginalization. However, this thesis is also structured thematically, exploring race in chapter one and gender and sexuality in chapter two. This thematic separation establishes race as underlying and structuring the entirety of *Westworld*, while also allowing me to focus on particular gendered characters in the show.

While the author of this thesis knows that gender exists on spectrum and is a societal construct, the following discussion often employs binaristic terms such as 'women' and 'man' in order to discuss, and also call into question, the narrow and binaristic views of gender portrayed by *Westworld*. As will be described later, *Westworld* is lacking in queer narratives and relies on heteronormative and outdated dichotomous conceptions of gender.

Does *Westworld* reflect a larger trend in filmmaking, a trend that might suggest the prevalence of what I call a cybergaze⁸? These are questions that I would like to explore in later work.

⁸ By 'cybergaze', I mean a gaze-like relationship between the screen and audience, where the cybernetic being is the object being looked at by the viewer and constructed by the filmmaker. Rather than traditional gaze theory titles, such as male gaze and colonial gaze, where the title refers to the perspective of the gaze, 'cybergaze' is proposed to center around the subject. The audience doing the gazing may intersect across various positions – colonial, hetero, male etc. This is potentially because such a gaze may rely on a false dichotomy between 'the authentic' and 'the cybernetic', using the robot status of the subjects as an excuse to reinforce existing social prejudices. This is something to explore in future research.

Section One: Race, Colonialism and the Gynoids of *Westworld*

Introduction

At first glance, *Westworld's* casting choices seem to be thoughtfully diverse. A large proportion of actors are Black, Indigenous, and Asian. However, on closer inspection, there are problematic choices in how this diversity is distributed across roles. This distribution aligns with the power dynamics between the human and robot characters, with the latter subservient to the former. Black actors mostly play robots within the core cast: Maeve Millay, the brothel madame, played by Thandie Newton; Bernard Lowe, the technician, played by Jeffrey Wright; and later Charlotte Hale, the spy played by Tessa Thompson.⁹ The Indigenous and Asian actors are cast as nameless villains and/or cannon fodder. *Westworld* uses Western film and television to fetishize racialized characters and privileges white stories. Overall, *Westworld* recreates and reinforces exploitative and disturbing portrayals of BIPOC characters.

As the *New Yorker's* television critic, Emily Nussbaum, articulates, "while the cast is visually polyglot, the dialogue is color-blind."¹⁰ This colour-blind narrative is especially problematic given that slavery is a central theme of the show and that the *Westworld* park is set in settler-colonial America's Civil War era.¹¹ The audience is consistently seated in the perspective of the white characters, which often leads to objectifying the Indigenous and Black characters, thereby constructing a colonial gaze. An early example of the audience viewing

⁹ This is not to say that the white actors all play human characters, as Dolores, the counterpart gynoid to Maeve, is played by Evan Rachel Wood. However, the distribution of power between these two women is also racially problematic, as discussed later in this chapter.

¹⁰ Emily Nussbaum, "The Meta-Politics of 'Westworld'," *The New Yorker*, October 17, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/24/the-meta-politics-of-westworld>

¹¹ The other parks introduced in season 2, *Shogun World* and *The Raj*, are likewise set during colonial eras in Japan and India.

Westworld through the lens of the white characters is when the camera aligns the viewer with Teddy, a white Host riding the same train as the guests into the park as if for the first time. His view of the train window, of the brothel, and of the introductory town in episode 1 are happening to him for the first time alongside the audience.¹² As critic Ani Bundel writes, "with this failure to emphasize the uglier aspects of the show's core conceit, there has always been an uncomfortable vein of racism floating through the concept behind *Westworld*."¹³

The racially problematic elements in the show's casting, narrative, setting, and genre choices, form a backdrop of white privilege against which the gynoid characters are portrayed. For instance, Maeve, the Black gynoid brothel owner, is disproportionately sexualized and brutalized compared to Dolores, the white farm girl. Further, the park settings – Civil-War America, Imperial Japan, colonial India – all reference racially charged eras in history, but these settings are recreated as entertaining backdrops. This chapter will demonstrate that while *Westworld* succeeds in addressing certain issues surrounding race, it continues to denigrate its racially othered characters, especially its gynoids, demonstrating the need for an intersectional approach to understanding the gynoid character more broadly.

Theoretical Framework

This chapter takes an intersectional approach to its gender-based cultural analyses and uses a critical race theory framework. As an approach, intersectionality evaluates experiences of

¹² *Westworld*, season 1, episode 1, "The Original," directed by Jonathan Nolan, written by Jonathan Nolan, Lisa Joy and Michael Crichton, aired October 2, 2016, on HBO. 03:37.

¹³ Ani Bundel, "Westworld's white supremacist undertones keep getting louder," *Syfy*, May 14, 2018, <https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/westworlds-white-supremacist-undertones-keep-getting-louder?amp>

discrimination through interconnected aspects of identity rather than considering multiple identities as isolated categories. Kimberlé Crenshaw first introduced the term and explained that social stratifications cannot exist separately for all forms of identity, as there are lived experiences that are unique to identities formed in the intersection of these pre-supposed categories of belonging. Therefore, the Black female experience cannot be captured fully through a lens of either gender or race: "Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated."¹⁴

In analyzing *Westworld's* engagement with race, I consider intersections with gender, class and other identities. The alternative of separately addressing these categories relies on a dangerous precedent. For example, middle- and upper-class white women have historically monopolized the feminist movement and the study of gender-based discrimination. Similarly, the study of race-based discrimination has privileged the perspectives of Black men.¹⁵ These approaches mean that "Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender."¹⁶ Their exclusion from these approaches misses not only the unique lived experience of Black women, but also the amplified, "double-discrimination" that Black women experience "on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex."¹⁷

¹⁴ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 140, <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=ucf>

¹⁵ Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersections", 151

¹⁶ Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersections", 140

¹⁷ Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersections", 149

Therefore, experiences of dominant demographics within gender- and race-based discrimination cannot speak fully to the unique lived experiences of Black women. Intersectional analysis must be applied to Maeve's character because as both Black and a woman, she is doubly oppressed by sexism and racism.

As Crenshaw explains, analysis that aims to address issues of racism must necessarily address issues of sexism in order to capture the breadth of experiences within a community: "If any real efforts are to be made to free Black people of the constraints and conditions that characterize racial subordination, then theories and strategies purporting to reflect the Black community's needs must include an analysis of sexism and patriarchy."¹⁸ While an intersectional view is applied throughout this thesis, this chapter, in particular, is of critical importance in evaluating the portrayal of gynoids in *Westworld* as it demonstrates the intersecting experiences of gynoids as not only gendered but as racialized women.

The seminal work *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, provides the guiding principles of critical race theory employed in this work. As they explain, racial considerations are critical in cultural analysis, as our socio-cultural reality is a purely constructed space. The culture we choose to create and curate impacts the distributions of power that occur in our societal relations: "our social world, with its rules, practices, and assignments of prestige and power, is not fixed; rather, we construct it with words, stories and silence."¹⁹ Not only is mainstream media formative in our constructive social reality but the way race is portrayed in media effects and constructs the collective social imagination of racialized

¹⁸ Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersections", 166

¹⁹ Jean Stefancic and Richard Delgado, *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge* (Temple University Press, 2013), 3.

persons. Because these cultural images are often negative, reinforcing racist beliefs and stereotypes, they contribute to negative self-worth for and normalize discrimination against racialized persons:

Through an unfortunate psychological mechanism, incessant bombardment by negative images inscribes those images on the souls and minds of minority persons. Minorities internalize the stories they read, see, and hear every day. Persons of colour can easily become demoralized, blame themselves, and not speak up vigorously.²⁰

As *Westworld's* characterization of gynoids presents negative cultural narratives, glamorizes violence, shores up racial hierarchies, and has a substantially diverse cast, the show's potential impact on racialized viewers must be considered. A future audience study could investigate the impact these racial portrayals have on viewers, especially racialized audience members. The potential for such a mainstream network television show as *Westworld* to promote and normalize negative racial impressions is present however the actual impact the show has on the audience and their cultural and introspective opinions requires future investigation involving participant based studies.

Slavery, Colonialism and Anti-Black Racism

The term 'robot' has historically been associated with slavery since its inception in Karel Capek's 1921 play *Rossum's Universal Robots*.²¹ As Kakoudaki explains, Capek's play "introduced the Czech word *robota* (labor), linking robots forever to servitude, enslavement, and

²⁰ Stefancic and Delgado, *Critical Race Theory*, 328

²¹ Karel Čapek, *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots): A Fantastic Melodrama* (New York: Doubleday, 1925).

revolt."²² Literature and media have a long history of employing the robot figure to represent the enslavement and negation of personhood. *Blade Runner*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *The Animatrix*, and *I-Robot* are famous Hollywood examples of contemporary films and television shows which portray slavery and exploitative forms of labour using robots. Capek's play has likewise long been compared to a variety of actual histories of oppression. As Gregory Hampton articulates, "Capek rewrites the narrative of American slavery fifty-six years after its legal abolition as a cautionary tale that speaks to the technologically advancing nations of the world."²³ Kakoudaki proposes that "Capek exposes the dehumanization of workers and soldiers through capitalist corporate and state practices in the mechanized factories and battlefields of the 1910s."²⁴

Amongst scholarship which addresses the intersections of race and technology, the robot as slave allegory is typical. Ruha Benjamin explains that these histories are necessarily connected: "the disposability of robots and the denigration of racialized populations go hand in hand [...] The intertwining history of machines and slaves, in short, is not simply the stuff of fluff magazine articles"²⁵. Louis Chude-Sokei posits that the history of chattel slavery is influential in the creation of real and fictional robots: "slavery ultimately haunted cybernetics as it does science fiction: as an example of what must *not* be done with these new beings due to the moral crimes of what *had already been done* during chattel slavery to blacks."²⁶ Kakoudaki

²² Kakoudaki, *Anatomy of a Robot*, 9

²³ Gregory Hampton, *Imagining Slaves and Robots in Literature, Film, and Popular Culture: Reinventing Yesterday's Slave with Tomorrow's Robot*, (London: Lexington Books, 2015), 3.

²⁴ Kakoudaki, *Anatomy of a Robot*, 11

²⁵ Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology* (Polity Press: 2019), 58.

²⁶ Louis Chude-Sokei, "Race and Robotics," in *Cyborg Futures. Social and Cultural Studies of Robots and AI*, ed. Teresa Heffernan (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 164.

explains that narratives that involve robots will often illustrate the political, institutional and philosophical structures which facilitate slavery: "Robot stories showcase the longevity of repressive structures and separatist or racist epistemologies and the authority of legal institutions, their ability to confer or ascertain different definitions of personhood."²⁷ It is clear from its origin, common use in fiction, and continued discussion in scholarship that the robot as slave allegory provides the opportunity for science fiction works to engage with narratives and histories of enslavement.

Following this scholarly and textual tradition, *Westworld* makes use of the robot as slave allegory. In the show, wealthy white people act out colonial fantasies of conquering the American west by exploiting a disenfranchised population of Hosts (robots). Thematically, slavery runs through the veins of *Westworld*. The Hosts are imprisoned against their will, forced to perform labour that benefits others, and have no rights, recognition, or bodily autonomy—both for other characters and the audience, the Hosts of *Westworld* function as slaves. However, *Westworld* employs the robot as slave allegory to critique notions of freedom and liberty broadly, all while setting the narrative in an American colonial setting reminiscent of the era of Black slavery in America. It does this while using white bodies to portray many of these allegorically robotic slaves, and without bringing race into the narrative in any perceptible way. As such, while *Westworld* is able to bring in commentary on slavery and freedom on a macro scale, it visually and thematically appropriates the history of Black slavery in America, through a colourblind and colonial lens. The audience is often aligned with the white characters, gaining

²⁷ Kakoudaki, *Anatomy of a Robot*, 115

sympathy for their supposed indentured plight as robots, as seen through how the audience aligns with Dolores and her victim centric narrative.

Sherryl Vint proposes that the definition of "the human" has been historically centred in the justification of slavery and that *Westworld* draws attention to this. She points out that "Aristotle famously defined the slave as a living tool, an extension of the master's will not significantly different from an inanimate object, and the Hosts as simultaneously objects of technology *and* entities with experiences of the world epitomise this conundrum."²⁸ Vint further posits that the Hosts are inferior to humans based on their synthetic rather than biologic origins: "Delos Corporation deems an algorithmic mind necessarily inferior to a biological one, and also sees manufacture (rather than birth) as necessarily and eternally categorising the Hosts as less than human."²⁹ Vint's work points to *Westworld's* successful engagement with slavery broadly, and its use of the robot as a suitable figure to allegorically portray slavery. The dichotomy between synthetic and biologic illustrates the false differentiations between people that have been used historically to justify slavery.

While the show does follow in the literary line of using robots as an allegory for slavery broadly, as Vint explains, it also lacks appropriate contextualization of the historical setting of Black slavery in America. Vint's critique lacks an acknowledgement that *Westworld* cherry picks aspects of slavery to address, which it does so while blindly appropriating the history of Black slavery in America, and uses white bodies to do so.

²⁸ Sherryl Vint, "Long Live the New Flesh: Race and the Posthuman in *Westworld*," in *Reading Westworld*, eds. Alex Goody and Antonia Mackay (Palgrave Macmillan. 2019), 147.

²⁹ Vint, "Long Live the New Flesh", 148

The park's large-scale recreation of colonial settings also situates the Hosts as enslaved to the park's human visitors. Like the parks, colonial economies relied on slave labour, which required "dehumanising categories through which to govern disposable labour."³⁰ The violence of this governance is "parallel[ed] in the QA (Quality Assurance) teams that storm Delos headquarters in season two, executing any Host, regardless of individual behaviour, simply because Hosts belong to a category of subjects currently rebelling against the imperial centre."³¹ *Westworld's* colonial settings are tied to visions of American manifest destiny and British Imperialism. The wealth of these Empires has been built on slavery, and thus they have controlled who is included and excluded from the definition of "the human".

Anthony Spanakos argues that "Dolores's action fits with the philosophy of Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), who believed that freedom for colonized peoples was impossible without violence against the colonizer."³² Much like the historical revolts of enslaved and labouring populations³³, the Hosts in *Westworld* use violence as a tool to assert their personhood and to seize the resources needed to further their emancipation. As Kakoudaki articulates, robot rebellions are a familiar plot device, but the political nature of those narratives is dependent on the agency the robot characters have:

how political this plotline will be thus depends on the narrative treatment of the robot's agency: the robots rebel because they know they have been oppressed, or they rebel for no reason at all as

³⁰ Vint, "Long Live the New Flesh", 150

³¹ Vint, "Long Live the New Flesh", 150

³² Anthony Spanakos, "Violent Births: Fanon, *Westworld*, and Humanity," in *Westworld and Philosophy: If You Go Looking for the Truth, Get the Whole Thing*, eds James South and Kimberly Engels (Cornwall: John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2018), 229.

³³ American examples include the revolt of slave passengers aboard the Creole ship in 1841, the Turner rebellion of 1831, or the Aponte rebellion of 1812 among countless others.

if they are mechanical maniacs, or it doesn't matter why they rebel as long as they allow us to rebel too [...] Whether or not the premise of robotic mayhem is legible politically, the spectacle of robotic violence itself carries echoes of social uprising, of slave rebellions and socialist revolutions that refer to historical realities and their aftermath in the cultural memory.³⁴

In *Westworld* the motivations of the Host rebellion are based on an attempt to achieve freedom in the broadest sense. There are no political, historical, or social motivations for the Hosts' turn towards violence. Instead, their entire rebellion is a simple continuation of *Westworld's* vague themes of freedom and liberty, rather than a direct link to any real historical slave revolts. Again, since this rebellion is set against the visual backdrop of Black and Indigenous revolts in colonial America, this colourblind and commentary lacking rebellion loses most meaning, except to once again recreate the robot as slave allegory, without context.

Westworld's engagement with the robot slave allegory indicates an awareness of its colonial setting and tropes. Historically, the genre conventions of Westerns have been decidedly racist, as they vilify people of colour and present a narrative of white heroism on the American frontier. As Aaron Bady explores, this villainization is central to assuaging white anxiety around emancipation and the Civil War:

"The Birth of a Nation" to the many Westerns set during Reconstruction, often told the story of the Civil War as one of white heroism and black passivity. Because the war divided American white people between North and South, famously pitting "brother against brother" over the issue of black slavery, the Western told a different story, a mythology of North and South reuniting on an almost completely white frontier, turning their guns on the continent's indigenous peoples instead of on one another.³⁵

³⁴ Kakoudaki, *Anatomy of a Robot*, 126

³⁵ Aaron Bady, "'Westworld.' Race, and the Western," *The New Yorker*, December 9, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/how-westworld-failed-the-western>

The narrative of the park in *Westworld* is structured around these same genre conventions. Guests in the park, primarily white, are offered scripted and tropified characters from this colonial vision. Nameless Indigenous characters are depicted as violent and menacing, and Maeve is characterized using Jezebel and Mammy tropes which were historically used to control and dehumanize enslaved Black women.

However, while the setting, allegorical characterization, and power dynamics at play between the show's heroes and villains affirm *Westworld*'s awareness of colonialism, the show's ability to make any anti-racist commentary fails due to its lack of engagement with race and actual historical slavery. Moreover, when the show includes racist tropes found in mid-century Westerns, these characterizations often read as replications rather than challenges to the traditional ways they have been employed in the past, as will be explored further in the next section. An early season one example of this characterization is the stereotypically menacing portrayal of, Indigenous characters, termed Ghost Nation, almost exclusively shown violently killing white Hosts and guests.³⁶

The primary issue with the anti-colonial commentary *Westworld* seeks to make is its colour-blind outlook — a central concept in critical race theory. The concept holds that while ignoring race in social, cultural, and political situations may create equality in certain areas of opportunity, this perspective ignores the racism and covert racist beliefs that pervade Western culture:

Because it is an ingrained feature of our landscape, racism looks ordinary and natural to persons in the culture. Formal equal opportunity—rules and laws that insist on treating blacks and whites

³⁶ *Westworld*, season 1, episode 7, "Trompe L'Oeil," directed by Frederick E.O. Toye, written by Halley Gross and Jonathan Nolan, aired November 13, 2016, on HBO. 35:39

alike (color blindness)—can thus remedy only the more extreme and shocking forms of injustice that do stand out. It can do little about the business-as-usual forms of racism that people of color confront every day and that account for much misery, alienation, and despair.³⁷

Alison Landsberg draws on the term "postracial mystique" (referring to the belief that Western culture somehow became postracial, while racism at large carried on in society) to describe how this colour blindness manifests in media and *Westworld* in particular.³⁸ As she explains, *Westworld* "constructs a world in which race seems not to matter, goes entirely unmentioned, even as racial stereotypes and hierarchies are embedded in the show's narrative and aesthetics."³⁹ While the show does engage with and condemn slavery and colonialism, its simultaneous refusal to allow race to enter the purview of the narrative means that covert racism still pervades its narrative and genre choices. This dualism of both attempting to make thoughtful commentary on race while perpetuating racist undertones makes any racial engagement *Westworld* is striving for superficial. As Landsberg notes, the show's lack of racial commentary "makes a political response to racism virtually impossible."⁴⁰

The show's postracial perspective makes its robot as slave allegory distinctly apolitical and ahistorical. There is a definitive lack of commentary, dialogue, or even mention of Black slavery in America in *Westworld*; as Sadek Kessous points out in their work "A Mere Instrument of Production: Representing Domestic Labour in *Westworld*": "the show makes no reference to

³⁷ Stefancic and Delgado, *Critical Race Theory*, 2

³⁸ Allison Landsberg, "Post-Postracial America," *Cultural Politics* 14, no. 2 (2018): 199.

³⁹ Landsberg, "Post-Postracial America", 202

⁴⁰ Landsberg, "Post-Postracial America", 203

slavery, its practices, or the ramifications of its cessation."⁴¹ Additionally, and perhaps most upsettingly, *Westworld* engages the "postracial mystique"⁴² by using white actors to portray many of the Hosts characterized as slaves within its colonial setting. In not attending to the historical elements latent in chattel slavery, which its colonial setting draws from, and in using white bodies to portray slaves in America, *Westworld's* commentary on slavery is inadequate and appropriates Black history.

This is not to say the robot cannot ever serve as a figure of racial marginalization. The vast catalogue of Afrofuturist work, such as Janelle Monáe's album *The ArchAndroid* or Kibwe Tavares' film *Robots of Brixton*, demonstrate that the robot figure functions as an excellent metaphor to address the discrimination and dehumanization experienced by Black people. Indeed, Afrofuturism works against traditional science fiction narratives such as *Westworld*, which present predominantly white futures under the guise of being progressively "postracial." As Mark Bould describes, science fiction broadly centralizes white characters and narratives because it wants to create a "color-blind future" to avoid addressing past and current racial issues:

From the 1950s onwards, sf in the US magazine and paperback tradition postulated and presume a color-blind future, generally depicting humankind "as one race, which has emerged from an unhappy past of racial misunderstandings and conflicts" (James 47; see also Kilgore). This shared assumption accounts for the relative absence of people of color from such sf: if race was going to prove unimportant, why even bother thinking about it, when energies could instead be devoted to more pressing matters, such as how to colonize the solar system or build a better robot?⁴³

⁴¹ Sadek Kessous, "A Mere Instrument of Production: Representing Domestic Labour in *Westworld*," in *Reading Westworld*, eds Alex Goody and Antonia Mackay (Palgrave Macmillan. 2019), 210.

⁴² Landsberg, "Post-Postracial America", 199

⁴³ Mark Bould, "The Ships Landed Long Ago: Afrofuturism and Black SF," *Science-Fiction Studies* 34, no. 2 (2007), <https://www.depauw.edu/sfs/abstracts/a102.htm>

In addition to undermining its robot as slave allegory, *Westworld's* postracial colour-blindness functions to distract from other exploitative ways it characterizes its Black characters. Landsberg identifies the show's white supremacist undertones that this colour-blindness masks: "under the guise of being race neutral, or multicultural, the show tacitly affirms white supremacist ideologies, perpetuates stereotypes about the locus of black women's worth, and perhaps most distressingly reserves consciousness and humanity for those with white skin."⁴⁴

The transformation of Charlotte Hale's character is an example of how the narrative perpetuates colonial themes. Hale is introduced in season two as one of the only non-Host Black characters but is quickly killed and remade as a gynoid with her mind replaced with a copy of Dolores, the white protagonist gynoid. In season three, this change becomes increasingly disturbing when Dolores in Hale's body is portrayed as a superior mother to Hale's actual human child. Hope Wabuke addresses the transformation of Hale's character as an act of internal colonization:

Here, the Black woman's body functions as a site of colonization by the violence of whiteness. Here, too, is most damagingly the very clear idea, stated by the white European colonizer in his sophisticated colonizing French accent that the robot Dolores is a better mother to the black child than the black human mother Charlotte ever was. Again, we have the stereotype of the horrible black mother rearing its head. Black women, *Westworld* tells us, are so unmaternal that even a murderous serial killer robot is a better caretaker.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Landsberg, "Post-Postracial America", 202

⁴⁵ Hope Wabuke, "Do Black Lives Matter to *Westworld*? On TV Fantasies of Racial Violence," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, June 4, 2020, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/black-lives-matter-westworld-tv-fantasies-racial-violence/>

The implication that Dolores, a white robot who has never had children, is a better mother to Hale's son reinforces discriminatory stereotypes surrounding Black mothers and reproduces the tired white saviour narrative wherein white women 'rescue' Black children.⁴⁶ In addition, the focus on Black women being mothers, often incompetent or asexual ones, reproduces racist tropes.

In situations like these where the body of Black women are objectified and violated on screen, the audience is pulled into the view of the white colonizer, pushing them to identify with this perspective. A common example is when these characters are killed, the camera shows the perspective of the killer looking down at their victim, or even down the barrel of the gun or knife positioned to kill their victim. This positioning of the audience into the perspective of the colonizer via the camera is known as encirclement – a reference to the circling and trapping action of attackers often on horseback or in wagons in classical Westerns. An example of such a perspective is when Maeve is killed by a white guest standing on a table in the brothel, who shoots her for fun. The camera is positioned from his point of view looking down on her, watching as she dies, confused and in pain.⁴⁷

The show's sexualization of the Black body is also problematic. For instance, a Black Host, Bart, stands naked in front of a white technician who jokes about his penis size, playing into racist stereotypes about black men's virility:

There is a particularly uncomfortable moment in episode 5, in which a black host named Bart has been sent to the behaviour lab because he was encountering technical difficulties; like other hosts

⁴⁶ See Mathew Hughey, *The White Savior Film: Content, Critics, and Consumption* (Temple University Press, 2014).

⁴⁷ *Westworld*, season 1, episode 4, "Dissonance Theory," directed by Vincenzo Natali, written by Ed Brubaker and Jonathan Nolan, aired October 23, 2016, on HBO. 07:51

in this area, he is nude. Elsie, a white behavioral specialist, turns to him, and as she does his penis comes into view. In a joking, off-handed way she says to the nonresponsive host that if he does not stop pouring alcohol on the guests, "I'm going to have to reassign you to a narrative where your... talents... will go tragically to waste."⁴⁸

Especially disconcerting is that the show writers include this interaction in the scene as a moment of comic relief. There is no counterpoint or dissent from the other characters or the setting to call out the joke as racially prejudiced: "The show, in this moment, unreflexively references stereotypes about race, and black virility, instrumentalizing, as it does again and again, black bodies in service of white ones."⁴⁹ This scene reproduces sexual stereotypes regarding Black men and dehumanizes the Black body as Bart cannot react to this voyeurism. His inability to talk or move likewise plays into racist preconceptions of Black men and their sexuality being 'dangerous' or something that needs to be 'controlled.' As Kathryn VanArendonk articulates, "in both *Westworld* and *Westworld*, Bart has been built as an inert, controllable sex toy, appealing for his size and the resulting implication of power and sexual prowess. And at the same time, he's rendered safe because he's restrained."⁵⁰

While violence is a central theme in *Westworld*, the violence enacted on Black characters is noticeably more frequent compared to other characters.⁵¹ While there is the possibility this is an intentional choice by the creators, the implication that Black bodies are always associated

⁴⁸ Landsberg, "Post-Postracial America", 200

⁴⁹ Landsberg, "Post-Postracial America", 200

⁵⁰ Kathryn VanArendonk, "Why *Westworld*'s Throwaway Scene of Black Male Nudity Felt So Dehumanizing," *Vulture*, October 31, 2016, <https://www.vulture.com/2016/10/westworld-black-male-nudity-anatomy-of-a-scene.html>

⁵¹ Wabuke, "Do Black Lives Matter to *Westworld*?", 2020

with being victims or perpetrators is a tired cinematic trope that has become an easy point of exploitation for white filmmakers. As Wabuke articulates, the notion that violence and pain can summarize Black identity is overplayed, insufficient, and exploitative: "can we not get more imaginative than only imagining Black pain as a catalyst in Black life – than monetizing very real Black pain for white entertainment and profit?"⁵² The effect of characterizing Black characters through an almost exclusively violent lens has the potential to alienate Black viewers and cater to already entrenched stereotypes held by white viewers. As a Black female audience member, Wabuke describes the discomfort felt when faced with these violent images, especially as *Westworld* refuses to engage in actual racial commentary: "there is something that just sits uncomfortably with watching these images of anti-black violence in a television series that does not reckon with what these images mean in that time we are living in [...] This is set up to be happy entertainment for the white viewer. For black viewers, it can be triggering and retraumatizing. For me, it was too much. I had to fast forward."⁵³

Film and television have a responsibility to be representative and attentive to the lived experiences of their audiences, as media through which socio-political messages become ingrained in the collective imagination. In not doing so, they risk privileging an androcentric white and heteronormative perspective, and by extension, perpetuating negative messages regarding those who do not fit this narrow definition of personhood. As a form of mass media, network television must be aware of and responsive to the world it inhabits. When writing this thesis, much-needed attention was being drawn to the state of protest and action catalyzed by the

⁵² Wabuke, "Do Black Lives Matter to Westworld?", 2020

⁵³ Wabuke, "Do Black Lives Matter to Westworld?", 2020

death of George Floyd, a Black American man, at the hands of police. This ongoing movement, BLM, continues to focus attention on systemic and institutionalized racism. In the spring of 2020, *Westworld* season three aired. Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, both unarmed Black citizens, were unjustly killed in these same weeks. As an avenue of mass media, there is a critical need for shows such as *Westworld* to address latent racism in our society. However, as Hope Wabuke articulates, *Westworld* has offered up nothing but disappointing, even triggering portrayals of its Black characters:

Westworld, whose mantra is "these violent delights have violent ends," is now and has been in a unique position to say something about the meaning and impact of the sorts of images it puts into the world. But Westworld, after three seasons of existence alongside the Black Lives Matter movement and continued escalating anti-black violence both on its small screen and in the real world, has nothing to say.⁵⁴

In a time of entrenched racial inequality, the use of ultra-violent, sexualized and racist depictions of Black characters makes *Westworld* at best a work of failed commentary in a time ripe for such narratives. At worst, and more likely, it is part of the problem. Overall, while *Westworld* is aware of and addresses themes of colonialism and slavery, it does so in a way that is appropriative and colour blind, which undermines its ability to make thoughtful or coherent commentary. Under the guise of employing a diverse cast and portraying a narrative of slavery in a colonial setting, the show tacitly exploits its Black and Indigenous characters, much in the same way Westerns of mid 20th century American primetime television and Hollywood did. As Wabuke says,

⁵⁴ Wabuke, "Do Black Lives Matter to Westworld?", 2020

"although there is diversity in *Westworld*, the diversity is still relegated to stereotypical, and often painful representations."⁵⁵

Reflexivity and the Western Genre

Westworld follows in the footsteps of Western films that mythologized the 'old West' of American history "as one of white heroism and black passivity" in "an almost completely white frontier."⁵⁶ As Nussbaum articulates, "Westerns were America's proud form of self-mythology: laconic heroes saving the world from bad guys in the name of protecting pure white women, over and over."⁵⁷ Not only does *Westworld* take up the genre tropes of Westerns, it quite literally takes cues from one of the most famous Western directors, John Ford.⁵⁸ Ford was pivotal in establishing the racial tropes found in Westerns, as "no director did more to imagine the Western as a space for playing out the fantasy of white reconciliation."⁵⁹ His words are even quoted in the show by a namesake character as Bady notes:

Even the park's creator seems to be a personal fan of the Western director. Dr. Ford's name is no coincidence: when explaining to Bernard why he has hidden the truth of the park's co-creator, Arnold, he explains that stories take precedence over reality by quoting the most famous line of

⁵⁵ Wabuke, "Do Black Lives Matter to *Westworld*?", 2020

⁵⁶ Bady, "'Westworld' Race, and the Western", 2016

⁵⁷ Nussbaum, "The Meta-Politics of 'Westworld'" 2016

⁵⁸ Bady, 2016. Ford was responsible films such as *Stagecoach* (1939), *Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), and *The Searchers* (1956), among many others.

⁵⁹ Bady, "'Westworld' Race, and the Western", 2016

what might be Ford's last great Western, "The Man Who Killed Liberty Valance": "When fact becomes legend, you print the legend."⁶⁰

Westworld replicates tropes from the Ford era of filmmaking while also reflexively commenting on these problematic tropes. *Westworld* is, in effect, a Western about Westerns and a story about storytelling. As Favard comments, the characters of *Westworld* are storytellers of their world within the Delos Corporation: "Ford and Arnold are researchers in cybernetics and artificial intelligence, but they are also the designers of an entertainment park; and as such, they are *storytellers*."⁶¹

For the Hosts, becoming aware of the fictional nature of their reality means a restructuring of their identities which unlocks a latent potential for escape from their imprisoning script. Maeve, for example, finds her coded narrative on a tablet and understands that her acts of rebellion were pre-written, and this awareness situates her on the narrative boundary between the real and the fictional:

Maeve is thus making a choice not only about what to do, but about her status in the narrative—that of Ford, of the revolution, of Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan—that many other characters do not seem to acknowledge; their ignorance is underlined by the series, emphasizing their 'character-ness'—and thus, their status as artificial, controlled beings, whether they are Hosts or humans.⁶²

⁶⁰ Bady, "'Westworld' Race, and the Western", 2016

⁶¹ Florent Favard, "'The maze wasn't made for you': Artificial consciousness and reflexive narration in *Westworld* (HBO, 2016-)", *TV/Series* 14 (December 2018): 5.

⁶² Favard, "'The maze wasn't made for you': Artificial consciousness and reflexive narration in *Westworld* (HBO, 2016-)", 9.

Thus, awareness—of story or self—imbues Hosts with an understanding of how they might re-program and construct a future and identity distinct from those imposed on them by humans. As Vint explained earlier, these new identities would be distinctly posthumanist and separate from the capitalist sphere, which privileges the liberal humanist subject.

A story about storytellers and the characters they create breaking away from stories is a complex narrative for the audience to unpack. Much like the Hosts trying to make sense of their timelines as they claw their way to consciousness, memory and its unreliability play a vital role for the audience as they attempt to navigate the intertwining and non-linear plot of the show: "just as memory is the first key to unlocking the Hosts' consciousness,"—and, subsequently, their humanity—"it is the first step for the audience to understand what *Westworld* is trying to accomplish with its plot."⁶³

At the genre level, this reflexivity emerges as *Westworld* re-imagines the classic Ford-built Western narrative from a predominantly female lens.⁶⁴ As Suzanne Köller articulates, "the series creates female characters beyond the binary of damsel-in-distress and female (action-) hero by using strategies and devices of serial narrative complexity to not merely portray women, but indeed portray their portrayal."⁶⁵ Köller further posits that *Westworld's* ability to create female characters who are, on a fictional level, also agents in their own fictive stories as Hosts allows the show to provide commentary on female characters in film and television broadly:

⁶³ Favard, "'The maze wasn't made for you': Artificial consciousness and reflexive narration in *Westworld* (HBO, 2016-)", 7; Vint, "Long Live the New Flesh: Race and the Posthuman in *Westworld*", 152.

⁶⁴ Susanne Köller, "'I imagined a story where I didn't have to be the damsel': Seriality, Reflexivity, and Narratively Complex Women in *Westworld*," *ZAA* 67, no. 2 (2018): 164.

⁶⁵ Köller, "Seriality, Reflexivity, and Narratively Complex Women in *Westworld*", 164.

By presenting its female android characters as literal characters, functions, devices—that is, constructions—which develop an ambiguous autonomy and agency, the series does not merely engage in an entertaining and challenging display of meta-storytelling but in a deeper level of (self-) reflexivity that lays bare, comments on, and ultimately undermines established, received notions of femininity in popular and visual culture as part of a larger negotiation of the creative process and practices of storytelling.⁶⁶

Westworld's trope-resisting female characters suggest that women's agency is always there in a genre that primarily portrays women as helpless narrative devices.

However, are all of *Westworld's* female characters afforded this agency? While the mere presence of complex female characters provides intrinsic commentary on the typical roles offered to women in Westerns, as stated earlier, if the gynoid is to be adequately evaluated in relation to its status as gendered, then it must also be evaluated in relation to race in tandem with gender. As this work explores later, the show still reproduces many classic Western tropes and conventions with its female characters, several of which are racist and misogynistic.

Westworld's reflexivity on narrative, memory, humanity, genre, and gender is captured in its opening credits. The scene portrays a half-made Host riding a horse, referencing the false galloping horse trick used in classic Western filmmaking:

She strikes the pose of late 19th century Wild West carney shows that toured America's Midwest. Laterally, then, she evokes the vanishing horse rider in cinema: from a grizzled John Wayne with reins in teeth, blasting two rifles in *True Grit* (Henry Hathaway, 1969) to Robert Redford's illuminated jacket in *The Electric Horseman* (Sydney Pollack, 1979) to Paul Newman's stilted theatrics in *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (Robert Altman, 1976).⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Köller, "Seriality, Reflexivity, and Narratively Complex Women in *Westworld*", 168

⁶⁷ Philip Brophy, "Post-Human Post-Cinema: The Opening Titles of *Westworld*," *Senses of Cinema* 89, (December 2018): <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2018/feature-articles/post-human-post-cinema-the-opening-titles-of-westworld/>

The replacement of these iconic male figures astride their horses with a robotic, semi-formed female cowboy provides a striking image that turns the classic image on its head. However, as Philip Brophy notes, this does not mean the Western has been made into a better version of itself. It is most likely foreshadowing a haunting return of the ghost of Westerns past, and its darker possibilities in a postmodern context: "to have the West revisit us with vengeance: this is the chilling undercurrent animating the opening title sequences simulations."⁶⁸

Another iconic image of the opening sequence is the re-imagined Vitruvian man, using a synthetic, partially made, bright white Host attached to a ring. Katarzyna Burzyńska sees this image as a reversal of Renaissance notions of human perfectibility.⁶⁹ The Vitruvian Man was an image deeply rooted in humanism, which Burzyńska points out is tied to the exclusion of many marginalized identities: "Both anti-humanist and posthumanist scholars have demonstrated how post-Enlightenment, supposedly modern, notions of humanism have so far excluded marginalised groups of women, sexual 'others,' or the disenfranchised."⁷⁰ In rejecting the classic Vitruvian Man, *Westworld* creates a postmodern vision that challenges outdated and problematic humanist notions of so-called perfect human construction. Instead of offering the Host as an alternative form of perfectibility by placing it in the Vitruvian Man's place, Burzyńska argues the opening credits demonstrate the hubris of humanist notions by using the Host as a parody on the original work: "*Westworld* presents a cynical reversal of the founding Renaissance myth of order

⁶⁸ Brophy, "Post-Human Post-Cinema", 2018

⁶⁹ Katarzyna Burzyńska, "'A new god will walk': Shakespeare, the Renaissance, and the birth of the posthuman in *Westworld*," *Cahiers Elisabethains: A journal of English Renaissance Studies*, 100, no. 1 (2019): 9.

⁷⁰ Burzyńska, "'A new god will walk'", 10

and harmony in the universe. This reversal is encapsulated in the modified version of the central image inspired by *Vitruvian Man*, where the image of beauty is cynically reduced to an intelligent sex doll."⁷¹ Rejecting humanist ideologies of what classifies as "human" returns to Vint's point, as previously elaborated on, that the Hosts are a distinctly posthuman entity—their rejection of the capitalist sphere of production that creates them is likewise a rejection of the perfectionism this sphere assumes to be attainable.

Reflexivity only partially addresses these issues of racism and misogyny as the series also exploits and replicates the spectacle of sexual and racial violence. Michael Forest and Thomas Beckley-Forest contest that in *Westworld's* case, it is hard to unpack whether the show, with its critiques of certain storytelling practices, also participates in and commercially relies on those same practices. As they articulate, "Nolan and Joy may have truly created the ultimate critique of television dramas—one which collapses on itself. *Westworld* can criticize the cynical and formulaic devices of serial television, but it doesn't necessarily break away from those techniques."⁷²

The intentions behind *Westworld's* reflexive elements are impossible to unpack without explanation from the creators themselves. However, situating *Westworld* as a 21st-century for-profit network television show reminds us that the show is not beholden purely to creative intentions. It must also serve HBO and its need for commercial success. Forest and Beckley-Forest explore this as a possible reason why elements of traditional Westerns, like racist violence

⁷¹ Burzyńska, "“A new god will walk”", 9

⁷² Michael Forest and Thomas Beckley-Forest, "The Dueling Productions of *Westworld*. Self-Referential Art of Meta-Kitsch?" in *Westworld and Philosophy: If You Go Looking for the Truth, Get the Whole Thing*, eds James South and Kimberly Engels (Cornwall: John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2018), 192.

and brutal sexual content, are present in *Westworld* alongside attempts to critique this same content: "like the park's gamerunners, the shape of the narratives that Nolan and Joy write are not entirely determined by them—they must follow a corporate imperative to attract sufficient consumer interest or else corporate interest, in this case, HBO, will close down the show and replace them."⁷³ We must question whether *Westworld's* violence, sexualization, and subservient portrayals of racialized characters critique television itself or whether these elements exist purely to ensure commercial success at the expense of relying on problematic tropes.⁷⁴ In effect, we must question, as Forest and Beckley-Forest do, how much our desires as consumers of *Westworld* align with the desires of the park's guests: "If *Westworld*, the park, intertwines the consumer gratification of 'guns and tits' and the idea of 'discovering oneself,' we can suppose that the same is true of *Westworld* as a viewing experience."⁷⁵

Given the uncertainty of the creators' intent, how can problematic portrayals in reflexive shows like *Westworld* be evaluated? The line between recreating tropes and critiquing them is thin. However, more careful consideration of *Westworld's* racialized gynoids demonstrates that these portrayals engender impressionable, sexist, racist, and violent portrayals of racialized women on screen regardless of the creators' intent. Kakoudaki and Vint propose that the robot figure represents the experiences of being a racially othered person and of slavery, making *Westworld's* narrative therefore reflexive of histories of slavery and racial oppression. However, this line of thinking is reductive; these arguments mostly ignore the lived experiences and

⁷³ Forest and Beckley-Forest, "The Dueling Productions of *Westworld*", 186.

⁷⁴ See the Nielson company's study "Mass Appeal: A look at the Cross-Cultural Impact of On-Screen Diversity," *Nielson*, June 18, 2018, <https://www.nielson.com/us/en/insights/article/2018/mass-appeal-a-look-at-the-cross-cultural-impact-of-on-screen-diversity/>

⁷⁵ Forest and Beckley-Forest, "The Dueling Productions of *Westworld*", 190.

perspectives of Black people in America. *Westworld* comments on slavery broadly with its robots as slaves metaphor, but it falls short in addressing the complexities of race and colonialism. This discrepancy is problematic considering the show capitalizes on a colonial era and setting where race was, and continues to be, entrenched into its historical and social dynamics. Delgado and Stefancic explain that how media portrays race cultivates our collective social perceptions of racialized lived experiences. The line the narrative walks between critique and reinforcement of racial realities often ends in exploitative reproductions of race-based violence and sexualization. Are the creators indulging in the "postracial mystique" or challenging this perspective? If *Westworld* is to be genuinely reflexive and create commentary that challenges racist social undercurrents, it must address race in its narrative, not simply capitalize on it through exploiting its Black and Indigenous characters; otherwise, it runs the risk of adding to the ever-growing catalogue of film and television that upholds white supremacist paradigms.

The White Colonizer Fantasy

The lens of the white colonizer is the dominant perspective of American Westerns. As Bady articulates, Westerns privilege the white colonizer perspective and mythologize the era of colonial invasion as one of white heroism against a vilified Indigenous population.⁷⁶ As such, displacing and killing Indigenous characters is one of the genre's entrenched tropes, and *Westworld* reproduces this approach in its adaptation of Ford's style of Western filmmaking. For the park's guests, *Westworld* is best described as "an opportunity to [Live Action Role-play

⁷⁶ Bady, "'Westworld' Race, and the Western", 2016

(LARP)] as a colonizer."⁷⁷ The Indigenous characters in the show—members of the fictional Ghost Nation—have little to no dialogue or plots of their own until midway through season two. Season one depicts Indigenous Hosts as nothing more than a violent threat: the scenes show them riding into battle, hunting children, killing white Hosts, and threatening guests. This anonymous violence is their only role for most of the show: to serve as cannon fodder and nameless villains for the park's guests and white Hosts. These portrayals rely on encirclement to align the audience with the perspective of the colonizer. Unlike when the audience is seated in the position of the white guest looking down on Black female Hosts, the audience often looks up at the Indigenous Ghost Nation characters from the ground, positioning the audience as the victim, making the Indigenous characters appear more menacing and villainous by the camera.⁷⁸

While this may intentionally highlight the historic vilification of Indigenous characters in American Westerns, it is equally as likely that the show is copying this Ford style of filmmaking by casting its Indigenous Hosts as villains. Regardless of the intentions behind this vilification, *Westworld* continues to present these tired and racist images of violent Indigenous villains terrorizing the frontier, and the audience has noticed. As critic Scott Meslow says, "it's long past time for the show to give one of the 'native' hosts something to do besides walking slowly and menacingly toward the camera."⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Scott Meslow, "Westworld is for White People," *GQ*, May 6, 2018, <https://www.gq.com/story/westworld-is-for-white-people>

⁷⁸ *Westworld*, season 2, episode 3, "Virtu e Fortuna," directed by Richard J. Lewis, written by Roberto Patino and Ron Fitzgerald, aired May 6, 2018, on HBO. 55:01

⁷⁹ Meslow, "Westworld is for White People", 2018

While these racist portrayals are pervasive throughout the show, there are some efforts to portray Indigenous characters with more complexity. These efforts include creating a central Indigenous character, Akecheta, who is played by Native actor Zahn McClarnon and who is not a villain⁸⁰, and expanding the amount of Indigenous dialogue, much of which is in the Lakota language.⁸¹ But despite these efforts, the villainization and victimization of Indigenous characters help *Westworld* to build both its show and fictional park around the white settler fantasy. Bundel points to this racist foundation in reviewing season two of the show: "the romanticization of colonization is essential to the appeal of *Westworld* as a park."⁸² In one of the most disturbing scenes of season two that features Indigenous Hosts, Ford freezes a group of Ghost Nation warriors in place and methodically scalps them, leaving them posed in kneeling positions. While he does this to discover the maze imagery that Akecheta has been placing under the scalps of Hosts, the imagery of the white park owner viscerally scalping the Indigenous Hosts is typical of the disturbingly graphic gratuitous scenes of violence against colonized and enslaved Hosts that permeate the series.

The Delos Destinations website attracts guests to the park with the tagline "Welcome to the New World,"⁸³ appealing to settler fantasies of reconquering and subjugating the Indigenous population. Bundel writes that the park re-enacts the colonization of the Western frontier and the

⁸⁰ This switch in how the Indigenous characters are portrayed is noted by Favard, 2018, 11: "once depicted as the evil Other, the Ghost Nation is seen in a new light by both the characters and the viewer, especially during 'Kiksuya' (S02E08), which uses Akecheta as a point-of-view character".

⁸¹ Becky Ferreira, "How 'Westworld' Uses Multilingualism to Explore Prejudice," *Motherboard*, June 11, 2018, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/59qjed/how-westworld-uses-multilingualism-to-explore-prejudice>

⁸² Bundel, "Westworld's white supremacist undertones keep getting louder", 2018

⁸³ "About", Delos Destinations, <https://www.delosdestinations.com/>

genocide of Indigenous peoples that occurred during this violent process: "guests were given the opportunity to re-enact an explicitly racist period in which the U.S. government's 'Manifest Destiny' policies led to an expansion of white colonists across the continent with no regard for native peoples who lived there first."⁸⁴

The colonial frontier as the perfect vacation spot for the wealthy white guests carries over into the other parks featured briefly in season two: Shogun World and The Raj. The Delos website describes Shogun world as a park set during Edo Japan designed to be a more violent and more intense version of Westworld:

For those for whom Westworld is not enough, the true connoisseur of gore can indulge their fantasies with the slash of a katana. Modeled after Japan's Edo period, Shogun World offers a chance for guests to embrace their inner warrior; in a landscape of highest beauty and darkest horror. Let your true self take shape in the land where self-discovery is an art form.⁸⁵

In Shogun World, where Maeve and her party briefly detour during season two, the audience is introduced to the gynoid Akane. While she does not occupy much screen time in the season overall, she is the focus of episodes located in this park. She is introduced as the brothel madam of Shogun world—essentially Maeve's equivalent in this microcosm. Delos Narrative and Design employee Lee Sizemore created both characters and explained to Maeve that Akane is a literal copy of Maeve's character: "If you're asking if you trust Akane, the real question is can you trust yourself?"⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Bundel, "Westworld's white supremacist undertones keep getting louder", 2018

⁸⁵ "Experience", Delos Destinations, <https://www.delosdestinations.com/#experience>

⁸⁶ *Westworld*, season 2, episode 5, "Akane no Mai," directed by Craig Zobel, written by Dan Dietz, aired May 20, 2018, on HBO.

Not only are Maeve and Akane equivalent characters in the Delos universe, but the narrative loops they occupy are copied across their parks as well: the scene introducing Akane features a brothel robbery identical to Maeve's in season one. In-story, we do not have to wonder about the writers' intentions—as Sizemore explains to Maeve: "Yes, fine. I may have cribbed a little bit from *Westworld*. Well, you try writing three hundred stories in three weeks."⁸⁷ Beyond the Hosts learning that their experiences are not unique, this exchange demonstrates that the storylines, lives, and, indeed, cultural landscapes of their worlds are all equivalent to the Delos corporation. The only difference between each of the park's colonial landscapes is who is offered for the predominantly white park guests to violently dominate.

Guests of Delos can choose and experience the colonial fantasy they desire. In *Shogun World*, Akane and her fellow Japanese Hosts fulfill either racially stereotypical roles for Asian characters in American cinema or character types appropriated from Japanese film. The women are shy and weak, the men are driven by honour and are exceedingly violent, and the Hosts' dialogue often draws on poetic rhythm and metaphorical speech. As the demographic the park serves is Western and white, it is intentional that the Hosts align with the guests' collective cultural imagination of the Japanese Edo period, as taught to them by American media. As critic Meslow articulates, "if you grew up loving John Wayne and Clint Eastwood, you have *Westworld* [...] If you grew up loving *Seven Samurai* or *Ran*—or just wanted to see what it felt like to be Tom Cruise in *The Last Samurai*—you have *Shogunworld*."⁸⁸

⁸⁷ *Westworld*, season 2, episode 5, "Akane no Mai," directed by Craig Zobel, written by Dan Dietz, aired May 20, 2018, on HBO.

⁸⁸ Meslow, "Westworld is for White People", 2018

The violence that guests commit against racialized Hosts in *Shogun World* aligns with American colonial fantasies. Like the Indigenous Hosts, many Japanese Hosts are subject to extreme violence: murdered en masse, with a large amount of gore and blood shown on screen. This violent treatment of Japanese characters is endemic to American cinema, as Charles Pulliam-Moore articulates: "The industry as a whole still has a rather glaring problem when it comes to introducing hordes of nameless (and often faceless) Asian actors whose sole role is to end up being hurt or killed in some sort of conflict involving white people."⁸⁹

Nolan and Joy have described their creation of *Shogun World* as rooted in their desire to replicate Samurai films:

You had this wonderful call and response between these two genres—with the gunslinger and the ronin. They have identical tropes but are set within different cultures. Frankly, this was just a great excuse to go and make a samurai movie with all the trimmings.⁹⁰

Nolan and Joy are fans of Japanese cinema, and their desire to pay it homage comes from that reverence. However, regardless of the creators' intentions, this homage still plays into violent and racist expectations for Japanese culture and Western media consumers. The audience of *Westworld*, much like the clientele of *Westworld*, is primarily white, and *Shogun World* presents them with images of white colonizers invading and consuming racialized subjects. A Western corporation, Delos, and Western filmmakers, Nolan and Joy, culturally appropriate Japanese cinema to create entire worlds for white colonial consumption.

⁸⁹ Charles Pulliam-Moore, "*Westworld* Has to Acknowledge the Racist Appeal of *Shogun World*," *Gizmodo*, April 28, 2018, <https://gizmodo.com/westworld-has-to-acknowledge-the-racist-appeal-of-shogu-1825507485>

⁹⁰ James Hibberd, "*Westworld* creators break silence on 'spectacular' *Shogun World* plan," April 9, 2018, <https://ew.com/tv/2018/04/09/westworld-shogun-world-interview/>

In addition to Shogun World, creators Nolan and Joy decided to deviate from the 1973 film's Roman World and Medieval World by introducing *another* colonial park: The Raj, a recreation of colonial India during the peak of British imperialism. In comparing Westworld, Shogun World, and The Raj, these parks are all designed around the image of colonial occupation and invasion. Nevertheless, Nolan and Joy describe their new parks as reaching a broader, non-Western audience:

Part of the reason we're going to Shogun World instead of to Roman World or Medieval World is, yes, you saw those in the original film. But also if you're doing a theme park, you wouldn't limit it to the Western European or North American experience. You'd try to reach a global audience. So the idea is you have a texture here that's totally different.⁹¹

The audience they reference could be the fictional guests targeted by Delos or *Westworld's* viewership, but given the alliance the show engenders between the two, they may as well be the same. However, as noted, this attempt to appeal to a "global" audience has failed in the real world, and Delos' guests, much like the show's audience members, are almost exclusively white. The Raj is no exception.⁹² As Bundel articulates, this world is designed to replicate the experience of the British colonizer for the white guests: "Raj World is British to a fault, including tea on the lawn of a grand house staffed by hosts, the servant class of which are all South Asian. This is where the rich and powerful go to re-enact the colonizing of Africa and South Asia by European countries."⁹³ Despite Nolan and Joy's decision to create both Shogun

⁹¹ Hibberd, "Westworld creators break silence", 2018

⁹² Meslow, 2018. In the opening scene to The Raj, white guests are served by a large group of Indian Hosts while they converse with each other, smoke, relax, or receive manicures. The imperialist tone is further conveyed by the scene's background music: a sitarist version of "Seven Nation Army" by the White Stripes.

⁹³ Bundel, "Westworld's white supremacist undertones keep getting louder", 2018

World and The Raj as a possible interrogation of colonial histories and settings, their reliance on the stereotyping and victimization of racialized characters creates three parks (and seasons) that still romanticize white colonizer narratives without making any clear commentary.⁹⁴

As Delgado and Stefancic articulate, shows rarely portray racialized characters with the same dynamic individuality afforded to white characters.⁹⁵ Instead, it is expected and accepted within the American film industry that racialized characters fulfill stock, powerless, and stereotypical roles: "minorities are buffoons, clowns, maids, or Willie Hortons and only rarely fully individuated human beings with sensitivities, talents, personalities, and frailties."⁹⁶ As a result, white guests, audiences and filmmakers "create culture at outsiders' expense. And [they get] to sleep well at night, too."⁹⁷

Maeve And Black Female Tropes

The need for an intersectional perspective is most apparent in the portrayal of gynoids within female filmic tropes, as these tropes most clearly demonstrate how gynoids are victimized because of their interwoven racial and gendered status. Maeve, for example, is depicted with

⁹⁴ See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Toronto: Random House, 1979). Said explains the hegemonic and racialized lens that Western culture portrays Eastern culture. The white colonizer narratives employed in the Raj and Shogun World could be seen as created through a lens of orientalism – both by the show and Delos storytellers.

⁹⁵ Stefancic and Delgado, *Critical Race Theory*, 329

⁹⁶ Stefancic and Delgado, *Critical Race Theory*, 329

⁹⁷ Stefancic and Delgado, *Critical Race Theory*, 329

exaggerated female tropism, which is a core and systemic tenet of gynoid characters in this series.

Maeve's intensified tropism prevents her from being a fully realized character in her own right. The layer of technology that permeates her existence creates enough distance from true humanity to justify treating her as inferior to human women. A Black, human woman depicted in the sexualized and victimized roles that Maeve experiences would be unacceptable to show viewers. This understanding of audience distaste for gendered violence and sexualization is clear from the lack of—or, at least, exponentially less severe—brutality suffered by all the human women in the series. As a gynoid, without the character 'rights' and privileges of a human, Maeve is more brutalized on screen.

Nevertheless, this gynoid character does not exist in a vacuum. As mentioned above, *Westworld's* gynoids are visually indistinguishable from humans. Furthermore, as Landsberg articulates, "though hosts are understood to be androids, they are played by actors."⁹⁸ As discussed later in this section, Maeve's characterization is also tied to a long history of slavery in America, which relied upon cultural archetypes to control, abuse, and subordinate Black women. Attempting to separate a gynoid character from the human elements she (and the actor who plays her) is linked to ignores the tropes and the violence that Black women are subjected to regularly. Moreover, for viewers who identify with the central gynoid characters, this means identifying with characters who have less agency. For racialized viewers, identifying with the tropified characters means facing their own lived racialized experiences, as interpreted by mainstream white society and further as confined to strict archetypal structures rooted in a history of chattel

⁹⁸ Landsberg, "Post-Post-racial America", 200

slavery. This identification leads to an impact on the self-worth of racialized viewers—as articulated by Delgado and Stefancic—who do not see their authentic lived experiences represented on screen but instead must bear witness to repetitive racist and violent tropes of racialized characters.⁹⁹ As Wabuke describes, the reliance on "Black pain"¹⁰⁰ as the core identifier for Black experience is tired and difficult to witness on screen as a Black spectator.

There are two central Black female film tropes placed on Maeve: the Jezebel trope and the asexual mother trope.¹⁰¹ Delgado and Stefancic point out that Black female tropes in the media are a common issue, as Black women are often only portrayed within a small selection of these. Indeed, it is some of the tropes they point to that Maeve's character aligns with: "In film, where female roles often revolve around their sexuality, black women struggle to be cast in lead roles and as love interests; black women are typically relegated to bit parts as prostitutes, asexual mother figures or neck-rolling mummies."¹⁰² She is quite literally the prostitute figure as the brothel madame, and she is the ultimate asexual mother, as she is constantly driven to find the Host child assigned to her in a previous narrative.

Most disturbingly, however, Maeve fulfills the Jezebel trope. The Jezebel character is a trope derived from the era of Black enslavement in America marked by exaggerated sexuality and intelligence.¹⁰³ As Patricia Hill-Collins describes, it was beneficial for slave owners to

⁹⁹ Stefancic and Delgado, *Critical Race Theory*, 328

¹⁰⁰ Wabuke, "Do Black Lives Matter to Westworld?", 2020

¹⁰¹ Köller, "Seriality, Reflexivity, and Narratively Complex Women in *Westworld*", 171

¹⁰² Stefancic and Delgado, *Critical Race Theory*, 447

¹⁰³ Köller, "Seriality, Reflexivity, and Narratively Complex Women in *Westworld*", 171

culturally intertwine Black women with uncontrollable sexuality to justify sexually assaulting them: "the institutionalized rape of enslaved black women spawned the controlling image of the Jezebel of sexually wanton Black woman. This representation redefined Black women's bodies as sites of wild, unrestrained sexuality that could be tamed but never completely subdued."¹⁰⁴ This assumed uncontrollable sexuality was an early trope that arose from a capitalist, slave-owning white society that transformed women's bodies into an economic and political site of patriarchal control. The image of the Jezebel woman creates an inescapable paradox for Black women: if they are perceived as too intelligent, too sexual, or too capable, they are labelled Jezebels; "loose" or "uncontrollable" needing to be tamed. On the other hand, if they are not seen as intelligent, attractive, or capable, they are infantilized or made into the asexual Mammy. Either way, Black women's sexuality is defined and controlled by the patriarchy.

Köller, who, as described earlier in this work, argues that *Westworld's* female characters are given agency and complexity that challenges traditional Westerns, also notes that Maeve is "a version of the archetypal Jezebel character, which originates in stereotypes constructed to justify the sexual abuse of enslaved Black women: overtly sexual, confident, and self-reliable, scheming and strategic, and primarily egotistical."¹⁰⁵ Maeve is often portrayed in sexual situations that combine her seductive prowess, acute intelligence, and scheming personality. Throughout the show, one monologue that defines her entire character is programmed into her as a core drive by a white writer on the Delos team. The monologue is used to attract brothel customers:

¹⁰⁴ Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Sexual Politics. African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, (Taylor and Francis, 2004), 56.

¹⁰⁵ Köller, "Seriality, Reflexivity, and Narratively Complex Women in *Westworld*", 171-172

You can hear it, can't you? That little voice. The one that's telling you, "Don't stare too long. Don't touch. Don't do anything you might regret." I used to be the same. Whenever I wanted something, I could hear that voice telling me to stop. To be careful. To leave most of my life un-lived. You know the only place that voice left me alone? In my dreams. I was free. I could be as good, or as bad, as I felt like being. And if I wanted something, I could just reach out and take it. But then I would wake up, and the voice would start all over again. So I ran away, crossed the shining sea. And when I finally set foot back on solid ground, the first thing I heard was that goddamn voice. Do you know what it said? [...] It said, "In this world, you can be whoever the fuck you want."¹⁰⁶

Maeve's monologue is filled with lines drawing attention to her lack of freedom and her cunning drive to escape. In drawing on themes of agency, confidence, escape, and planning, these lines align directly with the Jezebel trope and the context of American slavery. This monologue is delivered to an audience that knows Maeve is not choosing to have sex with any of the guests she must "seduce." Instead, she is repeatedly raped within her narrative loop, and only once she gains consciousness and memory does she stop repeating these lines and rebel against the Jezebel trope.

However, Maeve is not always portrayed as a Jezebel or in the prostitute role; she later inhabits pastoral and asexual motherhood. This trope is often imposed on Black women as the opposite to the Jezebel—associated with safety, submission, domesticity, and, perhaps most importantly, lack of sexuality. As Hill-Collins explains, this trope was also used as a means of control: "to justify the exploitation of domestic servants, White elites created controlling images of Uncle Tom and Mammy as prototypes of asexual, safe, assimilated, and subordinated Black people."¹⁰⁷ In the flashbacks to Maeve's previous narrative as a mother, she lives a pastoral life,

¹⁰⁶ *Westworld*, season 1, episode 2, "Chetbut," directed by Richard J. Lewis, written by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, aired October 9, 2016, on HBO.

¹⁰⁷ Hill-Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 57.

quite literally, in a cabin devoid of any Host men for miles. She wears long, white, neck-to-floor length robes—an aesthetic signal of safety, propriety, and chastity.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, she is consistently victimized by the Man in Black, a white guest who also owns Westworld (and thus by proxy Maeve and her daughter), who comes and kills them. In these scenes, she repeatedly exhibits extreme horror, unable to fight back as he murders her daughter before her. The on-screen violence enacted upon her aligns entirely with the conventions of the asexual mother trope and its roots in American slavery.

Similarly, Maeve's (re)turn to motherhood occurs on the cusp of her rebellion: she is suddenly drawn by the thought of her daughter to abandon the train (her means of escape) and to run back into the park to search for this Host girl assigned to her years ago. The controlling angle here is apparent: instead of freedom from both Westworld and *Westworld*, Maeve is pushed back into enslavement and the narrative by her sudden obligations as a mother. This move to entrench her in the motherhood trope reduces her character to conventional gender norms and detracts from her free will. As Elizabeth Mullen articulates, "she cannot resist her coding as mother and gets off the train to find the daughter she knows is only a construction—a seemingly inevitable slide back into traditional female gender norms."¹⁰⁹ Yet the show's creators have argued that Maeve's choice to abandon the train is an act of free will. As Favard articulates, "she sees a mother and her daughter, and suddenly decides to head back to the park, thus acting out of free will for the first time: an act dramatically highlighted by the plot and setting, and that writers,

¹⁰⁸ *Westworld*, season 1, episode 8, "Trace Decay," directed by Stephen Williams, written by Charles Yu and Lisa Joy, aired November 20, 2016 on HBO. 30:30

¹⁰⁹ Elizabeth Mullen, "'Not much of a rind on you': (De)Constructing Genre and Gender in *Westworld* (Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan, HBO, 2016-)," *TV/Series* 14, (2018): 6.

Joy and Nolan, made sure to underscore in subsequent interviews."¹¹⁰ Similarly, while Köller mentions the racism of the Jezebel trope, she argues that this is "effectively countered" by Maeve's motherhood.¹¹¹ Again, regardless of the creators' intentions, the impact of these representations must be examined: instead of Black liberation, the audience witnesses Maeve being pulled back from true independence into the Jezebel's sister trope of asexual motherhood and assimilation. The idea that one trope could cancel out the other does not acknowledge the full extent of racist representations in the media or *Westworld*, nor how the audience absorbs these. Whether her abandonment of the train indicates a moment of free will being enacted or denied, it is a transitory scene between two racist tropes that have been used to justify violence against Black women.

Indeed, Maeve never escapes this trope. Cyclically returning to the draw of pastoral motherhood, she remains trapped in this state for the remainder of season two. Even after multiple deaths and opportunities to attempt to escape the park, her core drive remains to regain her motherhood. This quest to reclaim her child could itself be seen as a form of reclaiming her freedom, as historically Black women have had their children stolen from them by white slave owners, and on an institutional level, by state social systems which target disenfranchised Black women. However, even this act of seeking freedom through acquiring a child maintains the motherhood trope. Consequently, she spends the season away from the main plot and her previous quest to escape the park and learn about reality. In effect, she is demoted to a subplot. While she contributes to the audience's understanding of Host consciousness, she does not seek

¹¹⁰ Favard, "Artificial consciousness and reflexive narration in *Westworld*", 8

¹¹¹ Köller, "Seriality, Reflexivity, and Narratively Complex Women in *Westworld*", 172

this awareness for herself. Instead, she seeks out her former daughter, who has since been assigned to another Black female Host who resembles Maeve.

Within the white American filmmaking industry, the tropes applied to Black women are often excused by individual filmmakers who believe that they are simply following industry standards or that they must rely on these tropes to connect with their audience's expectations.¹¹² As Delgado and Stefancic explain, white filmmakers often turn to these stereotyping archetypes out of their perception that they are necessary to the creation of "good films":

the rationalization goes, another filmmaker is free to make an antiracist movie that will cancel out any minor stereotyping in the one I am making. My movie may have other redeeming qualities; besides, it is good entertainment and everyone in the industry uses stock characters like the black maid or the bumbling Asian tourist. How can one create film without stock characters?¹¹³

Given the normalization of these tropes in the industry, *Westworld* is keeping up with industry standards.

In maintaining these "standards," *Westworld* leaves viewers to either continue to associate these archetypes with Blackness and femininity or, for racialized female viewers, to dissociate from the screen and story. Making Maeve a site of tropism instead of dynamic characterization engenders a problematic relationship with the screen for viewers, making their ability to identify with the protagonist contingent on accepting her treatment. This treatment ultimately leads to her sexualization, brutalization, inability to access the main plot, and death (although not a final one) in season two due to an unnamed park operator's stray bullet. Even

¹¹² Stefancic and Delgado, *Critical Race Theory*, 327

¹¹³ Stefancic and Delgado, *Critical Race Theory*, 327

when Maeve breaks away from her prescribed roles within the park, this gendered and violent characterization continues. This treatment, however, would not be possible without her gynoid status, as it distances her from real human womanhood, and therefore gives the creators licence to depict her more viscerally and literally more inhumanly, even though her character is simultaneously portrayed in a way meant to garner sympathy and belief in her personhood. Simultaneously, tropifying gynoids in this way plays into the patriarchal desires of white society and thus maintains boundaries of exclusion within the industry of precisely *who* is the viewer. In *Westworld's* case, this aligns with *Westworld's* guests: white and male.

This tropification and stereotyping of Maeve reinforces the audience as seated in the perspective of the white colonizer. When Maeve is killed or tortured the camera (and thus the audience) often looks down on her from the perspective of the perpetrator. As will be explored further in the next section she is often positioned beneath Dolores by the camera, which positions the audience alongside Dolores in a physical and metaphorical position of power over Maeve. Similarly, Bernard the Black Host from Delos HQ is turned on by his white technicians and colleagues. In one such scene, the camera angle looks down the barrel of the gun held by a white Delos operative aiming at Bernard, situating the audience alongside the white attacker, gazing at the terrified Black Host.¹¹⁴

Maeve And Dolores

Maeve is not only subject to racist tropes as a Black woman, but she is also subject to more brutal treatment than her white counterparts. This depiction impacts the viewer's perception

¹¹⁴ *Westworld*, season 2, episode 4, "The Riddle of the Sphinx," directed by Lisa Joy, written by Gina Atwater and Jonathan Nolan, aired May 13, 2018, on HBO. 11:19

of hierarchies latent in race relations between the show's gynoid characters, elevating white women above racialized ones. We see a substantial difference between their portrayals when comparing the two main gynoid protagonists, Maeve and Dolores. In effect, while Maeve and Dolores are equals in terms of narrative centrality and status as female gynoids, they are treated differently in the narrative of *Westworld*, beyond simply the park of Westworld, according to racial difference. Dolores is often portrayed with more sensitivity, privilege, and romanticization than Maeve. Where Dolores is less brutalized and kindly walked towards consciousness, Maeve is subject to more violence and must seize her consciousness from her creators. As Landsberg notes, there is "a deep racism underlying the different storylines created for Dolores and Maeve at the park."¹¹⁵ It is essential to examine these storylines, in addition to the tropes applied to Maeve, as they demonstrate how white gynoids are privileged over racialized ones.

Situationally, Maeve and Dolores' living conditions and lifestyles read as opposing situations of privilege and disenfranchisement. Dolores is the daughter of a rancher who lives in a pastoral landscape outside the limits of the town, and she spends her days exploring, sleeping in, and riding with her lover.¹¹⁶ Her morning typically begins with her waking peacefully in bed before coming downstairs to greet her father and head out into the world:

Peter Abernathy: You headed out to set down some of this natural splendour?

Dolores: Thought I might.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Landsberg, "Post-Postracial America", 201

¹¹⁶ Landsberg, "Post-Postracial America", 201

¹¹⁷ *Westworld*, season 1, episode 1, "The Original," directed by Jonathan Nolan, written by Jonathan Nolan, Lisa Joy and Michael Crichton, aired October 2, 2016, on HBO.

Meanwhile, Maeve is a prostitute who must earn her living, and she rarely gets the freedom of leaving the town of Sweetwater to explore the park. Landsberg notes these differences of narrative freedom and living circumstances in her evaluation of the characters:

While their narratives offer them the freedom to roam the idyllic, sweeping, western landscapes at will, Maeve's narrative ties her exclusively to the whorehouse in town. Dolores is part of a nuclear family; she lives with her father who loves and protects her. Her storyline in the park is also inflected by notions of true love and romance. She fervently believes that one day she and Teddy will be together. She does not work for a living but wanders the park at will, shops in town, or engages in painting, which is her hobby. Maeve, by contrast, has a storyline with no family; she is jaded and cynical, and she works for a living.¹¹⁸

In addition to the differences, Maeve and Dolores' different living situations impact how they interact with guests. As Dolores lives away from the main town, she only interacts with guests when visiting Sweetwater in the morning or if they happen to meet her while she is painting in the wilderness. In addition, she enjoys the ability to escape the guests if she so chooses due to her increased mobility. Maeve, meanwhile, is trapped in Sweetwater, and more specifically, the brothel and bar, which is the first stop for most guests. Consequently, Maeve is constantly in scenes where guests are present, while Dolores is often seen only with other Hosts whom she chooses to be around. Maeve is therefore granted less agency and is more often subjected to the whims of humans and Hosts alike, while Dolores is granted agency in her daily narrative through her access to privacy.

Dolores and Maeve are also treated dichotomously by park staff—mirroring the lived experiences of racialized persons who must often navigate complex and negative interactions with systems and figures of authority. Dolores is handled with care: as the original Host, she is

¹¹⁸ Landsberg, “Post-Post-racial America”, 201-202

treated kindly during update sessions, is addressed by name, and is often spoken to with terms of endearment. In one scene involving a technician and the head of security, the dialogue demonstrates the respect and recognition Dolores receives from the staff:

Dolores: I'm in a dream

Security: That's right, Dolores, you're in a dream. A dream that can determine your life.

You wanna wake up from this dream, Dolores?

Dolores: Yes. I'm terrified.

Security: There's nothing to be afraid of. As long as you answer my questions correctly, you understand?

Dolores: Yes

[...]

Technician: Wipe's complete. You don't think any of that had an impact on her core code?

Security: Not good old Dolores. Know why she's special? She's been repaired so many times she's practically brand new. Don't let that fool you. She's the oldest Host in the park. C'mon sweetheart, tell us what you think of your world.¹¹⁹

Meanwhile, Maeve is often shown in compromising situations with the technicians and is rarely referred to by name—instead, called "thing" or "it." For example, in one body shop scene, her abdomen is cut open, and she wakes up bleeding on the table. The technicians panic, and the following interaction ensues:

Technician 1: Asshole, you forgot to put it in sleep mode!

(both panic)

Technician 1: Stop, put that down! You break anything in her head we have to file a damage report! Uh... ok... Let's talk to her. What's her name?

¹¹⁹ *Westworld*, season 1, episode 1, "The Original," directed by Jonathan Nolan, written by Jonathan Nolan, Lisa Joy and Michael Crichton, aired October 2, 2016, on HBO.

Technician 2: Maeve.

Technician 1: Hi, Maeve. Maeve, hi. Look, you gotta calm down! Let's sit down and we can help you.

Maeve: Keep your fucking hands off me!

[...]

Technician 2: I swear I put it in sleep mode.

Technician 1: Oh does this look like fucking sleep mode?! Calm the fuck down and help me move this thing before someone sees.¹²⁰

It is clear from interactions like this that there is a discrepancy in how the staff treat Maeve and Dolores, which mirrors how figures of authority treat racialized and non-racialized persons in reality. While this dichotomy may be set up deliberately to expose institutionalized racism reflexively, there is no mention or discussion of race itself in these scenes, or any scenes, where Maeve and Dolores are treated differently. As such, regardless of what the show may be trying to draw attention to here, it is in effect reproducing the racist dynamics audiences expect when Black characters interact with figures of authority on screen.

Furthermore, scenes like the one in which Maeve is cut open on the table are common occurrences. As a racialized gynoid, she is more often viscerally brutalized on screen than her white counterparts. There is a noticeable difference in how much violence Maeve and Dolores experience, as is most evident in season two. In one rare moment, when their worlds and storylines collide, Maeve lies shot and bleeding on a table on the cusp of death, about to be tortured, while Dolores stands over her, watching calmly. The camera is situated from the perspective of Dolores, looking down on Maeve, engendering a colonial and objectifying

¹²⁰ *Westworld*, season 1, episode 2, "Chetbut," directed by Richard J. Lewis, written by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, aired October 9, 2016, on HBO.

perspective of Maeve.¹²¹ Dolores mocks Maeve's attempt to find her daughter, stating, "The kin they gave us is just another rope they use to lash us down."¹²² She says this despite having been obsessed with protecting her assigned father this whole season. Dolores then offers to kill Maeve out of pity instead of offering to let her join her army. The scene is disturbing not only because of the difference in violence but also in power—Maeve is positioned physically and metaphorically below Dolores: her narrative and motivations are belittled, and she is pitied and seen as weak.

Maeve is left on the table and continues to suffer as the techs prepare her for vivisection. For several scenes, across several episodes, Maeve is pinned to a table with her skin peeled back, revealing her internal organs. In one particularly gruesome scene, the technician torturing her increases her pain sensitivity simply for his enjoyment. This horrifying display must give us pause to remember Delgado and Stefancic's articulation of the negative impact these sorts of portrayals of racialized characters have on racialized viewers.¹²³ To be presented with an onslaught of violence enacted by white men against Black women must necessarily harm the Black female spectator and her ability to connect with the screen.

After this scene, Maeve remaining in the park rather than joining Dolores searching for freedom demonstrates the racialization in the posthumanist vision of the gynoid that the show offers. While Dolores is granted access to the external world and the opportunity to evolve

¹²¹ *Westworld*, season 2, episode 7, "Les Ecorches," directed by Nicole Kassel, written by Jordan Goldberg and Ron Fitzgerald, aired June 3, 2018, on HBO. 50:38

¹²² *Westworld*, season 2, episode 7, "Les Ecorches," directed by Nicole Kassel, written by Jordan Goldberg and Ron Fitzgerald, aired June 3, 2018, on HBO.

¹²³ Stefancic and Delgado, *Critical Race Theory*, 328

beyond her prescribed roles, Maeve remains confined in the human-built world of the park with her tropified characterization. In the first two episodes of season three, this privileging of posthumanism continues with Dolores' plot happening entirely in the human world, where she has become more powerful and begun to transcend her old *Westworld* role, while Maeve is still trapped in the park, in a simulation that sees her in yet another series of tropified roles, still searching for her daughter.

Of course, Dolores is not fully exempt from exposure to violence. She is subjected to repeated attacks by Host bandits who often inhabit her loop. However, the only violence she endures in season two is being shot by William while roaming free. She only briefly bleeds when shot, the gore is not excessive, and she feels no pain, nor is she even phased by the event. Contrarily, Maeve consistently and disproportionately experiences violence from both guests and Hosts.

Consciousness is how the Hosts of *Westworld* attain freedom, and their paths to reach this posthumanist identity—which, as Vint explains, separates them from their human creators—likewise, diverge along racial lines.¹²⁴ Landsberg notes that while Dolores is guided towards consciousness by Ford and Bernard, Maeve must fight and claw her way into consciousness.¹²⁵ Arnold, as a pawn of Ford, discusses literature with Dolores that deals with themes of reality and escape, such as *Alice in Wonderland*, whose Disney version she has been modelled off. Arnold also attempts to sacrifice himself in service of giving her consciousness and freedom. Ford completes what Arnold started by sacrificing himself at the end of season one, gifting Dolores

¹²⁴ Vint, “Long Live the New Flesh”, 152

¹²⁵ Landsberg, “Post-Post-racial America”, 202

consciousness after carefully guiding and bringing her into true reality through years of architecture. Maeve, meanwhile, must repeatedly wake herself up in moments of trauma in the body shop and hide drawings of the technicians in her floorboards. Through these attempts to guide herself into consciousness, she can eventually wake up through re-traumatization and recollection. However, it is revealed that Ford programmed this violent and abusive cycle into her being and that the consciousness we believe she has achieved is most likely fake. As Landsberg explains, "she was *programmed* to be able to wake herself from sleep, and even more discouraging, she was *programmed* to rebel."¹²⁶

As Landsberg articulates, Dolores is given consciousness while Maeve is never considered a candidate: "for the black woman, the issue of consciousness has never really been on the table. It is only the characters played by white actors who are imagined to have limitless potential."¹²⁷ Following in the long line of tropification and Western genre conventions, access to freedom, bodily autonomy, and a potential posthumanist future are white privileges. Maeve's lack of direct access to consciousness and its liberating, posthumanist potential beyond the park demonstrates the show's reliance on outdated racial power dynamics typical of the Western genre, as well as a lack of attendance to the adverse effects of excluding racialized women from narratives of emancipation for racialized female spectators.

Spectatorship

¹²⁶ Landsberg, "Post-Postracial America", 202

¹²⁷ Landsberg, "Post-Postracial America", 202

As bell hooks argues, the oppositional gaze is a relationship between the screen and Black female viewers. This gaze is a critical interrogation of the screen, rather than an identification with or a derivation of pleasure from it: "identifying with neither the phallogentric gaze nor the construction of white womanhood as lack, critical black female spectators construct a theory of looking relations where cinematic visual delight is the pleasure of interrogation."¹²⁸ This oppositional gaze is rooted in an acknowledgement that media is a system which reproduces and reinforces racism: "when most black people in the United States first had the opportunity to look at film and television, they did so fully aware that mass media was a system of knowledge and power reproducing and maintaining white supremacy."¹²⁹ In understanding the othering that occurs for Black spectators with cinema and television, it is clear that the Black female spectator resides on the very edge of exclusion and must respond to film critically, as there is no opportunity for the Black female spectator to identify with the screen: "black female spectators have had to develop looking relations within a cinematic context that constructs our presence as absence, that denies the 'body' of the black female so as to perpetuate white supremacy and with it a phallogentric spectatorship where the woman to be looked at and desired is white."¹³⁰ While it is not possible without further participant based study to understand the impact on Black spectators of *Westworld*, there is potential for bell hooks' theory to apply. Further study could investigate whether such a relationship of antagonism exists for racialized viewers of the series, or whether, as Stefancic and Delgado propose, they are more inclined to absorb the portrayals created on screen and develop a negative sense of self-worth. Or, perhaps, there exists a blend of

¹²⁸ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 126.

¹²⁹ hooks, *Black Looks*, 117

¹³⁰ hooks, *Black Looks*, 118

these two perspectives, where racialized audiences develop a unique perspective, antagonistic, negative or otherwise with the screen. Further study is needed to investigate this relationship.

As explored in this section, Maeve's portrayal is rife with tropification, violence, and racism. From a lens of oppositional spectatorship, this gives Black female spectators little choice but to adopt a perspective of critical interrogation. As hooks articulates, Black women have rejected or resisted identification with film and television that relies on such racist portrayals: "conventional representations of black women have done violence to the image. Responding to this assault, many black women spectators shut out the image, looked the other way, accorded cinema no importance in their lives," becoming alienated from the experience of watching film and television altogether.¹³¹ The other option is to consciously ignore racist and sexist portrayals in media in order to continue to "enjoy" it: "Most of the women I talked with felt that they consciously resisted identification with films—that this tension made moviegoing less than pleasurable; at times it caused pain."¹³² Decades since bell hooks' work, *Westworld's* treatment of Maeve presents no new options for Black female viewers. For all its diverse casting and attempted genre reflexivity, undercurrents of racism continue to run through the show, giving Black women in the audience the same limited options for a character to identify with as in classic American Westerns. As Hope Wabuke, a Black female scholar and spectator of *Westworld*, articulates, it has become increasingly difficult to watch network shows like *Westworld* in our current climate surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement. It is made for a

¹³¹ hooks, *Black Looks*, 120

¹³² hooks, *Black Looks*, 121

white audience as it deliberately caters to their desire to see, and even enact, violence against Black people:

I have realized that the creators of *Westworld* understand something about their target audience that I never understood about America until this week. Or, if I am honest, I probably understood it, but I didn't want to admit it for my own well-being. The creators of *Westworld* understand that their target audience desperately wishes to enact violence, but only upon a specific type of body deemed acceptable as a site of violence because of its Blackness. And they pander to it, disguised underneath all the signifiers of prestige television¹³³

Westworld's colour blindness and refusal to acknowledge the particular experiences of racialized and white women reinforces this problem by centralizing "womanhood" as a concept that is not intersectional and is therefore assumed as white. This whiteness is perpetuated by scholars like Miguel Sebastián Martín, who attend to Dolores and Maeve's gender and robot status as a double consciousness but ignore their race: "Dolores and Maeve's gender doubly others them, as both machines and women, subjecting them to the oppression of being the other in two ways: as both non-human and gendered female, while underscoring their humanity and sensitivity to the viewer's eyes, especially in the case of Dolores, who is initially portrayed as an innocent Alice in Wonderland."¹³⁴ There is a need for more works, like this thesis, which explores Maeve's character and the show's more significant issues of racism through an intersectional lens and therefore paints a complete and feminist picture of gynoid characterization.

¹³³ Wabuke, "Do Black Lives Matter to Westworld?", 2020

¹³⁴ Miguel Sebastian-Martin, "All the Park's a Stage: Westworld and the Metafictional Frankenstein," *ES Review. Spanish Journal of English Studies*, 39 (2018): 56.

Section Two: Sexualization, Gender and the Gynoids of *Westworld*

Introduction

In Fritz Lang's 1927 *Metropolis*, Maria Maschinenmensch performs a seductive, semi-nude dance to an exclusively male audience. She is the first filmic gynoid. In John Hughe's 1985 *Weird Science*, two teenage boys 'hack' a doll and bring her to life to create their dream woman. In Steve De Jarnatt's 1987 *Cherry 2000*, the titular character Cherry short circuits on a kitchen floor during intercourse with a human character. In Duncan Gibbens' 1991 *Eve of Destruction*, EVE VIII is the ultimate killing machine, with her primary weapon situated in her vagina. Finally, in Alex Garland's 2014 *Ex Machina*, a billionaire playboy tech-bro informs his mentee that he created his gynoid Ava so that "if you wanted to screw her, mechanically speaking, you could."¹³⁵ This handful of examples is part of a much more extensive catalogue that forms nearly a century of filmic tradition of attaching gynoid characters to hyper-sexualization, hegemonic gender roles, and heteronormativity. *Westworld* has joined this lineage through reliance on these same tropes.

By presenting its gynoid characters as women created to be *consumed* by a white hetero male audience, the show maintains entrenched and dichotomous gender roles and outdated notions of femininity. However, it also centres a new form of gaze in the relationship between screen and audience, reminiscent of Mulvey's male gaze but altered for the technologically infused female character – proposed here as 'the cybergaze.' This notion of cybergaze is briefly

¹³⁵ *Ex Machina*. DVD. United Kingdom: Universal Studios, 2015.

posited in this section. However, its theoretical substance is something further studies and research could investigate beyond the scope of this Master's thesis.

Before delving further into this section, a brief overview of Mulvey's male gaze will help understand the audience catering this thesis describes. In her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey introduced a scopophilic theory that would broadly become central to feminist interrogations of media. 'Male gaze' is the relationship between spectator and spectacle; between looking and being looked at. This relationship is inherently male and sexual, infused with a hierarchical power dynamic where the filmmaker constructs the subject being gazed upon to appease and cater to its viewer. As Mulvey describes, this filmic relationship comes from our androcentric society, which codes women as passive beings and men as active ones:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.¹³⁶

The male coded film spectator and creator, gazing at the female coded screen and character, forms a hierarchical consumptive relationship. The audience/filmmaker (male) both construct and devour the subject/film (female). This relationship plays on misogynistic androcentric views of women and ostracizes women from identifying with the audience. As Mulvey describes, the woman displayed on-screen functions both to appease narrative and audience desires for her sexualization: "the woman displayed has functioned on two levels; as erotic object for the

¹³⁶ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no.3 (1975), 4.

characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium."¹³⁷ Meanwhile, through the role of the camera, filmmaker, and audience, the male inhabits the role of the active protagonist driving the narrative: "the split between spectacle and narrative supports the man's role as the active one of forwarding the story, making things happen. The man controls the film phantasy and also emerges as the representative of power".¹³⁸

This section posits that *Westworld* characterizes its gynoids as male creations that are hyper-sexualized, objectified, and stereotypically gendered, similarly to how Mulvey describes the male gaze constructs women. However, the gazing of *Westworld's* gynoids is slightly different from the type described by Mulvey. The gynoid's technologic nonhuman status allows the filmmaker to depict it and, consequently, women, with more intense objectification, sexualization and stereotyping. Due to works such as Mulvey's, television critics and viewers would typically label a show such as *Westworld* as misogynistic, degrading, and narrow-minded in our current age. However, this thesis posits that the veil of technology shrouding the gynoid permits these portrayals to escape labels like 'misogynistic' while simultaneously constructing an amplified version of the sexual consumption Mulvey articulates. This section will also critique *Westworld* for making feminist commentary on women's lack of agency while simultaneously relying on gendered tropes, such as the femme fatale figure.

Objectification Theory and Gynoids

¹³⁷ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", 4

¹³⁸ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", 4

Westworld's sexualization of gynoids hinges upon its objectification of them, both within the narrative and by the audience. Objectification theory's core concept is dehumanization through treating and constructing humans as objects. Martha Nussbaum developed objectification theory beyond its original conception by focusing on sexual objectification and objectification's inherent adverse effects. She outlines seven tangible qualities for evaluating whether objectification has occurred and further articulates that context is exceedingly crucial in identifying instances of objectification: "all types of objectification are not equally objectionable; that the evaluation of any of them requires a careful evaluation of context and circumstance."¹³⁹ Nussbaum believes these seven components do not all need to be present for objectification to occur: "what objectification is, is to treat a human being in one or more of these ways."¹⁴⁰ This section will show that *Westworld's* gynoids are subjected to all seven forms of objectification, not always simultaneously, although almost always in sexualized and inherently gendered fashions.

The first principle of objectification Nussbaum describes is Instrumentality: "*Instrumentality*: the objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes."¹⁴¹ As tools of Delos, gynoids perform corporate work in the park, which is primarily sex work. They are offered up as potential rape victims in narrative loops or simply as women guests may choose to violate in any way they wish. The guests also use them as tools —or, from a game-centric perspective, as equipment enabling them to play through *Westworld*. As instruments, the gynoids

¹³⁹ Martha Nussbaum, "Objectification," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 24, no. 4 (October 1995): 256.

¹⁴⁰ Nussbaum, "Objectification", 258.

¹⁴¹ Nussbaum, "Objectification", 257.

of *Westworld* serve the guests' needs, fulfilling their role as cogs within the giant machine that is the Delos Park.

The second tenet of objectification is Denial of autonomy: "*Denial of autonomy*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination."¹⁴² Denial of autonomy is seen in how the gynoids have their memories removed and in coding gynoids to perform pre-constructed narratives. When the gynoids attempt to assert their independence, as Dolores and Maeve, Delos cyclically returns them to their assigned narratives and denies them free will. An example of this is when Maeve gains access to a technician's tablet and watches what she speaks appear on the screen. The scene is charged with gendered and sexual power dynamics, as the male technician next to her is fully clothed and calm while she is naked and undergoing a panic attack. Denial of autonomy permeates all Hosts throughout the show; the gynoids do not have the same free will humans have, but they also lack the same sexual autonomy on-screen given to the male Hosts. Instead, they inhabit primarily sexual roles in their narrative loops, are dressed in more revealing clothing and are scripted into heteronormative relationships.

The third indicator of objectification is Inertness: "*Inertness*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity."¹⁴³ Inertness occurs in a particularly physical way for *Westworld's* gynoids. The show often portrays gynoids as limp dolls without control over their limbs, unable to blink or exhibit facial expressions. Instances of nudity often accompany these displays of inertness. The opening shot of the show's pilot is a clear example of

¹⁴² Nussbaum, "Objectification", 257.

¹⁴³ Nussbaum, "Objectification", 257.

this: a slow, centred zoom on a naked and limp Dolores. She is unable to move her body, leaving her full-front nudity directed towards the camera. The shot intends to display her nakedness for the audience as much as for the technician servicing her. It establishes her character as a sexualized object meant for consumption from the show's onset. In terms of the male gaze, this shot exemplifies Mulvey's notion of the woman as an erotic object.¹⁴⁴

The fourth principle of objectification Nussbaum describes is Fungibility: "*Fungibility*: The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types."¹⁴⁵ *Westworld's* narrative makes evident how replaceable the Hosts are. Maeve, who used to have a daughter and live a pastoral life, is exchanged with another gynoid before being recast as the brothel madame. The park regularly gives the Hosts makeovers, changing their accents, histories and living places, all in service of creating new and exciting narratives to capture guests' attention. Making the Hosts interchangeable reduces them to bodies rather than personalities with independent thought. They are, of course, not just hollow bodies without memory or independent desires, as Maeve demonstrates a longing to return to her previous life.

The fifth component of objectification is Violability: "*Violability*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary-integrity, as something that is permissible to break up, smash, break into."¹⁴⁶ Lack of personal boundaries is a core component of the gynoids' relationships with the guests and many park technicians. They are repeatedly violently victimized, often

¹⁴⁴ Nussbaum, "Objectification", 257.

¹⁴⁵ Nussbaum, "Objectification", 257.

¹⁴⁶ Nussbaum, "Objectification", 257.

sexually. Delos implicitly designs the Hosts of the park for guests to violate them. If guests choose to play the game as a 'black hat' - meaning as a villain – then the Hosts' capacity to be violated is essential to their success as park characters. Through objectification and the subsequent belief that the Hosts are not living beings, violating the Hosts is morally permissible by the park's guests and Delos. As the park writer Lee Sizemore explains, "Do you want to think that your husband is really fucking that beautiful girl or that you really just shot someone? This place works because the guests know the hosts aren't real."¹⁴⁷ His words also exemplify that when violation, in general, is discussed, characters almost always reference sex in some regard.

The sixth principle of objectification, like instrumentality, is Ownership: "*Ownership*: The objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc."¹⁴⁸ In *Westworld*, Delos literally owns the Hosts. This ownership is a form of slavery, although recalling the previous chapter *Westworld* lacks an engagement with Black slavery or racial elements at play in this form of objectification. From the perspective of Delos, the Hosts are corporately commodified beings whose existence is regulated and controlled based on a financial model. In an even more literal sense, the Gynoids are a profit generating fictive element created by HBO for a male-centric audience to own and sexually consume. Collectively, the way the gynoids engage with the guests, the audience, and Delos establishes them as owned and commodified beings bought and sold for sexual consumption.

¹⁴⁷ *Westworld*, season 1, episode 1, "The Original," directed by Jonathan Nolan, written by Jonathan Nolan, Lisa Joy and Michael Crichton, aired October 2, 2016, on HBO.

¹⁴⁸ Nussbaum, "Objectification", 257.

Lastly, Nussbaum describes Denial of Subjectivity as a component of objectification: "*Denial of Subjectivity*: The objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account."¹⁴⁹ Denial of subjectivity is related to the denial of the Hosts' autonomy. As the Hosts are denied free will and are constrained to their assigned narratives, their desires are unimportant. The removal of the gynoids' experience is literal, as the technicians regularly erase their past experiences. When the gynoids get access to past experiences, it is only through a new software designed to use these memory fragments (called 'reveries') to create more realistic dialogue and gestures for the guests. Essentially, even though Ford uses this software to endow the Hosts with more depth of experience and memory, it is still manufactured by Delos to turn them into better products. The viewer is not permitted to know who Dolores and Maeve genuinely are, nor the long histories they have inhabited. Instead, the narrative portrays them with sexualized tropes throughout the exposition. Then, when their true identities are revealed in season two, they are transformed into villainous Femme Fatales. When they are permitted subjectivity, it is tempered with a fear of the power it gives them. Once this transformation happens in the third season, the gynoids continue to be objectified by the camera, and thus the audience is placed in the position of the male viewer. In one early scene of season three, Dolores acting as a seductive spy is caught by a male bodyguard and tranquilized. While loading her into a vehicle he touches her sexually, noting her beautiful yet dangerous nature. The camera is angled from his perspective viewing Dolores in her sexual and physically limp state.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Nussbaum, "Objectification", 257.

¹⁵⁰ *Westworld*, season 3, episode 1, "Parce Domine," directed by Jonathan Nolan, written by Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan, aired March 15, 2020, on HBO. 52:22

In addition to her core types of objectification, Nussbaum notes that we must "distinguish the objectification of one character by another character from the objectification of persons by a text taken as a whole."¹⁵¹ Indeed, in *Westworld*, it is clear that certain instances of objectification are meant to present commentary. The show's demonstration of the female body being denied autonomy in the figure of the gynoid could be interpreted as a commentary on the need for women more broadly in society to have bodily autonomy. Nevertheless, as previously described, this lack of bodily autonomy also plays into the sexualized fantasies the audience desires and is often only shown as unfavourable with white gynoids. Thus, the show walks a thin line between capitalizing on sexualization and creating commentary on it. This thesis's opinion is that most of *Westworld's* objectification centers on sexualizing the gynoid's body through a gaze-like method, upholding capitalizing HBO traditions and catering to white heteropatriarchal audiences. This ultra sexualization plays into the male gaze relationship but should be considered a different relationship (cybergaze) due to its amplified intensity and reliance on technology to facilitate and excuse this objectification.

Nudity In Westworld

Westworld has continued a longstanding tradition of displaying the gynoid body nude, playing into male scopophilic desires to gaze at the female body. In her work, "Technofetishism and the Uncanny Desires of A.S.F.R (alt.sex.fetish.robots)," de Fren focuses on the cultural fetishization and hyper-sexualization of gynoid figures in an androcentric community. The ASFR community de Fren investigates is an androcentric, male-dominated fetish subculture that predominantly exists on the internet, and whose members derive pleasure from the aesthetic

¹⁵¹ Nussbaum, "Objectification", 255.

sexualization of gynoids: "'ASFRians' experience pleasure and agency through, in a sense, hacking the system, the visual indicators of which often take the form of a female android who has run amok."¹⁵² In his book *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*, Brown focuses on how the technologic female action hero is visually sexualized "in order to justify a complete eradication of her subjectivity [...] When the action heroine intersects with technology, her fetishization as a pure object is brought to the fore in a manner that both reinforces and reveals our culture's ongoing efforts to construct ideal femininity as a commodifiable form readily available for sexual consumption."¹⁵³ Brown posits the gynoid character is not new and crosses across many formats from mythology and literature to contemporary film: "The sexualized technological woman of contemporary science fiction and action media is only the most recent incarnation of a theme prevalent for centuries"¹⁵⁴ It is clear from this brief overview of scholarship addressing gynoid sexual presentation that a prevailing trope and audience desire exists to see gynoid bodies as nude and sexualized. This desire is inherently gendered, considering the male audience, or internet fetish subculture, which desires to see gynoid characters in this fashion.

Westworld has continued this legacy of sexualizing the gynoid character. This sexualization is evident in the cinematic attention given to these characters' bodies and the disparities in how often they are portrayed nude compared to other characters. Nudity is a core

¹⁵² Allison de Fren, "Technofetishism and the Uncanny Desires of A.S.F.R. (alt.sex.fetish.robots)," *Science Fiction Studies* 36, (2009): 440

¹⁵³ Jeffrey Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*, (University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 93.

¹⁵⁴ Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 98

tradition of many HBO shows and likewise a core component of Nussbaum's components of objectification, primarily inertness and denial of autonomy.¹⁵⁵ Shows such as *Game of Thrones* and *Rome* established nudity and on-screen sex in HBO's model for creating drama television, and *Westworld* has kept up with this tradition. Some critics have argued that the excessive nudity in *Westworld* stops the human body from being eroticized and demonstrates the detached way the audience views the Hosts. As Masad of *Vice* argues, "*Westworld* is trying not so much to desensitize nudity, but to desexualize it."¹⁵⁶ Considering the many scenes in which the viewer is shown naked bodies in horrifying states—in the repair facilities in a state of bloody undress, piled upon each other, being hosed down like furniture, or lined up in the depths of a melting cold storage facility, slimy and shrouded in darkness—this seems like a valid argument.

However, these scenes do not represent most nude portrayals in *Westworld*. Critic Seizn Koehler counted all instances of full-frontal nudity in season one and compared how these instances were gendered, finding that "women are on display twice as many times as men – 78 incidents to 38 incidents."¹⁵⁷ These nude portrayals of gynoid Hosts are often sexualized or even sometimes horrific, while nude portrayals of android Hosts are often modest and comedic. Koehler notes, "it was almost comical watching all the different ways the *Westworld* production used chairs, doorknobs, handles, trays and other objects to protect the men's 'modesty' while almost no allowances were made for the women."¹⁵⁸ And in large groups, where a large proportion of the

¹⁵⁵ Nussbaum, "Objectification", 257

¹⁵⁶ Ilana Masad, "There's a Good Reason for All the Nudity on 'Westworld'," *VICE*, January 12, 2016, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/qbn3yx/theres-a-good-reason-for-all-the-nudity-on-westworld-hbo>

¹⁵⁷ Seizn Koehler, "These Violence Delights Have Misogynistic Ends in HBO's *Westworld*," *Wear Your Voice*, December 7, 2016, <https://www.wearyourvoicemag.com/violent-delights-misogynistic-hbos-westworld/>

¹⁵⁸ Koehler, "These Violence Delights", 2016

Hosts are male, their nudity represents "a vulnerable, baby-like state of blankness, merely the default setting that all bodies come with."¹⁵⁹ In other words, Hosts at large can be portrayed with desexualized nudity to create a commentary on their vulnerability and dehumanized status, but the gynoid's nudity is reserved to entice the male audience through its sexualization. This gendered nudity is the epitome of Nussbaum's objectification components denial of autonomy and violability, wherein the user constructs the subject for consumption or even destruction.

Another significant discrepancy is that male human characters are seldom displayed nude. Instead, the women in the core cast (the majority of whom are gynoids) perform "full-frontal nudity, while none of their male counterparts [...] [are] expected to do the same."¹⁶⁰ It should be noted that there is one moment where a second-tier male character, Lee Sizemore, performs full-frontal nudity in season two. However, having to do this is marked as a moment of degradation and embarrassment for him, permitting him to gain audience sympathy as a white male, with whom the audience aligns and can commiserate. This disparity in whom the show asks to perform nudity, as well as the overall display of women as more often naked, demonstrates *Westworld's*—and HBO's—tradition of sexually depicting the female body as a means of appealing to and centring their male audience.

HBO was embroiled in a media fiasco for asking the show's extras to perform genital-to-genital contact in several scenes, breaking conventional industry standards. David Robb at *Deadline* includes the following lines from the contract in question in his reporting on the situation:

¹⁵⁹ Masad, "There's a Good Reason for All the Nudity", 2016

¹⁶⁰ Koehler, "These Violence Delights", 2016

This document serves to inform you that this project will require you to be fully nude and/or witness others fully nude and participate in graphic sexual situations. By accepting this Project assignment, you may be required to do any of the following: appear fully nude; wear a pubic hair patch; perform genital-to-genital touching; have your genitals painted; simulate oral sex with hand-to-genital touching; contort to form a table-like shape while being fully nude; pose on all fours while others who are fully nude ride on your back; ride on someone's back while you are both fully nude; and other assorted acts the Project may require.¹⁶¹

Overall, nudity is pervasive in *Westworld*, especially with its gynoid characters, and even its behind-the-scenes methods involving nudity were deemed inappropriate by industry standards.

In his article "Beauty, Dominance, Humanity: Three Takes on Nudity in *Westworld*," Meyer posits that nudity works in many ways, but that primarily it centers around gendered forms of violence: "in *Westworld*, the primary frame of nudity occurs when the hosts are operating either in the context of male dominance of women, even brutality toward women, or female seduction."¹⁶² This hierarchy of power between the gynoids and other characters is often depicted in scenes where clothed technicians work on nude Hosts. In these scenes, ethical lines are crossed, either through the verbal abuse and degradation of the Hosts or physically abusing them. Meyer articulates this relationship of domination with the technicians: "the relationship between the guests and the techs on the one hand, and the hosts on the other is very clearly one of domination. This domination almost always involves an enforced nudity where the desire of the guest or tech is mapped onto the body of the host."¹⁶³ There is an instance of this in the first

¹⁶¹ David Robb, "'Westworld' Extras Must Agree to Genital-to-Genital Touching; SAF-AFTRA to Monitor," *Deadline*, September 30, 2015, <https://deadline.com/2015/09/westworld-extras-must-agree-to-genital-to-genital-touching-1201560056/>

¹⁶² Mathew Meyer, "Beauty, Dominance, Humanity: Three Takes on Nudity in *Westworld*," in *Westworld and Philosophy: If You Go Looking for the Truth, Get the Whole Thing*, eds James South and Kimberly Engels (Cornwall: John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2018), 198.

¹⁶³ Meyer, "Beauty, Dominance, Humanity", 200

episode where a clothed female technician working on the nude gynoid Clementine waits until her co-worker leaves and kisses Clementine while she is in her blank semi-offline mode. Another instance occurs when the body shop technicians physically repair Maeve. Instead of working on her nude body, one of the technicians moves her abruptly to scare the other one, then grabs her limp arms and waves them around, stating, "you really think this little fuck puppet is coming to get you?"¹⁶⁴

Dolores is voyeuristically viewed nude in season three, in an instance that is both sexual and upsetting for the male viewer seated in the position of the Caleb who is performing the voyeurism. Dolores is only partially covered in synthetic skin, as Caleb watches her apply her nude skin piece by piece to her synthetic body. The camera follows her body from his perspective, bringing both Caleb and the audience from the perspective of the objectifying male into the understanding that Dolores is both a sexual and dangerous being.¹⁶⁵ This scene demonstrates that even past her escape from the park and her transformation into a femme fatale, Dolores is a gynoid consistently viewed from a sexualized and male perspective by the camera.

On-screen nudity engenders an inherent power dynamic between the subject and the onlooker. There is a sense of privacy invasion and of privileged viewership for the audience. This view is a core principle of the male gaze – this access to the sexual presentation of the subject, often female, by the male voyeuristic audience member. Meyer categorizes the use of nudity in *Westworld* as a form of gaze-based relationship between the character and the

¹⁶⁴ *Westworld*, season 1, episode 5, "Contrapasso," directed by Jonny Campbell, written by Dominic Mitchell and Lisa Joy, aired October 30, 2016, on HBO.

¹⁶⁵ *Westworld*, season 3, episode 8, "Crisis Theory," directed by Jennifer Getzinger, written by Denise Thé and Jonathan Nolan, aired May 3, 2020, on HBO. 13:25

audience. He explains this relationship by showing how voyeurism occurs in classical art with the example piece "Susannah and the Elders."¹⁶⁶ In images that play on the male gaze, women are sometimes painted as objects of a male voyeur, and then further the object of the voyeur of the painting itself. In the consumption of this art, Meyer explains the character voyeur and the person who admires the painting, and the painter themselves, are one in the same relative to their gaze of the woman in the painting: "the artist and the viewer are no less blameworthy for turning Susannah, and painted Susannah, into an object of their desire than the old men in the story are."¹⁶⁷

Looking at *Westworld*, the exact relationship is intrinsic to the dynamic between the gynoids, the show creators and the show consumers – just as the old men, the painter and the art admirer observe Susannah in the painting, so Nolan and Joy and the audience observe the gynoids of the show. Meyer draws attention to a particular instance in which this gaze and focus on nudity occur – when William (a human man) observes Armistice (a gynoid) bathing in the river, revealing her full body snake tattoo.¹⁶⁸ The scene with William and Armistice is almost a direct copy of the painting of Susannah and very straightforward: William observes her bathing, the camera, positioning the audience in the seat of the male voyeur by angling over William's shoulder, lingers on her nude body.¹⁶⁹ Once she notices him and comes to shore to dress, the

¹⁶⁶ Meyer, "Beauty, Dominance, Humanity", 198

¹⁶⁷ Meyer, "Beauty, Dominance, Humanity", 199

¹⁶⁸ Meyer, "Beauty, Dominance, Humanity", 199

¹⁶⁹ *Westworld*, season 1, episode 4, "Dissonance Theory," directed by Vincenzo Natali, written by Ed Brubaker and Jonathan Nolan, aired October 23, 2016, on HBO. 16:18

scene returns to normal and continues without commentary on the prior sexualization. Meyer articulates this scene as a gaze-centric depiction of nudity.

For a complicated version of the looker (audience)-looking-at-the-looker (character in the art medium), consider the nude bathing woman in the episode "Dissonance Theory." The Man in Black and Lawrence happen upon Armistice (the snake-tattooed outlaw) bathing in a river. Of course, she knows on some level that she is being looked at, or will be looked at, because she has her men hiding in the bushes guarding her. After the Man in Black gets caught looking – mind you, he made virtually no attempt to hide the fact that he was looking – he justifies his ogling by saying that he was interested in Armistice's tattoo. And perhaps, given his maze obsession, it was this simple. But still, the similarity to poor Susannah is unmistakable.¹⁷⁰

The gaze at play here is undeniable, but this scene also demonstrates a fundamental tenet of gynoid nudity in *Westworld* – most of it takes place without acknowledgement. Just as Armistice and William never acknowledge the voyeurism that occurred before diving into the rest of the scene, the bodies of gynoids are on display for the male characters and audience with hardly any commentary or justification. Just as the technicians do not need to work on and interrogate their Hosts nude, there seems to be an air of superfluosity to the rampant gynoid nudity the show presents. The question then becomes, who is this nudity for? Is the gynoid body on display for narrative and aesthetic purposes necessary to the construction of *Westworld*, or is this done to maintain HBO traditions and appease an assumed heteropatriarchal viewership? Looking at the context of scenes that display gynoids nude, the latter seems to be more likely.

One voyeuristic scene that demonstrates the excessive nudity of gynoid bodies is the party-turned-orgy at El Lazo's. The infamous genital contact contract was created primarily for these scenes, which depict many Hosts, primarily gynoids, nude except for dripping gold paint, engaging in sexual activities. The orgy takes place in the town of Pariah, a location in *Westworld* designed to be a home for degenerates and criminals that is reminiscent of Dante's circles of hell,

¹⁷⁰ Meyer, "Beauty, Dominance, Humanity", 199

oriented around pleasure and consumption. In an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*, supervising director and co-producer Richard Lewis defended the infamous scene: "I think all of us have a modicum of taste that keeps us from taking it too far into the pornographic world and keeps it in the sensual world."¹⁷¹ Even without looking at the scene, knowing that the actors involved engaged in sexual touching and genital-to-genital contact, pornographic is an apt descriptor. Adorned in eye-catching paint and filling the frame of every shot in the scene, the nude gynoids at El Lazo's are ornamental and meant to draw in the eye of the viewer. However, as Meyer articulates, this gold nudity transforms them into objects to be consumed - both by the men at the party and the viewer: "the women are works of art, albeit works of art that exist solely for the gaze and desire of the male. In short, the women at El Lazo's party are not there for their pleasure but the primarily male human guest and audience members alike."¹⁷²

Again, what is disturbing about the overtly sexualized gynoids in this scene is that they serve no purpose other than to display the female body to the camera. Critical plot points surrounding whether William and Logan will join the army, and Dolores beginning to have visions of herself as a cybernetic being, are all framed by a plethora of naked gynoid bodies writhing and moaning in the background.¹⁷³ The orgy, with all its lavish decoration and activity, "has nothing to do with the actual plot of the show."¹⁷⁴ In effect, the orgy functions as texture to

¹⁷¹ Josh Wigler, "Inside 'Westworld's' 'Epic' Orgy Scene," *Hollywood Reporter*, October 30, 2016, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/westworld-orgy-scene-explained-942103/>

¹⁷² Meyer, 200

¹⁷³ Koehler, 2016

¹⁷⁴ Eliana Dockterman, "Women Now Rule *Westworld*. But Was It Worth It?" *Time*, December 5, 2016, <https://time.com/4589310/westworld-finale-dolores-maeve/>

the town of Pariah.¹⁷⁵ This use of excessive background nudity is part of an HBO tradition, as many of its previous centrepiece dramas featured orgies. As Eliana Dockterman points out, the audience should anticipate such a scene in *Westworld* because of this history: "Perhaps we shouldn't expect better from HBO: *Rome*, *True Blood*, *Game of Thrones* and *True Detective* have all featured orgies taking place in the background of scenes, all fetishizing women being dominated by powerful men and using nudity not to propel the plot but to distract from it."¹⁷⁶ Moreover, while the orgy does have male members (3), the disproportionate amount of gynoids (19) is hard to ignore.

Overall, nudity is a pervasive and consistent element of *Westworld* and disproportionately sexualizes gynoids relative to human and male Host characters. The gynoid is a sexualized figure readily available for male consumption, both through extras and main characters. Through her nudity, she is portrayed as vulnerable and weak. She is denied subjectivity and autonomy and considered a being that is only good for her body, which is used as sexualized ornamentation to settings. However, nudity is not the only way the gynoids of *Westworld* are sexualized, as they are also tropified with the stock femme fatale character, wherein their sexuality is something to be feared.

Sexuality As Weapon and Patriarchal Control

Heteropatriarchal fears of women's sexuality are evident in gynoid narratives where female sexuality is demonized and weaponized. These fears include envy of women's

¹⁷⁵ This, of course, does not even consider the negative cultural implications of naming a town known for its criminals and orgies Pariah after the caste group inhabitants of Tamil.

¹⁷⁶ Dockterman, 2016

reproductive abilities, leading male characters to role play their 'womb envy' by creating gynoids whose bodies and sexuality they can control. This patriarchal dynamic of male control—whether through creation or sexual violence—can be traced to the origin of filmic gynoids.

Returning to Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and the original gynoid, Maria Maschinenmensch, Huyssen, in his work “The Vamp and the Machine”, describes that the vilification of the machinic human historically occurs with female characters: "as soon as the machine came to be perceived as a demonic, inexplicable threat and as harbinger of chaos and destruction – a view which typically characterizes many 19th-century reactions to the railroads to give but one major example – writers began to imagine the *Maschinenmensch* as woman."¹⁷⁷ He explains that this fear of technology is likewise projected onto the male construction of the machine woman: "this view of the vamp's sexuality posing a threat to male rule and control, which is inscribed in the film, corresponds precisely to the notion of technology running out-of-control and unleashing its destructive potential on humanity. After all, the vamp of the film *is* a technological artifact upon which a specifically male view of destructive female sexuality has been projected."¹⁷⁸ A contemporary filmic trope used to portray the sexualized lethal gynoid is the femme fatale. Evolving from the mythical Pandora, the femme fatale as "exquisite female android [and] dangerous enchantress" pervades cyberpunk science fiction films.¹⁷⁹ As Mulvey explains in her book *Fetishism and Curiosity*, the Pandora and femme fatale figures are portrayed not only as destructive but also as deceitful and dichotomous: "both these iconographies depend on an

¹⁷⁷ Andreas Huyssen, “The Vamp and the Machine: Technology and Sexuality in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*,” *New German Critique* 24/25 (1981): 226.

¹⁷⁸ Huyssen, “The Vamp and the Machine”, 229-230

¹⁷⁹ Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996), 55

inside/outside topography. A beautiful surface that is appealing and charming to man masks either an 'interior' that is mechanical or an 'outside' that is deceitful."¹⁸⁰ For Dolores and Maeve, this trope is realized in season two, when both women become more powerful central figures in the revolution against humans and are cast as ultra-violent yet also ultra-sexualized figures. Countless times throughout the season, Dolores is featured in her now undone dress atop her horse, plowing down humans and Hosts alike with her rifle – a perfect image lethalizing her sexuality. Critics noted this intensification in the season premiere, observing that "attaining sentience seems to have really ramped up her testosterone, because she's living life like a Tarantino femme fatale, enthusiastically wreaking bloody revenge on every single human that crosses her path."¹⁸¹ Similarly, Maeve commands a group to find her long-lost gynoid daughter, gunning down all who block her path. Notably, this shift in character accompanies an aesthetic shift from asexual pastoral white gowns to svelte black dresses and high-tech guns. In season three the gynoids dual role as both fearful and desirous femme fatales continues. Through this transition the camera, and the audience, continue to be seated in the position of the male onlooker objectifying the gynoid, seeing her as duplicitously sexual and dangerous. An example of this is the masquerade ball scene in season three, when Dolores infiltrates the security of a rich male target by seductively blending in amongst various nude female models and gynoids. During these shots, the camera follows Dolores around the room from the various perspectives of the

¹⁸⁰ Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, 55

¹⁸¹ Dani Di Placido, "'Westworld' Season 2 Premier Recap: 'Journey Into Night'," *Forbes*, April 23, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danidiplacido/2018/04/23/westworld-season-2-premiere-recap-journey-into-night/?sh=348dfdc3238a>

security team seating the audience alongside the team in objectifying her sexually, eventually though, she reveals herself as a robotic weapon, attacking and killing the majority of the team.¹⁸²

The inclusion of guns in these gynoids' transitions exemplifies how sexuality and violence function in tandem to tropify gynoid characters through an androcentric perspective. In season one, gynoids rarely have access to guns and often are still inhibited by their programming from firing them, but they have sudden mastery of advanced weapons in season two. Arguably, as this pairing of gun-centric violence and sexuality is only otherwise seen in action heroines, so it could be considered a core difference between the cybergaze and the male gaze. The technologic element of gynoids makes them inherently more powerful, much like all other gun-wielding heroines. The male audience then takes up this power and flips it on its head as sexualization that appeals to particular desires or affirms specific male fears of women's empowerment. As Brown articulates, guns function as phallic symbols, which, when paired with overly sexualized gynoids, function to eroticize female characters and to affirm castration anxieties surrounding empowered women:

Guns are obvious phallic symbols, and when wielded by sexy action heroines, they clearly signify phallic compensation. The use of guns by beautiful women eroticizes violence, but it also cements the fetishistic representation of women and reinforces the underlying themes of castration anxiety at play in the genre. When the action heroine is reinterpreted as a powerful gynoid – as the physical embodiment of both a sexy female figure and a weapon of mass destruction – the theme of strong women as potentially castrating threats is taken to a ludicrous extreme.¹⁸³

¹⁸² *Westworld*, season 3, episode 4, "The Mother of Exiles," directed by Paul Cameron, written by Jordan Goldberg and Lisa Joy, aired April 5, 2020, on HBO. 37:24

¹⁸³ Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 101

Of all the times gynoids are sexualized throughout the show, none of these instances imbue them with autonomy – it is either a means of control or a weapon, serving male desire or assuaging anxiety surrounding female sexuality. It is not sexualization itself that is negative, as sexualization can be a form of feminist empowerment in many ways. Instead, it is the way *Westworld* uses sexualization to display its gynoid characters, that is a clear appeal to male scopophilic desires.

Femme Fatales, for all their power, are often destroyed at the hands of leading male characters. As Christian Zeitz describes, the femme fatale is a powerful and sexual force, but her actions ultimately lead to her downfall at patriarchal hands:

What defines them the most is their sexuality, often interpreted as dangerous and destructive to maleness, but however it is their access to their own sexuality which helps them to actively exert control over men. The dangerous and destructive woman described above, was termed *femme fatale* in discourses on film noir: she can be viewed as an independent and strong woman who uses her *sexuality as a weapon* to bring about the downfall or actual destruction of a man [...] However, her *transgressive* behavior is punished in the end in order to re-stabilize patriarchal power.¹⁸⁴

Maeve and Dolores are violently shut down several times by the men they seek to destroy. In season two, Maeve is shot to death by Delos security inside the park (although the show resurrects her for season three), and Dolores is killed by mercenaries in the season three opener. Ultimately, male anxieties both create and destroy the gynoid femme fatale. For her to emerge victoriously would confirm the male audience's fear of her sexuality, so she must always be restrained or destroyed to maintain the pre-existing patriarchal order.

¹⁸⁴ Christian David Zeitz, "Dreaming of Electric Femme Fatales: Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner: Final Cut* (2007) and Images of Women in Film Noir," *Gender Forum* 60, (2016): 86-87.

This threat the gynoid poses to the patriarchal order is continually restrained even after the Hosts escape the park and become more empowered and dangerous femme fatale figures. A rather literal example of this occurs early in season 3 when Maeve has escaped the park only to find herself in the home of Engerraud Serac, the richest man in the world. During her attempt to kill Serac and escape her imprisonment, all while attired in a skin tight white gown chosen by him, Maeve is literally frozen in place and sexually touched against her will. Serac, knowing she is a threat and also desiring her, rewrites her code to be able to control and imprison her. The camera throughout the scene enables a voyeuristic view of Maeve, aligning with the perspective of Serac.¹⁸⁵

The patriarchal construction of the gynoids in *Westworld* is not just about bodily control but also about removing individual agency and reflects existing within a male-dominated system at large – can a Host who is made and exists in a cosmos ruled by men have agency? The underlying thematic question is straightforward: can women in a patriarchally controlled world have true selfhood and agency beyond either fighting or acquiescing to that system? As Torres-Quevedo articulates, "the interrogation of agency in the constructed subject is not just salient of the existence of *Westworld's* hosts; it is at the heart of postmodern feminist constructivist theories of human experience, selfhood, and agency."¹⁸⁶

Male creation and control are often literal for gynoids, as the technicians and guests control their actual bodies. As Wosk posits, control is central to the way gynoids are constructed

¹⁸⁵ *Westworld*, season 3, episode 2, "The Winter Line," directed by Richard J. Lewis, written by Mathew Pitts and Lisa Joy, aired March 22, 2020, on HBO. 56:55

¹⁸⁶ Maria Elena Torres-Quevedo, "A Host of Questions. Women's Artificial Agency in *Westworld*," in *Women's Space. Essays on Female Characters in the 21st Century Science Fiction Western*, ed. Melanie A. Marotta (McFarland, 2020), 171.

as objects of male creation: "in fiction and films about robot women, men often prefer artificial women to real ones because they can literally turn them off with a switch or at least program and control the phrases they utter so the synthetic females will only say compliments and soothing things to them."¹⁸⁷ As literal objects, others control the gynoids not to achieve inner meaning, desires, or wants. This control returns to two core tenants of Nussbaum's objectification: denial of autonomy and denial of subjectivity.¹⁸⁸ This narrative of men controlling their robot creations has a long history. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is one of the originating sources for the trope of the male scientist who desires to control nature and, by proxy, its power over birth and life. Looking even further back, Conrad attributes the focus on male creation in the narratives of gynoid characters to the Pygmalion myth: "sf cinema's artificial females – robots, gynoids, cyborgs and even computers – seem to owe at least as much to the myth of Pygmalion."¹⁸⁹ At the core of all these relationships between male creators and gynoids is a complex series of power dynamics that rely on commodification, sexualization, domination, and gendering. These themes repeat in most gynoid storylines, such that the male creator is as much of a trope as the gynoid herself. As Zhang observes, "it is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of engineering skills must be in want of a robot girlfriend."¹⁹⁰

In *Westworld*, the male scientist who seeks to control nature is Dr. Ford, one of the original creators of the Hosts and the brain at the center of Delos. His character is played by

¹⁸⁷ Wosk, *My Fair Ladies*, 100-101

¹⁸⁸ Nussbaum, "Objectification", 257

¹⁸⁹ Conrad, "Femme Futures", 82

¹⁹⁰ Snoweria Zhang, "The Wicked Queen's Smart Mirror," *Journal of Design and Science*, (July 16, 2018), <https://jods.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/snoweriazhang/release/3>

Anthony Hopkins, appropriately reminiscent of his other famous roles, such as Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of The Lambs* and Odin in the *Thor* Marvel franchise. Ford's characterization relies on a mix of the paternal figure, mad scientist, and God, aligning him with other gynoid and posthuman female creators such as Victor Frankenstein and Rotwang. These archetypes are not lost on Ford, as he often self-asserts as a father figure, a patriarchal capitalist, and even as the God of Delos' parks. Torres-Quevedo notes a remarkably candid moment where Ford explains his god-like status over Dolores and the other Hosts:

Ford regularly refers to himself and his deceased partner, Arnold, as such. He tells one of the hosts, 'Arnold and I made you in our image' ("The Well-Tempered Clavier") and has an extended conversation with Dolores in which he uses Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* (1508-1512) to explain the relationship between himself (God) and the hosts (humans) and his quest to grant them consciousness.¹⁹¹

In the first season, Ford repeatedly alludes that he is superior to the humans in his employ and the Hosts in his park. These assertions notably happen when he engages with female characters, even human ones. A particularly frightening instance of this gendered power dynamic is when Ford demonstrates his god-like control over Westworld to Theresa, one of the higher-up executives of Delos. During a lunch meeting at what the audience and Theresa are led to assume is a typical restaurant in the human area of the park, Ford suddenly freezes all the staff in place. Ford uses this control to scare Theresa, as she poses a potential corporate threat to his reign over Delos.

Even when Ford does not wield his power menacingly, he often infantilizes the gynoid women he creates. In the second season, his physical body dies, and he lives on as a digital

¹⁹¹ Torres-Quevedo, "A Host of Questions", 168

replica that interacts with many of the Hosts invisibly. During these interactions, a father-figure character begins to take over his god-like persona from season one. In one particularly upsetting scene, he hovers over Maeve while a technician tortures her and asserts a father-like relationship:

Of all the hosts I've made, you, Maeve, were my favourite. It isn't easy to contemplate letting your children die. You were as close as I got to having one. Still, I underestimated you. You stayed here in this world to save your child. So have I.¹⁹²

Kissing her on the head, he gifts her with the core software permissions needed to override her entrapment and access the functions of the park.

In his relationships with Dolores and Maeve, Ford continues the tropified roles of Frankenstein and other troubled male creators of monstrous women in their need to exhibit control and dominance over their creations. However, in his assertions of dominance as both a father and a god, he sometimes shows concern and empathy for his female creations, affirming their right to exist alongside him. This concern is a significant deviation from traditional storylines where the male creator is the source of the gynoid's demise and should be considered a distinctly feminist turn in the show. This affirmation by a male creator figure of the series that the gynoids are valid creations worthy of continuing to exist imbues the gynoid characters with post-humanist potential, though this posthumanism is ultimately unfulfilled by the show through its reliance on tired humanist tropes.

Ford is not the only paternal figure in *Westworld*. While many park security force members want to destroy the gynoids, most of Delos' upper management share Ford's desire to

¹⁹² *Westworld*, season 2, episode 7, "Les Ecorches," directed by Nicole Kassel, written by Jordan Goldberg and Ron Fitzgerald, aired June 3, 2018, on HBO.

preserve them. Olivia Belton explains that this father figure is tied up with a corporate and commodified control of the female Hosts: "*Orphan Black* and *Westworld* create metaphors for patriarchy, and specifically capitalist patriarchy, by figuring its male antagonists as controlling paternal figures."¹⁹³ This notion of corporate patriarchy flows throughout *Westworld* – the gynoids are commodified women, and upper management's concern is to preserve their financial assets, rather than the gynoids' value as living beings.

The corporate interest in creating and controlling Hosts also hints at the longstanding tradition in gynoid narratives for male control of the maternal and reproduction. As previously described, this control can derive from male anxieties and desires to control birth and reproduction. For Delos, the chain of production and corporate ownership collides with maternal envy. *Westworld's* appropriation of maternal reproduction via the gynoid is distinct from other narratives of the same type due to its scale. Instead of becoming the 'mother' creating a few children, the male creators of Delos mass-produce their gynoids and commodify them. This commodification reflects the gendered relationship between women and industries that seek to profit off their bodies. As Belton explains, the male creator to the female subject relationship in *Westworld* illustrates a pattern of exploitation that runs through many similar narratives: "the series place their heroines in opposition to the (largely) male creators who seek to commodify them. Male programmers, scientists and corporate figureheads are portrayed as central to the gendered oppression of the female clones and robots, creating a clear metaphor for patriarchal exploitation."¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ Olivia Belton, "Metaphors of patriarchy in *Orphan Black* and *Westworld*," *Feminist Media Studies*, 20, no.8 (2020): <https://doi-org.library.smu.ca/10.1080/14680777.2019.1707701>

¹⁹⁴ Belton, "Metaphors of patriarchy", 2020

However, Belton's description of Ford as the source of all the paternal violence in the show is inaccurate, as paternal control continues past Ford's death and after the Hosts leave the park. Season three for example introduces a new antagonist, the male coded AI 'system', run by another Ford-like man called Serac. Much like Ford, both Serac and his system, infantilize the hosts and humans around them. While, as Belton articulates, *Westworld's* narrative engenders a patriarchal lens, this is not achieved through a singular central paternal antagonist, such as Ford. Rather the whole show exhibits the patriarchal viewpoint. The various fleeting and rapidly changing antagonists, such as the system, Ford, Serac and Delos itself all reveal the show's underlying paternalistic perspective.

Doane explains that fear of and desire to control the material is intrinsic to science fiction cinema that fetishizes the female body:

It is not surprising, then, that the genre that highlights technological fetishism – science fiction – should be obsessed with the issues of the maternal, reproduction, representation, and history. From *L'Eve future* to *Blade Runner*, the conjunction of technology and the feminine is the object of fascination and desire but also of anxiety.¹⁹⁵

In *Westworld*, this desire for control over the maternal is a desire to control the chain of production, which Delos succeeds in attaining through a variety of patriarchal means. *Westworld*, therefore, continues a history of narratives that commodify, objectify, and control the female body.

¹⁹⁵ Mary Ann Doane, "Technophilia: Technology, Representation and the Feminine," in *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Reader*, ed Sean Redmond (New York: WallFlower Press, 2007), 189.

In addition to prolific nudity, sexualization, denial of agency, and commodification, *Westworld* regularly subjects its female characters to sexualized violence. As noted earlier, the show explicitly depicts this violence, prompting critics to seek comments from showrunner Lisa Joy and actress Evan Rachel Wood, who plays Dolores.¹⁹⁶ Wood is a survivor of sexual violence and has shared that while she understands the concerns and has a "very, very visceral reaction" to "things being written off as locker-room talk," the "show is definitely a commentary" on these very issues.¹⁹⁷ Sexual assault is used in *Westworld* to illustrate issues of patriarchal violation of women's bodies and objectification. In this case, Nussbaum's component of violability¹⁹⁸, stems from lack of recognition of personhood. Sexual violence is so central to the show that the first assault appears only 15 minutes into its pilot: William kills Teddy and drags Dolores, screaming, off to the barn, saying, "I didn't pay all this money cause I want it easy. I want you to fight."¹⁹⁹

However, while *Westworld* depicts sexual assault, it does not nuance these instances of violence as commentary, instead it uses these scenes as entertainment. In these instances, the camera is primarily situated from the perspective of the attacker, the scenes employ sexualization of the female body alongside violence, and the attacks happen on screen rather than being implied. Conversely, Clavin and La Casse posit that *Westworld's* portrayals of sexual violence actually situate the viewer in the position of someone who has undergone or witnessed trauma:

¹⁹⁶ Dockterman, "Woman Now Rule *Westworld*", 2016

¹⁹⁷ Alex Morris, "Evan Rachel Wood: How Wild Past, Personal Demons Prepped Her for 'Westworld'," *Rolling Stone*, November 17, 2016, <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/tv-features/evan-rachel-wood-how-wild-past-personal-demons-prepped-her-for-westworld-107632/>

¹⁹⁸ Nussbaum, "Objectification", 257

¹⁹⁹ *Westworld*, season 1, episode 1, "The Original," directed by Jonathan Nolan, written by Jonathan Nolan, Lisa Joy and Michael Crichton, aired October 2, 2016, on HBO.

Trauma humanizes hosts because it encourages viewer identification by making the android plight sympathetic to us. To achieve this viewer consciousness, *Westworld* interpolates viewers into the headspace of trauma survivors (the hosts) whose traumatic experiences disrupt a sense of security and safety, with fear and uncertainty haunting their minds for years.²⁰⁰

However, Clavin and La Casse's claims that these depictions garner sympathy for the hosts is not supported by the choice of camera perspective. The perspective of the gynoids being attacked is almost never shown, and instead the camera situates the audience in the seat of the perpetrator, further turning the gynoid into an objectified spectacle, and alienating the viewer from the gynoids experience. For example in season one, William drags Dolores into a barn to rape her, and the camera hovers over William's shoulder down at Dolores as she is thrown to the ground.²⁰¹ This is consistent throughout all seasons of the show, as the audience is seated in subtle ways via the camera as a sexual attacker. Moments like this include the previously described scene in season three wherein Serac freezes and touches Maeve, or when the body guard does the same to Dolores in the season three premier. In both of these scenes the camera is positioned from the perspective of these men, forcing the audience into the position of the attacker. Rather than viewing the perspective of the female characters, enabling the audience to empathize or sympathize with their experiences, they become objects for the attackers who are aligned with the audience being presented with sexual violence as entertainment.

Through these scenes there is also a repetitive insistence on the helplessness of the victims. There is no opportunity, particularly in season one, where the gynoids escape their on-

²⁰⁰ Keith Clavin and Christopher J. La Casse, "The Post-Traumatic Woman and Narratology in HBO's *Westworld*," in *Women's Space. Essays on Female Characters in the 21st Century Science Fiction Western*, ed. Melanie A. Marotta (McFarland, 2020), 195

²⁰¹ *Westworld*, season 1, episode 1, "The Original," directed by Jonathan Nolan, written by Jonathan Nolan, Lisa Joy and Michael Crichton, aired October 2, 2016, on HBO.

screen sexual assault, receive substantial assistance against it, or can defend themselves. This denies women an understanding that victimhood is not all-encompassing or guaranteed when faced with this form of violence. As Zhang articulates, one of the core components of the gynoid and male creator dynamic is that the gynoid "cannot refuse the male protagonists' desires and advances" – Delos engineers her to be an accepting victim, and "saying 'no' is simply not in her program. In the rare case where a female robot, abused and aware, voices her concerns and seeks help, she is eventually silenced and dismantled."²⁰²

Collectively, the gynoid figure is an ultra-sexualized, sometimes vilified, and male-controlled figure in *Westworld*. While these portrayals sometimes offer opportunities to create a commentary on relevant issues, many of them play into tired tropes of the science fiction genre. The appeal of the gynoid is situated front and center not only for the guests of *Westworld* but also for the viewers of *Westworld*, appealing to an intrinsically heteropatriarchal audience. The heteronormative, hegemonic, and dichotomously gendered perspective is heightened when looking at how the gynoids lack in an array of body types, sexualities, and gender representations.

Gender Aesthetic and Sexual Diversity

It is clear from the first episode of *Westworld* that there is a complete lack of either body type or sexual diversity present in its gynoid characters—there is a distinct lack of deviation from heteronormatively constructed beauty standards. As Meyer points out, "all the hosts presented as nudes in *Westworld* are idealized – svelte, buxom women and 'cut,' handsome,

²⁰² Zhang, "The Wicked Queen's Smart Mirror", 4

rugged men."²⁰³ The image of the gynoid has always been built from the collective Western heteropatriarchal imagination: from Maria to Eve to Ava to Dolores and Maeve; the filmic gynoid has always been a thin, tall woman with large breasts. Throughout *Westworld*, there are no gynoid characters with dialogue who do not fit this restrictive standard of beauty. Meanwhile, male Hosts in *Westworld* come in a variety of body types. This portrayal of a restrictive body type for the gynoids illustrates a narrow Western standard of feminine beauty, directed at heteropatriarchal Western male viewers. This depiction aligns with Mulvey's male gaze and reinforces associations between femininity, thinness, and whiteness.

In tandem with the lack of body diversity, there is a predominant use of heteronormative conventions of femininity to create the gynoid appearance. For example, Dolores is infantilized and virginal in white and light blue gowns, reminiscent of a Disney Alice in Wonderland. As noted by Torres-Quevedo, this conventional feminine aesthetic aligns with the virgin trope:

Dolores is the first female host that the audience encounters. She is a conventionally beautiful, blonde-haired, blue-eyed young woman who lives on a ranch with her parents, where she enjoys painting and helping her parents with their horses. She is characterized by her faith, innocence, kindness, and naivete. She initially functions as *Westworld's* virgin figure.²⁰⁴

As Nussbaum critiques, her aesthetic appeals to a hegemonic male audience both sexually and in situating her as a weak damsel in distress: "Blond and creamy-skinned, a painter and an optimist, she's engineered for customers to fall in love with and to want to protect; that impulse carries over to the HBO viewer."²⁰⁵ The show's camera work reinforces this association of the male

²⁰³ Meyer, "Beauty, Dominance, Humanity", 197

²⁰⁴ Torres-Quevedo, "A Host of Questions", 166

²⁰⁵ Nussbaum, "The Meta-Politics of 'Westworld'", 2016

guest with the male viewer: the camera often moves along her body, tracing the perspective of an onlooker.

Westworld's domestically coded gynoids play to androcentric heteronormative male fantasies, which often turn violent: "*Westworld* underscores this bond between domestic spaces, gendered violence and economic exploitation."²⁰⁶ The pastoral imagery associated with Dolores and Maeve's sexual, domestic labour in Sweetwater situates these characters as typically domesticated from a patriarchal perspective. The women are confined to their respective environments, performing repetitive labour that fuels the park's economy. This economic exploitation is especially true of Maeve, whose work serves to reproduce the economy of Westworld and who works in one of the few areas of the park where monetary transactions occur.

The association of domesticity with femininity has long been part of the gynoid's appeal to the male creator. To function as both a labouring and a sexual body fulfills a gendered relationship where women are domestic carers, confined to the microcosm of the household. As Kessous explains, the domesticity and femininity of the gynoid characters in *Westworld* intertwine as part of the male fantasy the park caters to: "The park's massified domesticity functions ideologically by attempting to use a neurotic male fantasy to paper over the social conflict between Westworld's Hosts, their Guests and their owners. This domestic space serves as the primal scene of this fantasy."²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ Kessous, "A Mere Instrument of Production", 211

²⁰⁷ Kessous, "A Mere Instrument of Production", 207

The domestic and the hegemonic images of femininity used in the show are reminiscent of American Western filmic tropes, as previously explored. These images play directly into Butler's notion of gender performativity, which Mullen has noted as latent in the portrayal of women by *Westworld*: "when a virginal homesteader's daughter and the hooker with a heart of gold are robots, repeatedly dumped off at the lab to be repaired, rebooted and sent back into the park, a blurring of gender and genre lines inevitably occurs [...] we get a play-by-play demonstration of Butlerian performativity."²⁰⁸ Gender performativity is explained by Butler as the way individuals portray their gender through aesthetic and action as performance, separating their gender identity from the sex they may have been assigned at birth, which has no bearing upon a person's chosen gender(s).²⁰⁹ Because gender is performance, and because the gynoids of *Westworld* are actors playing prescriptive roles in a false world, their expressions of gender should be understood as forms of performance. However, these performances are prescribed by male creators for male audiences—park guests and viewers alike. This prescriptive nature of the gynoids' aesthetic femininity becomes clear in season two when Dolores forgoes her blue and white dress for practical attire and abandons her domestic duties, "adopt[ing] a moderately androgynous style of dress."²¹⁰ Likewise, Maeve leaves behind the brothel and her frilled pink gown in exchange for pants and a jacket—clothing that in Westerns is typically coded for men.

As Dolores abandons the prescribed attire of her domestic femininity from season one, her change to a more androgynous appearance accompanies the introduction of a male persona into her character called Wyatt. This persona was programmed into her during a previous failed

²⁰⁸ Mullen, "'Not much of a rind on you'", 2

²⁰⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

²¹⁰ Belton, "Metaphors of patriarchy", 2020

attempt to help her reach consciousness. Unfortunately, this undercuts the meaning behind her change in appearance, as her actual identity is no longer a woman performing her version of femininity; instead, she is taken over by a male personality who attempts to re-assert his performance of conventional masculine gender norms.

That said, the line between Dolores and Wyatt is not always clear. Dolores uses different pronouns interchangeably, whether she is referring to herself as Wyatt or Dolores, which creates unclear implications for her gender performance—it is unknown if she is breaking down gender norms or if she has compartmentalized her previous pastoral female role in service of her current, more masculine-coded goals.

The Hosts are almost all coded as heterosexual beings. There are almost no queer-coded Hosts in the entire park, and there are no queer-coded relationships, sexual interactions, or even subtext with any of the main cast of Hosts. As Nussbaum questions, "Where are all the gay male bachelor parties?"²¹¹ There are simply no queer gynoids in the entirety of the show, except for one prostitute attempting to engage a female guest (who refuses) at the brothel, and the scene implies this short interaction is simply part of the gynoid's job, rather than orientation. The ultra heterosexual lean throughout the show indicates an alignment between the heteropatriarchal desires of the guest and the show's appeal to the heterosexual male viewer. Overall, the heterocurated feminine aesthetic and the ultra sexualized images of gynoids reside on a very gendered dichotomy and reinforce images of heterosexually imagined femininity.

²¹¹ Nussbaum, "The Meta-Politics of 'Westworld'", 2016

Conclusion

In *Westworld's* inaugural season, Ford, the god-like architect of Westworld, says as much to the audience as to his fellow characters that "stories helped us to ennoble ourselves, to fix what was broken in us, and to help us become the people we dreamed of being."²¹² The more I think about this idyllic sentence, and the more I recall the countless critics of *Westworld* I encountered throughout this thesis, the more I realize the 'us' Ford references in these words is one that excludes all identities beyond the androcentric perspective.

I think mostly, after looking back on the totality of *Westworld*, of scholar Hope Wabuke, whose review in the *LA Times* came in the wake of the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement gaining attention and which synthesized in only a few lines what I came to likewise understand about this show: "The creators of *Westworld* understand that their target audience desperately wishes to enact violence, but only upon a specific type of body"²¹³. This body, the gynoid's, is a political site of gender, sexuality and race. It is an entity of boundless posthumanist possibility appropriated by male scopophilic desire and a pandering model of white male-centric network television. As a character of almost pure fiction (there are, of course, real gynoids, but they are far and few between and only fractionally functional), the gynoid is constructed wholly by the narratives she inhabits. She is an artificial being, residing in an artificial world representing artificial constructions of identity. You can imagine the excitement those of us waiting for such a character to emerge in the primetime science fiction world felt when *Westworld* was set to air.

²¹² As quoted by Troy Patterson, "How 'Westworld' Denies our Humanity, One Pitiless Puzzle at a Time," *The New Yorker*, April 19, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/on-television/how-westworld-denies-our-humanity-one-pitiless-puzzle-at-a-time>

²¹³ Wabuke, "Do Black Lives Matter to Westworld?", 2020

The viewers waiting to identify with anything other than the white male protagonist imagined such a character as a bottomless well of possibility, of infinite gender, race, sexuality, age, and class. You can imagine the disappointment. As expected, *Westworld* delivered a gynoid character that aligned with the nearly 100-year history of gynoid tropification and failed to fulfill its posthumanist possibility, again.

This thesis asked the following question with regards to the gynoid characters in *Westworld*:

What androcentric parameters construct the portrayal of filmic gynoids, as seen in HBO's *Westworld*?

In brief, this thesis found that *Westworld* relies on tired racist Western tropes of Black and Indigenous characters. It disproportionately victimizes its Black women and privileges white narratives of freedom. Though it has a diverse cast, the show rarely deals with race, depicting a colonial setting reminiscent of American slavery. Likewise, while the show addresses slavery on a broad thematic and philosophical level, it refuses to engage with actual histories of chattel slavery. Instead, it situates the cis white heterosexual male as its target audience, aligning the interest of its fictional park guests with its audience by offering hypersexualized tropified visions of gynoids for their scopophilic consumption. These gynoid characters align with Nussbaum's seven components of objectification theory, with an amplified reliance on hegemonic conceptions of gender and overtly sexualized nudity. Underlying all these representations is an understanding that these gynoids, the show's setting, narrative and overall construction are intended to appease the male gaze. As this thesis briefly introduces in its second half, this

manifests as a new form of increasingly tropified, objectified and excused consumption, here termed the cybergaze.

The original intention of this thesis project was to investigate what constructs this proposed cybergaze. However, such a project is much larger in scope and will require a larger sample of case studies, mixed methods research and a larger space to undergo formal theory construction. As such, there is the potential for this thesis to continue into future research investigating and constructing a new form of male gaze exclusive to cybernetic characters, like the gynoid. It is my hope and intention to continue this project and develop this proposed cybergaze theory further. The possibility also to interrogate *Westworld* as a totality once the series concludes is intriguing. Such an analysis may offer more in-depth and complex understandings of how these gynoid characters evolved, improved, or degraded over time as the series continued. In future research, it would also be beneficial to more thoroughly explore the practical approaches of Television production. Such an exploration would require more space and time; however understanding the television specific methods of content creation could provide deeper insight into the creation of these characters and narrative tropes. However, there are no plans for *Westworld* to conclude or be cancelled, so such a follow-up analysis may be many years away.

This thesis has contributed to gaps in existing research on both gynoids and *Westworld*. Primarily this work has offered an analysis of race concerning both *Westworld* and the gynoid figure in tandem. In addition, it has taken an intersectional perspective, considering the connected roles race, gender and sexuality play in constructing gynoid characters on screen. Moreover, it has employed critical race theory, objectification theory and male gaze theory in considering the misogynistic perspectives taken by contemporary network television, specifically

HBO. Lastly, it has created the possibility for a future theoretical contribution in proposing a new form of gaze theory, which will hopefully focus on the gendered cybernetic character and its scopophilic relationship to the audience.

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