

The Transcultural Site: Interpersonal Encounters with Otherness in Lessing, Le Guin and *Battlestar Galactica*

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Adam Roberts, in *Science Fiction*, claims ‘SF, by focusing its representations of the world not through reproduction of that world but instead by figuratively symbolizing it, is able to foreground precisely the ideological constructions of Otherness’ (2000: 30). The potency of science fiction, in an academic context, is that it allows a literal consideration of ideas that are concealed through metaphor in other forms of literature, film, and television. This is done through visual cues, like giving highly intelligent species larger skulls, or violent ones menacing features, as well as through rhetorical cues. This, I argue, occurs to a great degree in the consideration of identity, specifically how we define ourselves apart from, in relation to, and against others. Science Fiction texts allow us to consider transcultural encounters without our own cultural contexts and biases coming into play, presenting texts which can be read ahistorically and divorced from both the author’s and reader’s cultural, political and historical perspectives. These texts allow the reader no side to identify with, and thus the cultural (and transcultural) encounters can be considered more objectively. Thus, like science fiction in general, these particular texts allow a more straightforward way of considering transcultural encounters, their methodologies, and their results.

Through a close reading of specific scenes, those of linguistic and cultural encounters, I argue that it is through a consideration of otherness that one can clearly see the different means by which identity can be constructed. The use of these transcultural encounters allows for an unencumbered platform by which to analyze and consider these sites. This will be done in a comparative study of three science fiction works, namely Doris Lessing’s *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five* (1980), Ursula Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), and the contemporary science fiction television series *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009). These texts were chosen because of the similarities in their approaches to the interpersonal and intercultural encounter, focusing on a micro-rather than macro-level of engagement and concentrating on specific relationships of love and intimacy. However, they each present the encounter with a different outcome, both in terms of subjectivity and identity formation. This is the focus of this article, and the texts represent the different possible approaches from these encounters.

Focusing on specific transcultural sites within each science fiction text, I will consider different modes of identity, arguing that there are three fundamental modes by which individual identity is constructed, each based on a different experience with the *other*. In this, I will be following Donald Hall's formulation of the distinction between identity and subjectivity.

For our purposes, one's identity can be thought of as that particular set of traits, beliefs, and allegiances what, in short- and long-term ways, gives on a consistent personality and mode of social being, while subjectivity implies always a degree of thought and self-consciousness about identity, at the same time allowing myriad of limitations and often unknowable, unavoidable constraints on our ability to fully comprehend identity. Subjectivity as a critical concept invites us to consider the question of how and from where identity arises, to what extent it is understandable, and to what degree it is something over which we have any measure of influence or control. (2004: 3-4)

In essence, I will argue that the site of a transcultural encounter leads to three ways in which the resulting transcultural experience can affect the identity of the individuals involved. First, in what I call the classical, or multicultural, mode, the innate identities of the individuals entering into the encounter can be maintained and re-enforced. In the other two modes, the individual's identities can be altered in relation to each other. In the postmodernist mode, the encounter relies on underlying cultural similarities, which can elide cultural difference to the point where it becomes impossible to determine a difference between oneself and the other, forcing the conscious construction of new defining characteristics by which to construct an identity. The transcultural mode, which I will contend is the most positive outcome of transculturation, is to focus on a deeper understanding that arises from a recognition, acceptance of and focus on the differences between individuals, which becomes a bridge to further encounters, change and understanding.

Transcultural theory presents a dialectical approach to identity, in which the interaction with another culture is a critical move towards a synthesis that produces greater cultural understanding. As such, 'one's identity is not strictly one dimensional (the self) but is now defined and more importantly recognized in rapport with the *other*' (Cuccioletta 2001: 8, emphasis in original). I will argue that it is not just an interaction with the other that is important, but how that interaction takes place and in what way it affects the subjectivity of the individual, which sheds light on the concept of subjectivity itself. Transculturalism has been presented as part of 'the quest to define shared interests and common values across cultural and national borders' (Slimbach 2005: 206), and in essence as a means of moving towards a new understanding of humanity as a whole. 'In many ways transculturalism, by proposing a new humanism of the recognition of the *other*, based on a culture of *métissage*, is in opposition to the singular traditional

cultures that have evolved from the nation-state' (Cuccioletta 2001: 8, emphasis in original). However, following Welsch, I will focus on local interactions, in the realm of the individual and interpersonal connections in which the boundaries of cultures can be explored, recognizing that individuals are not simply the product of a great national or cultural identity, (which in the science fiction context, is further removed from traditional considerations by placing the characters in a non-representative context, which cannot be directly linked to the author's or audience's perspectives). Furthermore, these local interactions are the sites in which transcultural negotiation takes place, and thus can be most clearly understood.

Mary Louise Pratt introduced the concept of the contact zone to the academic debate of postcolonialism, where much of the current thought on transculturation stems from. The contact zone refers to 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today' (1991: 34). I want to contrast the violent nature of the contact zone (grappling, clashing) in an asymmetrical relationship (reminiscent of the power relations inherent in colonialism, for example), with the more symmetrical (or out of context on both sides) nature of the relatively positive nature of the transcultural site. The transcultural site, as I identify it in these science fiction texts, represents a displacement of the individuals, as they stand in and for their respective cultures, from their reinforcing cultural contexts. Through this displacement, which Fernando Ortiz identifies as one of the features of transculturation in his *Cuban Counterpoint*, the transcultural encounter can become one of mutual acceptance and develop in a more positive direction (1995: 32-3). The outcome of such an encounter, as I argue, is by no means uniform, but through entry into a transcultural site, the power relations inherent in each cultural context are removed leaving the individuals more vulnerable and open to each other's culture.

John McLeod's concept of the transcultural threshold is also important here. 'The transcultural threshold can *productively* be thought of as one of conversation *and* silence, engagement *and* displacement, where cosmopolitan and postcolonial approaches productively inform each other rather than short-circuit an attempt to build ethical, hopeful mondialisation' (2011: 11, emphasis in original). What I would like to emphasize is the notion of both displacement, which I would argue is already partially accomplished through the removal of the individual from their respective cultural contexts, and engagement. In Ortiz's original conception, there was no possibility of return to one's original context, but in today's world of globalization, the more real-world implications of McLeod's argument are more salient. The productivity inherent in meeting across such a threshold allows for the development of more understanding. It is in a transcultural site, and across a

transcultural threshold, that the three couples meet in the science fiction texts I am presenting here.

The Marriages between Zones Three, Four and Five

Doris Lessing's *The Marriages between Zones Three, Four and Five* offers a classical approach with regards to subjectivity, in which there is a confrontation with the other, and a consideration of one's identity, and yet the innate identity of the characters is reinforced through a transcultural encounter. Typically, if one is thinking of an innate identity, identity markers are considered self-evident. In literature such characters are common, characters who do not develop, or whose identity remains static, and those who develop along predetermined paths, set forth either through their religion, or social expectations. These characters are defined deductively, their identity formed based on characteristics and assumptions that are within themselves. In cultural encounters centering on these characters, the relationship with the other does not force a re-evaluation of the individual's identity, but rather reinforces their own subjectivity. The interaction with other cultures allows recognition of their innate identity, allowing their characteristics to be highlighted and understood. The characters do not change in relation to each other, but rather the encounter allows reflection upon their own innate nature.

Lessing's text provides the fable-like story of Al Ith, the Queen of Zone Three. Through the intervention of an unnamed, alien force, this independent, self-sufficient woman, living in a type of feminist utopia, travels and enters into marriage with the King of the neighboring (and inferior) Zone Four. This interaction regenerates an internal spiritual movement towards enlightenment, while simultaneously reinforcing the identities of both partners in the marriage, despite their differences. Most scholarship focuses on this regeneration, reading the two cultures as part of a whole (a native race manipulated by the Canopeans to achieve spiritual harmony akin to Sufism). 'Lessing's *Marriages* is just that. It has been recognized as thinly veiled allegory by nearly all the reviewers' (Draine: 144-5). I, however, focus specifically on the identities of the two protagonists and the methodology of their transcultural encounter.

Both Al Ith and Ben Ata have well defined cultural contexts, which also define their roles in society and their individual identities. 'If they were nothing else, these two, they were representatives and embodiments of their respective countries. Concern for their realms was what they were' (Lessing 1980: 45). As they are representative, the individual encounter that Lessing describes functions as a stand-in for a larger cultural exchange, as a product of the ripple effect of their leader's experience. This is part of Lessing's overall project, throughout the Canopos in Argos series.

Science fiction writers are concerned with those conditions of existence which transcend, while determining, the individual case. Their task is a difficult one — to expand the reader's consciousness so that it can grasp events from the alien perspective of huge vistas of time and space. (Here we see surfacing Lessing's consistent theme, the attempt to transcend the limits placed on consciousness by the thought conventions of a particular historical moment and situation). (Draine 152)

Thus, while focusing on the individual experience, and the localized transcultural site, the effects in the novel are greater than just those upon Al Ith and Ben Ata. In the novel, they represent a change throughout the zones, and in the larger project, this particular encounter is representative of the entire spiritual harmony of the Universe.

The site of their encounter is in Zone Four, which although presented as culturally inferior (not least due to the numbering system, but also due to the reactions of the other occupants of the respective Zones) still represents a neutral location. The presence of Al Ith so disrupts Ben Ata's customary dominance as to displace him from his cultural context. Al Ith is both physically and emotionally removed from her contextual space. 'In this novel, Al Ith, the queen of Zone Three, is the unwilling pilgrim from one spiritual state to another' (Draine: 164). Thus, their marriage bed, which neither of them chose, becomes the site of the transcultural encounter.

Although they both change through the product of their marriage, their identities do not change in reaction to each other's differences, but rather develop in a linear fashion. They come to a greater understanding of who they already are through this interaction with someone else, yet do not define themselves in contrast to the other. Neither Al Ith nor Ben Ata chose this path, which was dictated by some unexplained alien force, which we can surmise from the larger context is the Canopean representative. Thus, they enter into the situation with both scepticism and reluctance as well as a sense of duty to a higher power, to which they were beholden. 'They looked at each other with a frank exchange of complicity: two prisoners who had nothing in common but their incarceration. This first, and frail, moment of tolerance, did not last' (1980: 29). Initially, they approach the experience with tolerance, a positive outlook on an anxious and undesired, unpredicted, encounter. The experience, consummated in a series of more and more tolerant and productive sexual encounters, proves meaningful, as both individuals strive for understanding and acceptance of the each other's otherness. They entered as disparate individuals, representative of nearly antagonistic worlds, into an experience where both attempt to come to an understanding beyond their own conception.

Their people were what *they* were, their thoughts were. Their lives could be nothing else, or less ... yet now both were aware, and deeply, so that they were

shocked and stirred to their depths, that all this concern and this duty of theirs had not prevented them from going very wrong. They were looking at each other, not shrinking from each other's gaze at all, but both trying to enter in behind the sober, thoughtfulness of his grey eyes, the soft gleam of her black eyes, so that they could reach something deeper, and other. (1980: 45, emphasis in original)

This encounter allowed both Al Ith and Ben Ata, especially after later reflection and interaction, to recognize that their respective cultures were stagnant, that they had 'gone wrong'. The transcultural encounter provided a needed reflection and stimulus to kick start their cultures on a path of enlightenment, which is built into their cultures. The transcultural site allows them a space to go beyond culturally encoded stereotypes and factors, attempt to recognize deeper aspects of their own selves, and accept each other for their otherness. This encounter, though, remains fleeting, and although it allowed each of them, individually, a source for reflection, they remain culturally distinct. After their union they return to their respective situations, seemingly unaltered in relation to each other.

For looking at each other now, returned to their absolute separateness, their otherness, these two denizens of their different realms could not believe what they had won together during their hours of submersion in each other. She was to him, again, a foreign woman, everything about her alien, though dear now in a way that estranged him more than bound him. (1980: 70)

The nature of their understanding seems to exist only in the transcultural site, and their encounter serves to reinforce, rather than mediate, their cultural differences. The moment recalls McLeod's transcultural threshold, where the tension between conversation and silence, and engagement and displacement reacts to produce a positive effect. Here Al Ith and Ben Ata meet across the threshold, but it is through a process of estrangement and recognition of difference, and the maintenance of this difference, which punctuates their encounters. As they return to the marriage bed, their encounters become increasingly focused on difference, rather than understanding (although still with mutual respect). 'The two entered their room from opposite arches, and stood examining each other. As usual it was their difference that had to strike them first: both, matching the long days of questioning and wanting and longing, with the reality of this stubbornly self-contained individual, felt only a sort of exhaustion' (1980: 125). The identity, their self-contained individual identity, is stubbornly continued, although now with a more positive trend. The realms function as distinct cultures within a multicultural society, tolerant and accepting of each other, even while cultural markers and boundaries remain intact. There is no blurring of the boundaries between the zones, but the hostility and distrust have been removed through the transcultural encounter between Al Ith and Ben Ata, and the common path to enlightenment reinstated.

This pattern follows a religious principle. The idea of the story is for the characters to recognize ‘the importance of self-knowledge’ (Marchino 1972: 252), characteristic of Lessing’s novels in general. Lessing uses themes from Sufism, a form of mystical belief that she studied from the early 1970s, to connect a search for self-identity, (an identity which one already possesses and yet does not yet fully understand), to one’s role within society. Both concepts are interconnected despite their lack of knowledge about their identities; those identities are equally predetermined. Although there is change throughout the text – Al Ith and Ben Ata both develop and, at least in the case of Al Ith, move upwards joining those in the ‘next’ Zone (Zone Two for Al Ith) – the movement always develops linearly, and predeterminedly. The necessity of this movement is made possible through the transcultural encounter, yet the differences do not change their identity in a dialectical fashion. They come to a greater understanding of who they already are through this transcultural encounter, yet do not define themselves in contrast to the other.

The Left Hand of Darkness

Ursula Le Guin’s 1969 novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, presents a different concept of a transcultural encounter, one in which both parties are altered as a result. The novel as a whole deals with the contrast between planets, specifically between Gethen, (translated within the narrative as Winter), and the rest of the worlds of the Ekumen, a federation of planets which is developed throughout her Hainish cycle. The protagonist, Genly Ai, is the sole representative of the Ekumen on the planet in their attempt to make an alliance and have Gethen join the federation, and much of the narrative is focalized through his perspective. In the narrative, all interaction between the cultures occurs by design on an individual, rather than world level, which allows Genly Ai to stand in for Ekumen culture as a whole, similar to Al Ith and Ben Ata in Lessing’s novel.

One of the largest barriers between Genly, the envoy, and the other inhabitants of Gethen, is that the Gethenians are a race of androgynies. Through their interaction, Le Guin discusses the possibility that gender need not necessarily exist in the strict predetermined duality that it is often portrayed in our, or Ekumenian, culture. The majority of the time, the Gethenians are not sexual (akin to the periods of time many animals are not in heat) and in those periods they do not exhibit either masculine or feminine sexual organs or features. It is only during specific periods called *kemmer* (approximately once a month) that the Gethenians become gendered, acquiring specific gender physical and emotional traits. ‘Normal individuals have no predisposition to either sexual role in kemmer; they do not know whether they will be the male or the female, and have no say in the matter’ (Le Guin 1969: 91). Thus, it is only through reaction to the other in the relationship that gender roles are asserted, and the Gethenians can

take either role depending on this interaction. Their very sexuality acts out notions of identity formation typical of cultural encounters, but in a natural occurring way. Yet, even by providing an alternative gender, or way of describing gender, Le Guin does not fundamentally alter the way we look at gender. Even her description of the mating process of the Gethenians reinforces the idea of a duality. ‘We are dualists too. Duality is an essential, isn’t it? So long as there is *the other and myself*’ (Le Guin 1969: 233, emphasis in original).

She does, however, present the idea that these dualities that we use to construct identity are not fixed or static, but can be altered with new ways of thinking. This is mainly due to the position of Genly as outside the androgyne construct. The reader, through Genly’s perception, still views the androgyne as other in relation to himself. Le Guin’s novel also broadens the concept of identity beyond that of exclusively gender. By placing Genly Ai, the envoy, as the sole character that somewhat resembles the reader, it forces the reader to initially identify with his experiences. This is reinforced by having the majority of the story, ten of the twenty chapters, narrated in the first person by Genly himself. The remaining chapters are either narrated directly by others (five) or are presented in the third person (five), but it is important to note that the entire text is chosen and presented by Genly. As Spivack notes, ‘His is the overall structuring consciousness of the book’ (1984: 45). Genly’s story is also the story of the construction of his identity. Through a series of negotiations, he learns to see himself in relation to the Gethenians. The Gethenians, individually and in their commonality, represent the Other for Genly. What Le Guin has done has simply changed the focus away from a typical male/female dichotomy to that of a male/androgyne differentiation, or simply a human/alien distinction.

Although the text is a largely about how to communicate and negotiate with a new type of identity, it is in a particular transcultural site that Genly and Estraven, the former prime minister of one of the nations on Gethen, finally come to a mutual understanding of each other, in any kind of meaningful sense. In exile, and travelling across the vast regions of Ice encompassing the planet’s northern most regions, Genly and Estraven enter a transcultural site, one in which they are both removed from their respective cultural contexts and enter as relative equals, as Ortiz indicates is required for transculturation. As Estraven notes, ‘up here on the Ice each of us is singular, isolate, I as cut off from those like me, from my society and its rules, as he from his. There is no world full of other Gethenians here to explain and support my existence. We are equals at last, equal, alien, alone’ (1969: 232). In this barren landscape, with both exiled, Estraven politically and Genly physically and temporally (he has timejumped and is thus 90 years removed from his own time), Estraven and Genly have, for the first time, the possibility of encountering each other’s true selves. They are in a position where they are reliant on each other for their very survival, which breeds a level of trust between them, and a deep sense of camaraderie. ‘Estraven and I had simply

arrived at the point where we shared whatever we had that was worth sharing' (1969: 247).

Despite the circumstances, what remains between them are their differences, both physical and cultural. Genly still has not recognized Estraven's true androgyne nature, as the male/female dichotomy is ingrained in his cultural background. For example, Genly, throughout the novel, refers to Estraven using only male encoded syntax. Yet, in this transcultural site, it is possible for the recognition of the other to happen, for Genly to see what he never could see within the cultural contexts outside of the Ice.

And I saw then again, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not to see in him; that he was a woman as well as a man. Any need to explain the sources of that fear vanished with the fear; what I was left with was, at last, acceptance of him as he was. Until then I had rejected him, refused him his own reality. He had been quite right to say that he, the only person on Gethen who trusted me, was the only Gethenian I distrusted. For he was the only one who had entirely accepted me as a human being: who had liked me personally and given me entire personal loyalty, and who therefore had demanded of me an equal degree of recognition, of acceptance. I had not been willing to give it. I had been afraid to give it. I had not wanted to give my trust, my friendship to a man who was a woman, a woman who was a man. (1969: 248-9)

It is only in this site that a true understanding of each other could happen, a transcultural encounter. It opens up a space in which both Genly and Estraven can come to accept the other individual and culture, and through this process adapt to accept aspects of that cultural identity within their own. The process leads towards a type of synthesis that produces a greater cultural understanding. This transcultural threshold, once reached here, allows the possibility of a hopeful, ethical union to spread between the planets, just as a cultural understanding was able to occur here. This occurs fundamentally not as recognition of the similarities Genly and Estraven share, but specifically by focusing on, and accepting, their differences. 'But it was from the difference between us, not from the affinities and likenesses, but from the difference, that that love came: and it was itself the bridge, the only bridge, across what divided us' (1969: 249).

This change is ultimately accomplished through a personal relationship with Estraven. Genly has to recognize, and accept, that Estraven contains both masculine and feminine parts, and it is only when the feminine side of Estraven becomes apparent, during *kemmer*, that Genly is finally able to see Estraven as he really is. Bittner claims that for Genly, in their isolation, 'the categories (e.g., male-female, and all other dualisms) he has used to see Estraven vanish, and he can, when he is otherwise blind, perceive Estraven as he-she really is. Genly Ai experiences the 'shift of identity' Frye speaks of when the ways in which he sees, which are his identity, shift' (Bittner 1979: 15). Genly goes through an identity

shift, demonstrable in his description of his ‘own’ kind at the end of the novel, describing them as foreign to himself, and strangely sexualized creatures, akin to the way that Genly himself was described as perverted at the beginning of the novel by the native Gethenians. Yet the duality that he used to come to terms with Estraven remains. It is through this relationship, the encounter in this transcultural site, and his acceptance of Estraven as Other that Genly’s subjectivity is changed. That change is reflective of the positive outcome of transculturism, in contrast with Lessing’s text which reinforces a more multicultural perspective. Although both Lessing’s and Le Guin’s texts have been connected with utopianism and feminist science fiction, I present them here with different outcomes and perspectives. Lessing offers a position in which identity is reinforced through the encounter, while Le Guin’s novel presents two characters who are indelibly altered in the transcultural site. Thus, it is on their contrast, rather than their perceived feminist utopian roots, that this analysis focuses.

Battlestar Galactica

The post 9/11 remake of *Battlestar Galactica* provides another transcultural site in which to look at subjectivity. While *Marriages* provides a look at the classical approach, with an innate identity reinforced in a transcultural site of marriage, and *Left Hand* provides a situation in which Genly’s identity shifts in reaction to his transcultural relationship, *Battlestar* demonstrates a possibility in which neither of those results of the transcultural experience are possible. *Battlestar Galactica* tells the tale of the invasion, and near annihilation, of the human population of a series of worlds at the hands of their cyborg creations, the Cylons. Yet, throughout the series, the lines between Cylon and human are distinctly blurred. Looking specifically at the characters of Sharon¹ (Grace Park) – in their two distinct individuals Boomer and Athena – one can see their attempts at understanding their own identity, first perceived as innate, then through comparison with the humans, and finally, through the transcultural encounter, through a postmodern approach.

Initially, Boomer is a Raptor pilot assigned to the *Battlestar Galactica*. Her identity is wrapped up in that of the military, and by all accounts she is a fine officer. The show reveals, however, that Boomer is a secret agent of the Cylons,

⁵ The Sharons are the generic name for the Number Eights (the eighth of the twelve human-like cylons). There are two specific Sharons delineated in the series, Lt. Sharon ‘Boomer’ Valerii and Sharon ‘Athena’ Agathon, which I will specifically refer to by their call-signs, Boomer and Athena. Athena, a call-sign this individual only receives later in the series, retains the memories from Boomer’s experience on *Galactica*, so the identity process is known to her in her relationship with Helo on Caprica later in the first season. Some scholars distinguish the two characters as *Galactica-Boomer* and *Caprica-Boomer*, or simply Boomer and Sharon.

and a Cylon herself (despite her lack of knowledge of this state). The audience is cued into this development by the introduction of multiple characters played by the same actor, multiple copies of a single model of Cylon. Boomer herself comes to understand the development after she attempts to assassinate Commander Adama (Edward James Olmos), captain of the *Galactica* (Episode 1.13). There seems to be no epistemological method to determine the difference between a Cylon and a human, despite some effort made by Dr. Gaius Baltar (James Callis) at creating a test, using blood samples (Episode 1.8). Despite the robotic nature of the evolved humanoid Cylons, they are made of organic material and a physically indistinguishable in every way.

Although the audience can tell the difference (they are clued in to different Cylon characters through presentation of the doubling of cloned Cylons), on a diegetic level no human character can, with any authority, tell the difference. This Cylon/human distinction is further blurred through the relationship between Athena (a different iteration of Sharon) and Karl ‘Helo’ Agathon (Tahmoh Penikett), in a key transcultural site while they are stranded on Caprica in the first season. Caprica, at this point, is a post-apocalyptic waste land, a planet which was once central to human civilization destroyed by a Cylon nuclear attack (which was shown during the mini-series which functions as a backdoor pilot to the series). Helo encounters Athena, who he assumes is his fellow crew member from *Galactica* returned to the planet to rescue him (Episode 1.1). Both Helo, who is physically separated from his ship and other humans altogether, and Athena, who is sent by her fellow Cylons on an undercover mission to find out what Helo knows, are separated from their own cultural context. This is particularly important for Athena, as she is forced to exist as an individual, in a race of individuals, despite coming from a culture of collectivity. As Robert Moore notes, ‘when we first meet her, Sharon² is a member of a culture that does not tolerate the individual’ (Moore 2008, 107). Just as in Le Guin’s text, the androgynous nature of the Gethenians already challenges our sense of identity construction; here too the characteristics of the Cylons present a challenge to the audience. These figures are both created and machines, but at the same time produced through strictly biological matter and have emotions, feeling and thought. Matthew Gumpert argues that they are essentially ‘Haraway’s cyborgs: hybrid beings, both human and machine, and therefore neither human nor machine, whose very ontological indeterminacy represents a challenge to the old essentialist notion of identity’ (2008: 147).

Whether or not the Cylons represent only cyborgs, or can also be read as metaphorical stand-ins for culturally distinct humans, they still come to represent the Other for the human characters within the series, with whom the audience

² Moore refers to Athena simply as Sharon.

tends to identify.³ Yet, that remains true only as long as the Cylons do not take on individual identities and characteristics. The series opens with several Cylon characters having relationships with human crew members, specifically Boomer and the Six model that comes to be called Caprica Six (Tricia Helfer). In reaction to more individualized experiences, they develop individual traits that later in the series threaten Cylon society altogether. This concept is carried over to the relationship between Athena and Helo. ‘Just as Boomer and Caprica Six are changed because of their having loved individual human beings, so also is Sharon changed through her relationship with Helo’ (Moore 2008, 109). This alteration in Sharon’s character comes through an encounter in the transcultural site of the surface of Caprica. It is in this space that Athena rejects her Cylon culture to save Helo’s life (Episode 1.8), and also where Helo learns that Athena is a Cylon and chooses her despite his engrained prejudices (Episode 1.13, 2.6).

Through their relationship, both characters alter not only their prejudices towards the other, but fundamentally change their own identity in reaction to the change. What is more striking, however, is that the line between Cylon and human is completely blurred through this interpersonal relationship. Athena’s ability to express emotion, shown to be genuine, and betray her people, demonstrates that the cyborg creation has evolved to the point of being indistinguishable from humans. Furthermore, they are reproductively compatible, as their relationship produces a daughter, Hera (Episode 1.13, 2.18). The identities Helo and Athena thought existed prior to their transcultural encounter, and their re-evaluated selves in reaction to each other, fail to maintain the Cylon/human dichotomy, showing that the difference between those species is impossible to determine. As such, using the category of human and Cylon (at least when referring to the evolved version) ceases to be meaningful, demonstrating a postmodern approach to subjectivity, one in which such dichotomies traditionally used such as male/female, majority/minority, and here human/cyborg, cease to be determinate.

In this approach, cultural differences are elided, rendered either illusory or unimportant, whereas the transcultural experience seems to rely and deem important exactly these points of difference, regarding them as inaccessible and critical, and yet transcendable into some form of understanding. This postmodern approach is based on an underlying commonality, which becomes, through a stripping away of other culturally imposed factors, the only identity markers remaining, allowing a reconciliation between Athena and Helo which also

³ Although one could read this metaphor as postethnic, following David Hollinger, I find that reading in this science fiction context to misread the application of technology. While it is probably also a postethnic, and indeed as I argue elsewhere, postgender, universe, this particular encounter and situation are more aptly read as posthuman, dealing with the problems of eliding technology and humanity, and our inevitable joining in the future (thus the end of both cyborgs and humans in this context).

destroys their respective cultural identities as both Cylon and human. This is in contrast to Le Guin's text, in which cultural understanding is achieved through perceived and yet accepted difference, the differences and Otherness being the new common thread that the transcultural encounter uses to achieve true communication. Here difference is undetectable, making that positive outcome of the transcultural encounter impossible in the same way.

In this article, I argue that these three distinct modes of subjectivity function through close readings of those transcultural sites mentioned, all considered on an individual, interpersonal level. Each of these encounters requires the recognition of cultures beyond one's own, but the reaction to this encounter differs depending upon the structure of the underlying subjective construction. Lessing's *Marriages* presents a scenario in which cultural identity is reinforced through a transcultural encounter, producing a multicultural society. *Battlestar Galactica* presents a postmodern, and posthuman take on identity construction, where the two cultures meeting in the transcultural site are eliminated through the recognition of inherent similarities and constructed, and thus false or unsustainable, differences. Finally, Le Guin's *Left Hand* presents a transcultural experience that achieves a synthesis which produces a greater cultural understanding, through a focus on recognizing Otherness and accepting difference, while maintaining the cultural identity of the individuals involved. How each text presents the transcultural experience is critical to understanding their identity and how it is formed, and the transcultural site, which allows for a more open and positive cultural encounter, can produce different results based on the characteristics and dynamics of the encounter.

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