Aliens:
Narrating U.S. Global Identity Through Transnational Adoption and Interracial Marriage
in *Battlestar Galactica*
Abstract

Science fiction rewrites the conflict between self and Other as encounters between human and alien, providing an ideal generic cover for an exploration of the evolving role of the U.S. globally. The sci-fi television series, Battlestar Galactica, depicts the two most familiar tropes of the Asian interracial family, the transnationally adopted Asian girl and the marriage of an Asian woman and a white man, reimagined as an interracial and interspecies family. Both kinds of multiracial families illustrate how metaphorical representations of U.S./Asian relations of have altered over time to rationalize the disjuncture between a celebratory rhetoric of globalization and U.S. multiculturalism and the neo colonial flow of Asian female labor.
Although it attempts to show us future worlds, science fiction in mass media has much more to say about our contemporary moment. It would seem to be the quintessential genre of escapist fantasy, yet, along with its close twin of horror, science fiction makes manifest our collective anxieties, transforming and projecting them onto other monstrous and alien bodies. A growing body of critical literature explores the association of these fantastic alien bodies with the material construction of contemporary raced bodies. This article extends a particular strain of recent work on race and science fiction which reads the narratives of extra planetary aliens as metaphors for extra national aliens and analyzes shifting conceptions of U.S. national boundaries in relation to Asia.

If the genre of science fiction gives us a way to first invoke and then resolve scenes of social chaos and to explore the divisions between society and the Other (Neale, 2000; Sobchack, 1997), then the critically acclaimed, cult, cable television series *Battlestar Galactica (BSG)* (2004-2009) functions as an ideal site to examine the representation and resolution of current social contradictions. In particular, the show works through the conflict between idealized notions of the U.S. as a global leader and its role in the exploitation and spread of Asian, female, global labor. It was not only the most popular show ever broadcast on the Sci-Fi Channel, it also is one of the few to feature an Asian woman as a central character. The dramatic series, which is based on an earlier, campy, 1970’s television series, portrays the aftermath of the near annihilation of the human race by Cylons, humanoid robots. The complicated story follows the remnants of the human colonies in their flight from the Cylons.

A primary storyline revolving around the search for the proper family for a character named Hera opens up spaces within mainstream media where messages about
globalization, citizenship, gender, and race can be negotiated and reinforced. Hera is the bi-species and, not incidentally, multiracial child of the cyborg Athena (American born, Korean Canadian, actor Grace Park) and the human Helo (Euro-American actor Tahmoh Penikett). Representations of Asian Americans, unlike African or Euro Americans, are often displaced spatially outside the U.S. because of their persistent association with Asia (Nakayama, 1994). The figure of the Asian carries the specter of foreignness, thus the ideological and narrative work of defining a relationship between Athena, Hera, and the humans resonates with the task of imaging the relationship of the U.S. to the rest of the world. The series is a particularly useful object of study in that it moves from an adoption plot where a series of potential families, Cylon and human, are proposed and then rejected to an interracial/interspecies romance between Hera’s parents, ultimately promoting a multiracial, nuclear family. Through an analysis of the interracial family plotlines, we can chart the movement between two of the historically dominant ways popular culture has represented Asian females in U.S. families.

If we understand the family as a metonym for nation, then these two models of interracial family formation, one formed by transnational adoption and the other by intermarriage, present two different ways of imagining the nation.¹ What can account for this narrative shift from a sentimental tale of transnational adoption to a highly gendered, interracial family romance? If transnational adoption narratives are a way to imaginatively rewrite U.S. global relations as familial ones, then what ideological movements are mapped by this new narrative? Why this story and why now?

This article will address these questions by first placing *BSG* within current scholarship on race and science fiction. Following the work of other cultural studies
scholars working in race and media, this study will then read *BSG* semiotically and as a part of the political economy of racialized media (Dyer, 1997; Guerrero, 1993; Mukherjee, 2006; Muñoz, 1999; Willis, 1997). Shifting between the specific visual and narrative meanings of *BSG* and a larger historical and economic frame highlights the role of culture in suturing together the fractured and conflicting experiences of global migration into a more palatable narrative of progress and liberal individualism.

The first half of the analysis of *BSG* will contextualize its adoption narrative within a longer history of representations of transracial adoption, demonstrating the links between those adoption stories and paternalistic models of U.S. colonialism that served to justify direct military intervention by the U.S. into Asia. The image of the little Asian girl adoptee both confirms the mythology of American moral superiority and invokes the specter of the outsider within who threatens a national heteronormative ideal. Tropes of Asian misogyny, poverty, and anachronistic culture are set in contrast to U.S. modernity and liberal humanism as justification for transnational adoption, helping to negotiate the ideologically threatening reality of global economic inequalities.\(^2\) The analysis will then turn to the multiple families competing for Hera who represent more than just the psychological and social hierarchies of U.S. familial models. By proposing and then rejecting several competing family types, the show demonstrates the ways in which the legitimation and recognition of particular kinds of racialized and gendered families work to simultaneously contain the threat to the heteronormative and strictly gendered family, define national boundaries and full citizenship, and mystify the globalization of once-national economies.\(^3\)
The second half of the paper will track the move towards a new kind of family formation that meets the needs of a contemporary era, characterized less by active and overt control over Asian countries and more by unequal economic relationships and the flow of labor, particularly female service labor, into the West. Although the interracial romance between Athena and Helo repeats a long standing stereotype of Asian women paired with Euro American men, the merger of that pairing with a family narrative helps the audience imagine a version of national citizenship that reconciles conflicts between structural global inequities and the U.S. ideal of liberal individualism, between differential citizenship and mythologies of a national meritocracy, and between the rhetoric of anti-colonialism and the ascendance of neo-colonialism. The ultimate valorization of an interracial and interspecies couple over any adoptive family rewrites the familial story of the U.S. and Asia from benevolent paternalism to one of patriarchal domestication.

Science fiction, race, and representation

*BSG* is explicitly allegorical, endlessly dissected on discussion boards by fans and in popular print by critics. Interpreting Cylons as a stand in for racial differences is a common point of departure for analyzing the show (Dies, 2008; Pegues, 2008). Grace Park, who plays Athena, says in an online interview that she first had trouble creating her Cylon character. She continues, “Someone close to me said. ‘It’s pretty easy. It’s just an oppressed race.’ As soon as I heard that I was [snaps fingers] ‘That’s what it is.’ And I’ve been using that a lot” ("Grace Park ", 2005, July 20). Although the Cylons may look like
humans they have a different religion, family structure, and method of communication, all of which are emphasized as significant and almost insurmountable distinctions.

The deployment of the alien Other as a stand in for racial and ethnic difference is not new to science fiction. True, race is often absent or limited in science fiction criticism (Roberts, 2006; Telotte, 2008) and discussions of race on television often neglect science fiction (Gray, 1995; Hamamoto, 1994; Hunt, 2005; Nadel, 2005; Torres, 1998), but there are notable exceptions. Included among these are scholars who argue that aliens have often acted as metaphors for racialized others in film (Greene & Slotkin, 1998; Guerrero, 1993; Nama, 2008; Ramírez Berg, 2002) and in television (Adare, 2005). Star Trek has been of particular interest to scholars of media and race (Bernardi, 1998; Pounds, 1999; Vande Berg, 1997) who argue that representations of alien races in the series parallels the movement from a civil rights era to a “post-racial” one.

Two recent publications draw a direct line between representations of aliens in science fiction and issues of immigration and national boundaries. In literary studies, the Winter 2008 issue of MELUS was dedicated to untangling the conflation of “Alien/Asian” in both science fiction and popular representations of technology. In media studies, Charles Ramírez Berg devoted a chapter of his book on Latinos in film to science fiction “with the hope of unveiling what we as a society repress and oppress in regard to immigration” (2002, p.156). This article will continue the trajectory of these later studies to understand the cultural and political context that inform coded representations of race and immigration in science fiction.

Ramírez Berg argues that understanding aliens as immigrants does not preclude other metaphorical readings, but immigration should be included as an important
interpretive lens. Within the world of *BSG* alien/racial differences are often mapped onto national difference. The humans, who serve as our primary point of identification, reflect the culture and ideals of mainstream U.S. society, but the Cylons’ culture is shrouded in mystery and frequently needs to be explained to the audience. Furthermore, there are many moments in the series when the Cylons are portrayed as a nation-state and specific Cylon characters as migrants. The most explicit of these representations concerns a debate over the right of Cylons to move freely through the fleet and is couched in terms of immigration. Late in the series, some Cylons break from their leaders and seek asylum among the humans, occupying primarily service positions. They eventually demand political representation prompting public debates about the limits of their citizenship rights. By analyzing Cylons as immigrants and by focusing on Athena and Hera who are not only played by Asian and multiracial Asian actors but also, as I will further argue, embody multiple Asian female tropes, this article will center on the kinds of beliefs and preconceptions that underlie the representations of Asian, female, immigrants to the U.S.

Other Communication scholars have linked mediated debates over national belonging to the framing and limits of political responses to immigration (DeChaine, 2009; Flores, 2003; Hasian Jr & Delgado, 1998; Ono & Sloop, 2002). While scholars have concerned themselves with the construction of the border and the immigrant through news media and political rhetoric, fictional representations also take part in the cultural construction of racialized, national borders. As Lisa Flores (2003, p. 365) notes, “The symbolic and political terrains of immigration are never neatly distinct...” This article, then, concentrates on the intersection of race, science fiction, and national identity in the mass mediated narrative of *BSG* to understand how it represents and reflects the
conflicted and, as yet, unreconciled politics of immigration and Asian, female, global, labor.

*Transnational Multiracial Adoption and U.S. Empire*

Hera, the elusive multiracial, multispecies child at the center of much of *BSG*’s plot, embodies the contradictions and shifting politics that characterize contemporary narratives of globalization. As is typical of representations of multiraciality, she is largely physically absent, but she is invested with meaning by many of the show’s primary characters (Sexton, 2008). Even as she is marked by race, by gender, and by nation, she is a cipher, a nearly empty signifier shaped by multiple discourses, valued as plot devices rather than as a character (Ono, 2008).

Media images of multiracial Asian adoptees demonstrate the importance of mass mediated narratives in advancing a coherent national identity. As cultural historian Christina Klein argues in her description of media representations of Korean adoption, “The figure of the white parent to the non-white child has long worked as a trope for representing the ostensibly ‘natural’ relations of hierarchy and dominance” (2003, p. 175). Concerns about the structural, global, inequalities that make possible the increasing flow of babies from poorer Asian countries to wealthy Western ones are rewritten as romantic stories about mother love and finding families. These media images of Asian adoptees, particularly those popularized in the wake of U.S. wartime incursions into Asia, work in counterpoint to the ideologically contradictory images of the U.S. as an invading imperial power.
Images from BSG resonate with historical representations of transnational Asian adoption. The extensive news coverage of Operation Babylift, the evacuation of thousands of Vietnamese children in the waning days of America’s war in Vietnam, worked to replace other iconic images of the Fall of Saigon, such as the mass evacuation of the American Embassy. Heroic images of rescue countered news footage of the humiliating rush to abandon our allies ahead of the approaching North Vietnamese army. In the 1980’s, television featured multiple, fictional, re-tellings of the saga of adopted children of the Vietnam War searching for their fathers (Hamamoto, 1994). Even earlier, magazines such as *Readers Digest* and *Saturday Review* featured stories about the adoption of the multiracial children of Korean mothers and U.S. or U.N. soldiers into Euro American families (Klein, 2003). Robert Lee argued that the U.S. at midcentury was attempting to consolidate its global standing by promoting a Cold War liberalism that included the paternal control of Asia externally and the integration and assimilation of Asian Americans domestically, countering memories of Japanese American internment (Lee, 1999). The Asian baby adoptee seems to be the perfect merger of these two ways of imagining Asia.\(^5\)

*BSG* does revise and complicate the familiar multiracial Asian, transnational, adoptee narrative, yet, at times, it also simply replicates the binary and hierarchical structure of these well-rehearsed ideologies of U.S. foreign relations. The starkest example is its complete rejection of the Cylons as appropriate caretakers for Hera. To read *BSG* allegorically, the Cylons are a foreign and hostile Other and the humans are equated with the hegemonic, white dominated, U.S. Although the series later questions
those divisions, the early denigration of Cylon culture and Cylon families as either nonexistent or dysfunctional has disturbing racial overtones.

The audience is introduced to the bizarre and, literally, alien society of the Cylons shortly before the ones in which we are shown their inability to nurture and protect Hera. In the episodes just prior to Hera’s rescue from her Cylon kidnappers, we see the Cylons torture one of the show’s main human characters, Gaius Baltar (James Callis) cementing the depiction of their culture as fundamentally corrupt. Their communal society is visually marked as different from the outset. The audience first views their ship as we follow Baltar through its doorless, minimalist, and, apparently, clothing-optional interior where the inhabitants practice Tai Chi. The honeycomb of halls and rooms are inhabited by Cylons who share each others’ thoughts and sexual partners. The layered fades and cross-cuts of Baltar walking aimlessly down identical, eerily lit, hallways make it difficult to track Baltar spatially or chronologically and visually disorients us. By the time Athena arrives to take Hera back to the humans, the cultural difference between the humans and Cylons is made viscerally clear.

The rejection of multiracial children by Asian societies was repeatedly argued as a primary reason for multiracial adoption, rooting the need for adoption in bigoted Asian cultures. This theme is echoed in the depiction of Cylon attitudes towards species mixing. Boomer, Hera’s caretaker on the Cylon ship, says to Athena, “You can have her. I’m done with her.” To which Athena replies, “You don’t mean that. I know you still care about [the humans] Tyrol and Adama.” And Boomer says, “…Humans and Cylons are not meant to be together. We should just go our separate ways.” As the scene ends, Boomer becomes so distraught by her inability to care for the half-human Hera that she
threatens to “Snap your [Hera’s] little neck.” In response, her own neck is broken, and her bonds to Hera are severed. The Cylon’s difference from humans explains and justifies the decision to place Hera in the superior care of human culture. These scenes in *BSG* gain their power and logic from familiar transracial adoption narratives.

*Nation and the Limits of Non-Normative Domesticity*

While post-Vietnam War media images of transnational, multiracial Asian, adoptees have historically shored up national boundaries between the multicultural, progressive, and benevolent paternalism of the U.S. and an infantilized Asian Other, the image of transnational adoption has also come to symbolize a threat to the traditional nuclear family. Tobias Hübinette, in his historical account, points out that Korean adoption represented a “liberating reproductive method” for “radical feminists and sexual minorities” and was associated with “left-liberal ideologies.” 7 Like mid-20th century representations of Korean adoption, contemporary views of transnational adoption are ambivalent. Although adoptive, interracial families provide evidence that the U.S. is beyond race and socially progressive, they also open the door for more radical family formations.

The representations of transnational adoption in *BSG* illustrate how the threat to traditional families, and, by analogy, the challenge to the boundaries of U.S. racial identity, is often countered by the promotion of a highly gendered, heteronormative family structure as natural and normal. The heterosexual nuclear family is believed to be created autonomously and spontaneously within the domestic space, rather than the result of social policies rewarding the “intact” family and punishing alternative family
structures. In contrast, *BSG* portrays the non-normative family unit of the female President of the Colonies, Laura Roslin (Mary McDonnell), her assistant, Tory Foster (Rekha Sharma), and a single mother known only as Maya (Erica Cerra) as well meaning but essentially misguided. This queer family unit is reinforced within the show by the consistent visual pairing of Roslin and Foster during the beginning of the third season when the kidnapping takes place. Although Roslin is romantically aligned with the male Admiral Adama in the narrative, she is more frequently linked visually with Foster, with Foster appearing nearby or in the background of many of Roslin scenes while Adama is on a ship far away. Foster, a minor character at that point in the series, is almost exclusively seen in the company of Roslin, and their intimacy is cemented by their shared knowledge of their theft of Hera. The trio of Roslin, Tory, and Maya, then, can be fruitfully read as an alternative, queer, family unit.

Their family is tainted from the beginning by both the overly intrusive role of the state and, ultimately, its inability to protect Hera. As the ultimate representative of the state, President Roslin’s interference into the nuclear family of Athena, Helo, and Hera is suspect. Because the Cylons reproduce through cloning, one of the fundamental lines separating them from the humans is their lack of traditional family structure. In the season three episode “A Measure of Salvation,” one character justifies the proposed genocide of the Cylons saying, “No fathers, no mothers, no sons, no daughters.” In the series, the family, and motherhood in particular, become sacrosanct. However, Roslin violates the family unit and takes the baby from her birth family because she believes Hera is important to the future of human society. The initial decision by the state, embodied by Roslin, to ignore affective and familial ties in favor of abstract ideals is
unambiguously condemned as the series progresses. Athena becomes an ever more sympathetic character and the show’s patriarch Admiral Adama, despite his love and respect for Roslin, upbraids her for stealing Hera from her mother. The power of the state to place children in non-normative, adoptive families is not understood as an act of equity and benevolence, but as a political force run amok.

**Global Migration and the Family Romance**

In response to changes in the role of the U.S. globally, the representation of the family as nation turns from a transnational adoptive family towards a strictly gendered interracial one. To track this shift, this essay turns from the portrayal of the multiracial child Hera to her Asian mother, Athena, and her place in the interracial family before returning to the third and final rejected adoptive family.\(^{10}\) *BSG* works hard to reconcile some of the contradictions of the U.S. globally. Although the U.S. positions itself as anti-imperialist and anti-colonial, dedicated to the democratic self-rule of all countries, it participates in an unequal global economic system. The U.S. supports a global economy wherein labor is exported out in the form of underpaid, predominantly female, workers to host countries. Then, capital in the form of remittances is funneled back to the home country to help balance an economy hobbled by debt to those same host countries. In yet another contradiction, the U.S., which imagines itself as a multicultural, anti-racist, meritocracy relies upon a system of differential citizenship and immigration to limit and control movement across its borders. Even while the barriers between national economies seem to be weakening, national boundaries are becoming ever more rigid (Sassen, 1996). Global migration has been touted as a the ultimate symbol of freedom, liberal
individualism, and the transcendence of traditional nation-states, yet the nation still plays a considerable role in differentiating and regulating types of migration.

*BSG* provides a storyline that can reconcile both of these contradictions by revising the story of migratory flows from one of capital and labor to one of affective ties. Thus, migration is not the result of neo-colonial economic policies but a personal choice by those people who are emotionally drawn to the U.S. and want to move there. Structural inequalities are naturalized and justified along familial lines. In the world of *BSG*, those migrants who adhere to the correct story by forming strong affective ties are rewarded while those who remain workers, whose primary tie to the humans is as laborers, remain disenfranchised outsiders.

One of the most important aspects of Athena is that she is a clone. The Cylons come in several “models” or types and their entire population consists of multiple copies of each type. Thus, there are several version of the Eight model, all played by Grace Park. Conveniently enough, the storyline of *BSG* itself splits Park into two Eight clones who can be aligned with divergent models of female migrant labor. The first clone we meet is Boomer and the main clone of the series is Athena. Boomer and Athena (both Grace Park) represent Asian female immigration to the U.S. within the current historical moment in which transnational migration is both encouraged and demonized. The economic and social system of the U.S. increasingly depends upon transnational migrant labor while citizenship and sanctioned immigration become ever more unattainable for many of those very workers. While Boomer and Athena emerge as central and distinct figures, the masses of other Eight Cylons form an important backdrop to the primary
stories. Thus for the remainder of the essay, the characters played by Park will be either specifically named as Boomer or Athena or will go by the generic name of Eight.

The association of Boomer visually with the global migration of Asian female labor is cemented by an image from the end of the first season. Boomer realizes that she is a Cylon, not a human as she had long believed, when she leaves her space ship and is surrounded by identical versions of herself. The scene, complete with an ominous sound track, is menacing and meant to evoke unease at the uncanny image of indistinguishable replicas of Eights. That image became one the show’s defining symbols, as it was included in the opening credits followed by the intertitle, “There are many copies.”

The image of multiple Boomers resonates with that of the faceless masses of Asian female “nimble fingers,” a term used to objectify and categorize these workers, (Kang, 2002), and Boomer is diminished when confronted with her multiple selves. Factory labor depends upon a flexible and interchangeable work force, a work force that is increasingly migratory and transnational (Wickramasekera, August, 2002). Yet the laboring mass of factory workers, like the “coolie” labor of the 19th century, are by their very interchangeability and exploited state poor potential citizens. Boomer fails repeatedly as a citizen-subject of the human colonies and is the character that resembles most closely the criminalized migrant. She remains under the control of her home state, the Cylon nation, throughout the show and is both a traitor and terrorist. As the Cylon model specifically designed for romantic love, the resonances with other images of Asian women seem too obvious to ignore, recalling the Asian woman as wartime prostitute and spy and, during peacetime, as an interchangeable part of the global sex trade (So, 2006).
The Eight model of the first season is one of many indistinguishable, uncountable, replicas produced as sexual and reproductive capital.

Although Athena begins much like the other Eight Cylons, her divergent path sets her in stark contrast to Boomer. At first, her role in Cylon society, like Boomer, is to seduce humans and produce a Cylon/human hybrid child. Athena is a victim of Cylon society, a point made explicit by a long and unexpected beating by two other Cylons. The camera lingers on the abuse, beginning with a close up of a fist coming toward the camera and then slowly panning away as she crawls and then kneels while being punched and kicked repeatedly. She is also represented as complicit in her own exploitation by agreeing to perform acts -- sex and reproduction -- for political ends rather than understanding those behaviors as “naturally” flowing from affective ties. The turning point comes when Athena falls in love with Helo and begins her integration into human society.

Her partial acceptance into human society, however, is also marked by repeated and sadistic punishment. She is abused and shunned by everyone but Helo. As Grace Park says of her character in an on-line interview with 13MinutesMag, “They do everything to Sharon (Eight). Like she’s so brutalized you can’t help feeling sorry for her. That’s kind of the point” (Nguyen & Le, January 18, 2007). During most of Athena’s pregnancy she is kept under observation in a glass enclosed cell, and many of her most dramatic scenes, including a near gang rape, are filmed through thick glass and wire, distancing the viewer and preventing a clear identification with her. In addition, this state of constant surveillance invites the viewer to assist the ship’s crew in keeping her under a punishing gaze. Despite this treatment, Athena remains loyal to the humans and even
willingly contemplates Cylon genocide to prove her worth to them. Athena’s rehabilitation into an acceptable citizen, then, requires her victimization. It is through her brutalization that she proves her loyalty and gains the good will of the humans.

Athena’s movement from enemy to a partial citizen also requires her to reject rather than identify with others who labor under the same conditions. At the end of the last season, Athena tracks Boomer and shoots her. She finally annihilates the earlier, undomesticated version of herself, a version that understood her reproductive labor as work rather than natural and free. The other Eights remain part of the sex trade or, in the last season, are expendable manual laborers engaged in the futile and sometimes fatal attempt to repair the ship.\textsuperscript{12} As the series progresses, the other Eights become more easily distinguished from Athena who dresses almost exclusively in military clothing. The other Eights appear in a variety of flared mini-skirts and form-fitting jackets, emphasizing the contrast between Athena, the ultra-patriot, and the rest of the Eights, the sexualized seductresses.

The primary paths for Eights are severely limited to an emotional submission to the humans or exploitation and death. The overarching bootstrap narrative of Athena’s partial integration into the professional class of the ship also explains the failure of the majority of the Eights since they are “poor citizens” who do not form families and affective ties to the humans. The figure of Athena and her various copies rewrite distinct migrant groups as part of a teleological progression that renders acceptable the exploitation of one group and the limited citizenship rights of the other.\textsuperscript{13} The implication is that the system itself is equitable and fair, and if one only forms the “correct”
relationship with both labor and affect then the movement from low-status to high-status migrant is inevitable.

*The final family and gender norming*

The family formed by Helo, Athena, and Hera is set in contrast to a final potential adoptive family: Gaius and Six. Gaius and Six are morally suspect and hedonistic, corrupted by their intellect and their narcissism. As the series progresses, they both have multiple sexual partners and end up estranged. This couple parodies a popular contemporary image of the failed American family with stock stereotypes of the overly ambitious wife, an oblivious husband, and their eventual “divorce.” Further, they are not singled out as symbols of the dysfunctional family. Of the four marriages that take place during the show, only Athena and Helo’s is intact at the show’s end. The 2000 census showed that less than 25% percent of American households consist of the normative nuclear family of a mother, father, and their children, yet it remains an idealized standard (Schmitt, 2001, May 15). By promoting the family unit of Athena, Helo, and Hera, the show chases a model that is no longer the norm. In the end, it is Helo and Athena’s relationship that approximates the near mythical ideal of the nuclear family, and they are Hera’s final parents.

While the image of the interracial *family* might be new, depictions of the Asian interracial couple have historical roots at least as far back as the post-WWII era. During that time, the excessively feminine Asian woman was represented as a direct rival to independent white women in films such as *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), *Sayonara* (1957), and *Love is a Many Splendored Thing* (1955). These images of interracial romance helped to reassert traditional gender roles in reaction to the threat of the
independent woman, both celebrating the superiority of white masculinity and reprimanding white women for their lack of docility and domesticity (Koshy, 2004; Lee, 1999; Marchetti, 1993; Simpson, 2001).

Although Athena’s interracial romance may follow a familiar storyline, the transition from couple to family brings a new element to the representation of the interracial family and, by extension, the relationship of the U.S. to Asia. The earlier filmic representations were primarily set in Asia and ended before questions of family or reproduction arose, echoing a U.S. policy that viewed Asian countries and labor as subject to the U.S. but distinct and separate (Marchetti, 1993). The interracial family, however, can speak to concerns about increasingly porous borders and the flow of labor back and forth between the U.S. and Asia. It provides a handy metaphor for the partial, segmented, and inequitable integration of a highly gendered Asian labor force.

Athena begins her transition through a romantic relationship, but she is saved and redeemed by motherhood. When she arrives on the ship the Battlestar Galactica, the central metropolis in the series, she is spared from immediate execution by announcing her pregnancy. In the episode “A Measure of Salvation” Athena is made resistant to a Cylon disease by the fetal transfer of her hybrid baby’s blood. In that case, the baby literalizes a blood tie that links Athena to the humans. This exemplifies what Lauren Berlant has termed, “fetal motherhood,” meaning the mother is “becoming more minor and less politically represented than the fetus, which is in turn made more national, more central to securing the privileges of law, paternity, and other less institutional family strategies of contemporary American culture” (1997, p.85). The movement from understanding the child as separate from the mother to determining the citizenship of the
mother reverses historical treatment of the transnational adoption of biracial babies. For example, the biracial baby boom that followed U.S. wars in Southeast Asia and Korea resulted in the Amerasian Immigration Act of 1982, which belatedly granted immigration rights to children of American soldiers but did not include rights for their mothers. In fact, mothers were required to sign an irrevocable release so that their child could emigrate.

Set in contrast to the other women on the show, Athena’s excessive and dangerous femininity can only be contained through monogamy and motherhood. Having a Korean North American embody the role of Athena helps propel the narrative trajectory by reinforcing the long held stereotype of Asian women as naturally and irrevocably feminine and suited to domesticity. Although she is a fighter pilot, she also seems to be a primary caregiver. She is the only one of the characters seen in domestic labor, usually related to Hera, folding clothes and comforting and playing with her.

Her racial difference also reminds the audience of her foreignness, her inability to fully assimilate. On another episode, she says, “I have to fight every day on this ship to be accepted” (3.14). This places her into a double bind. Like the model minority stereotype, she must excel but is, by her very efforts, set apart from the others. Athena’s precarious place within the fleet produces a narrative that demonstrates the ability of the fleet to accommodate difference, but in order to maintain a coherent narrative it must also constantly remind the audience of that very difference.

Athena’s acceptance into human society is always tenuous and contingent upon the charity and sponsorship of her husband and her commander. In a scene that was cut from the episode “Maelstrom” but included in the DVD extras, she confronts another
woman on the ship and says, “You hate who I am. You hate where I’m from. You hate me because I’m a Cylon. But you won’t kill me because I love my husband and I love my child. Because I love this ship and what it means to me” (5.17). Although she may be hated and will never be recognized as fully deserving of citizenship, she is allowed to exist through her affective relationships to her family and the state and her embrace of a clearly defined gender role.

Asian female labor and differential citizenship

Detaching global migration from capital and labor and yoking it to affect and family also provides a justification and logic to differential citizenship laws. Although citizenship may be couched in terms of universalism and color-blind ideals, in practice acquiring citizenship is a highly stratified and racially marked process.\textsuperscript{15} The number of independent, Asian female, migrants, as opposed to early 20\textsuperscript{th} century trailing spousal migrants, has increased exponentially with each decade since the 1970’s (Wickramasekera, August, 2002). The old symbol of the helpless, biracial, easily assimilated child taken into the care of a benevolent West may not be adequate for contemporary migration. Instead, \textit{BSG} layers another image over the earlier one so the Asian mother also joins in the migratory flow, accepting and even embracing her partial citizenship in exchange for her multiracial child’s complete integration into the human race.

The story of interracial marriage that replaced the story of the adoptive family distances and isolates the U.S. from the economies and politics of other nations by ignoring its role in the global circulation of labor. Instead we have a familiar, Horatio
Alger-esque, story of transnational labor set in space. The explanation of global migration is revised from one of unequal interdependence on a national and global scale to one where women exploited by their home country enter the U.S. as devalued service labor including sex workers or mail-order brides (Gonzalez & Rodriguez, 2003; Kang, 2002; Marchetti, 1993; Shimizu, 2007). The laboring women remain in the host country due to loyalty or love of an obviously superior culture, and the lucky few find their way into “legitimate,” middle-class, traditionally gendered, heterosexual, families. The family unit helps to reproduce the state’s interests with the assumption that the migrant wife will assimilate to the dominant culture, produce children for the state, and remain under the patronage of her male champion. An earlier colonial, paternalistic, story of abandoned and rejected children who need to be guided and cared for is eclipsed by a story of the liberal, global, adult female who can and does choose the U.S. over all others.

The depiction of Hera’s potential and final families in *BSG* provides an imaginative space in which the ideological contradictions embedded in notions of gender, globalization, and citizenship can be worked through and reconciled. Representations of the heterosexual nuclear family as the natural and ideal reflection of the nation are a key component in resolving the contradictions of global inequalities. While Athena’s story offers a path towards becoming a recognized national subject, it does so by erasing the structured flow of a specifically racialized and gendered labor force. If the global order is enabled through our ability to imagine and represent its shape, then the fact that the narrative of alienation and assimilation in both the transnational adoption stories and the interracial romance plotline of *BSG* would be so familiar and satisfying should give us pause. Mass media representations that naturalize contingent citizenship, heteronormative
families, and the structural inequalities of transnational capital and labor are becoming all
too commonplace in the struggle to narrate the U.S. as a global power.

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References


There are too many references to list here but prominent scholars working at the intersection of gender and race studies have long argued that the representations of family function as a metonym for the nation (Berlant, 1997; Eng, 2003; Palumbo-Liu, 1999; Smith, 1999; Spillers, 1987).

To offer just one of several contemporary examples, in the much reported Anna Mae He custody battle in Tennessee between the Chinese biological parents and the American adoptive parents of a Chinese girl, the original court documents cite poor conditions in China as partial reason for terminating her biological parents’ rights. The Shelby County judge referred to China’s one child policy and purported 50% death rate for female children in China, a “fact” attributed to Anna Mae He’s father. After Anna Mae He returned to China, CNN, in a Dec. 13, 2008 broadcast, reported breathlessly “from a country not know for its openness” and with apparent surprise that she lived in an apartment with “hardwood and marble floors!”

Saskia Sassen refers to this simultaneous movement towards a nationalistic ideology and a denationalized global economy as “the opposite turns of nationalism.”

The metaphorical use of aliens as racial and ethnic Others is also recognized by mainstream audiences as evidenced by the popular controversy over the film Avatar which many believed replicated racialized colonial narratives. Even James Cameron, the movie’s director, felt compelled to respond to these audience interpretations (Boucher, 2009, August 14).

This story of transnational Asian adoption could be traced back even further to Madame Butterfly which ends with the Japanese heroine committing suicide so that her multiracial child could be taken back with his white father and his new wife to America.

I am not arguing that the social rejection and isolation of multiracial children in Korea and Vietnam, particularly following America’s wars, is invented or unimportant. Rather, I am pointing out the prevalence of the argument, and its opposition to a vision of a more enlightened West. This vision is countered forcefully in several adoptee narratives including the excellent documentary Daughter from Danang in which the main subject, Heidi Bub, recalls her family’s decision to have her pass as white to avoid the racism of her community (Dolgin, et al., 2003).

Hübinette also cites Derek Kirton and Rickie Solinger work to support this claim (Hübinette, 2007).
I’d like to thank Abigail Derecho for pointing out the queer family unit formed by Roslin, Tory, and Maya at a presentation of an earlier version of the paper at the 2008 “Console-ing Passions” conference.

In a controversial episode during the first season, President Roslin, after much on-air soul searching decides to outlaw abortion to help perpetuate the human race.

Juliana Pegues also reads the Athena-Helo interracial romance in her analysis of *BSG*, but her article focuses on the projection of the Vietnam War onto the War on Terror to revise the meanings of war and torture in the context of Iraq and Abu Ghraib (2008).

We might also read the Cylon Tory Foster, the only other character on the show played by an Asian, as a mirror image of Athena. She uses sexuality to obtain information but is actively anti-maternal, which she demonstrates by murdering a mother in front of her child. Foster, like Boomer, is killed at the end of the last season.

In a short series of webisodes that aired on-line between seasons, “The Face of the Enemy,” another Eight appears who previous seduced Gaeta (Alessandro Juliani) in order to steal state secrets. She is revealed as a murderer and is, in turn, stabbed by Gaeta.

Aihwa Ong argues that the differential success for various Asian groups has more to do with the capital Asian migrants bring into the country rather than how much they make while they are here. She distinguishes between different modes of labor migration which range from the irregular or undocumented migration of low-wage, unskilled workers to capital rich business men and “parachute kids” who move freely across national borders in pursuit of educational opportunities (Ong, 1999).

At first the show seemed to encourage a reading of Baltar and Six as the proper parents for Hera. When Hera is born in the season two episode “Downloaded,” Six tells Baltar that she is “their child” echoing earlier predictions that they would have a child together. Throughout the series, Six, like Roslin, has visions of Hera in which Hera is crying, and she and Gatus search for and rescue her.