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Ambivalent anti-heroes and racist rednecks on basic cable: Post-race ideology and white masculinities on FX

ABSTRACT

1. This article explores the representations of white masculinities and the depiction
2. of racism in anti-heroic narratives on the basic cable network FX in the United
3. States. By juxtaposing the ambivalent racial sensibilities of a morally ambiguous
4. white protagonist with the overt racism of stereotypical depictions of the white
5. underclass, *The Shield* (2002–2008), *Sons of Anarchy* (2008–) and *Justified*
6. (2010–) acknowledge the continuing existence of racial prejudice in American society
7. while also supporting the dominant colour blind rhetoric that denies the continuing
8. impact of structural racism. Although some scholars interpret the popularity of
9. hyper-masculine anti-hero shows that speak to the notion of 'masculinity-in-crisis'
10. as indicative of the declining benefits associated with white, male privilege, this
11. analysis uses G. Harris' notion of 'postmasculinist television drama' to argue that
12. the consistent deployment of white masculinities in these FX programmes reinforce
13. the post-race ideology associated with hegemonic whiteness by 'othering' problematic
14. racial attitudes yet still allow white audiences to take 'ironic' pleasure from
15. expressions of overt racism.

KEYWORDS

post-network
television
basic cable
white masculinities
FX
anti-hero
prime-time drama

1. Although the term 'anti-hero' is an increasingly common descriptor of protagonists in contemporary prime-time cable drama, there is no clear definition or universal theoretical description of an anti-hero (Shafer and Raney 2012: 1030). This article uses the term to refer to the central distinction between traditional heroes who lack moral flaws and anti-heroes whose moral flaws are directly related to the unfolding dramatic narrative.
2. The première of *The Shield* drew 4.8 million viewers and was, at the time, the highest rated scripted show in the history of basic cable (Sepinwall 2012: 142). In addition, Michael Chiklis received the 2002 Prime-time Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Drama Series for his portrayal of Vic Mackey.

INTRODUCTION

Since the début of *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), original hour-long dramas with narratives centred on morally ambiguous, white, male protagonists have become increasingly common on US cable television. Among critics, discussions of television's contemporary 'golden age' are seemingly inseparable from discussions of the 'anti-hero' (see Martin 2013; Paskin 2013; Van Der Werff 2013a), a character who serves as the audience's 'primary point of ongoing narrative alignment, but whose behaviour and beliefs provoke ambiguous, conflicted, or negative moral allegiance' (Mittell 2013, 'Character').¹ Previously known as 'Fox on cable' (Larson 2003), FX reinvented its brand with the complex, hyper-masculine anti-hero drama *The Shield* (2002–2008) establishing itself as one of cable's première destinations for 'gritty' (Owen 2003), 'risky' (Lafayette 2008), and 'edgy' (Hampp 2007) fare. Set in the fictional Farmington district of contemporary Los Angeles, the show centres its narrative on a corrupt police detective, Vic Mackey (Michael Chiklis), who murders another police officer at the conclusion of the pilot episode. In the wake of *The Shield's* unprecedented success,² the advertiser-supported network introduced a slew of prime-time dramas including *Nip/Tuck* (2003–2010) and *Rescue Me* (2004–2011) to build 'a roster of series aimed at its young, male demographic [...] that bear more resemblance to each other as "FX series" than they do to other examples of their various genres' (Nichols-Pethick 2012: 162). Although the network claims its diverse line-up of dramas are united by 'emotionally complex and authentically human characters' (FX Networks 2007), as one critic observes, 'Series on FX have balls' (Goodman 2010). Indeed, by 2012, FX was the second highest rated cable network among men between 18 and 49 (Ad Age 2012).

Like anti-hero dramas more broadly, the gendered appeal of FX reflects both the industrial conditions at the start of the post-network era and broader cultural shifts regarding the dominant idea surrounding masculinity. In contrast to the economics of the network era, which rely on large audiences, during the 1990s, advertisers became increasingly interested in focused demographics allowing advertiser supported cable networks to produce content that will only be watched by 1 per cent of the available audience (Lotz 2007: 37). In such a narrow-casting environment, the particular appeal of hyper-masculine FX dramas with violent overtones are often linked to the growing sense of 'white masculinity in crisis'. The treatment of homophobia in *Rescue Me*, for example, depicts working-class white men 'negotiating adjustments in dominant ideology regarding gay identity' from the perspective of 'those whose past privilege is under siege and whose world-views are rendered increasingly obsolete' (Draper and Lotz 2012: 524). Similarly, for both the doctors and male patients in *Nip/Tuck*, plastic surgery is 'an attempt at making their masculinity "whole" again' (Brandt 2011: 20). Although the notion of masculinity-in-crisis has historical precedents (Kimmel 2005), the current crisis is associated with a variety of factors that challenge the validity of male privilege including neo-liberal economic policies, consumerism and, most notably, feminism, along with a range of related movements (civil rights, gay rights, antiwar) (Robinson 2000).

Among television scholars, the ideological significance of post-network texts speaking to this sense of declining privilege remains the subject of debate. According to J. Mittell (2013), for example, in 'complex masculinist dramas' like *The Shield*, *Rescue Me*, *Sons of Anarchy* and *Justified*, 'the narrative act of making male privilege an object of dramatic conflict, as well as encouraging

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1. male viewers to experience the emotional realm of effeminate melodramatic
 2. pleasure, can be regarded as progressive steps within the traditionally hege-
 3. monic realm of dramatic television' ('Serial Melodrama'). In contrast, G.
 4. Harris proposes the category of 'postmasculinist' television drama defined
 5. by an 'ambiguous/ambivalent relation not just towards feminism but to other
 6. twentieth-century movements that were concerned with the de-centring and
 7. de-naturalization of the normative, white masculine subject' (2012: 443). Like
 8. post-feminist media culture, the use of retro imagery in *Deadwood* (2004–
 9. 2006) or nostalgia in *The Sopranos*, for example, is significant because the act
 10. of referencing a previous era suggests that problematic social attitudes like
 11. sexism and racism have been left in the past (Gill 2007). From this perspec-
 12. tive, the white, male anti-hero protagonist's experience of existential crisis
 13. 'may be as much, indeed more, a sign of the recuperation and reaffirmation of
 14. "hegemonic masculinity" as of its undoing' (Harris 2012: 444).

15. This article contributes to the ongoing scholarly discussion regard-
 16. ing the ideological significance of masculine anti-hero drama by examining
 17. the relationship between race, racism and moral ambiguity in three FX crime
 18. dramas.³ Using 'post-race' ideology (see Collins 2004) as the basis for the textual
 19. analysis of *The Shield*, *Sons of Anarchy* and *Justified*, I argue that the deployment
 20. of multiple white masculinities provides white audiences with the opportunity
 21. to both take pleasure in overt expressions of racial superiority and generally
 22. disavow the existence of structural racism. Driven by conflict between two white
 23. men in crisis, the moral economies of FX crime dramas consistently position a
 24. primary white anti-hero with ambivalent attitudes regarding racial equality as
 25. superior to unambiguously racist white character(s) who more blatantly violate
 26. 'the decorum of the white racial order' (Hartigan 1997: 320). In a social context
 27. where hegemonic whiteness is associated with colour blindness, the presence
 28. of prejudice alongside tolerance promotes the belief that race is no longer relevant
 29. while simultaneously turning racism into a transgressive pleasure.

30. In the following section, after briefly reviewing scholarship that consider-
 31. ers the racial politics of *The Shield*, I bring discussions of post-race popular
 32. culture into conversation with Harris' (2012) notion of postmasculinist tele-
 33. vision drama to argue that the use of stereotypical depictions of poor white men
 34. is particularly significant in anti-hero narratives that rely on relative moral-
 35. ity. Next, I argue that *The Shield* uses Mackey's racial ambivalence as both an
 36. anti-heroic point of identification and to indulge in aggressive racist hostility
 37. while then denying and condemning such attitudes by displacing them onto
 38. his partner Shane Vendrell (Walton Goggins) as the abject embodiment of
 39. 'white trash'. I then extend this interpretation to *Sons of Anarchy* and *Justified*
 40. to highlight the consistent deployment of stereotypical representations of race,
 41. class and gender that paradoxically work to deny the significance of race. The
 42. article concludes with a discussion of racial politics in FX drama as a reflec-
 43. tion of the general entertainment network's niche branding strategy in light of
 44. critical and scholarly claims regarding the 'progressive' masculinity of cable's
 45. anti-heroic dramas.

46. **RACIAL POLITICS IN THE SHIELD, POST-RACE IDEOLOGY AND 47. POSTMASCULINIST DRAMA**

48. FX, a subsidiary of the Fox television network, launched in 1994 as a showcase
 49. for 20th Century Television-owned classic programming like *Batman* (1966–
 50. 1968). By the late 1990s, the network's lineup included a combination of
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3. The choice to focus upon crime dramas to the exclusion of dramedies like *Rescue Me* or medical dramas like *Nip/Tuck* is based in the genre's relationship with 'hard-boiled masculinity' and the tendency for such contemporary texts to blur 'American television's typical line between good and evil characters' (Malin 2010: 377).

movies and reruns of Fox series including *Married with Children* (1987–1997). FX's first attempt to attract the highly valuable male 18–49 demographic was the acquisition of NASCAR racing in 1999. This was followed by the introduction of the network's first original series, *Son of a Beach* (2000–2002), a comedic parody of *Baywatch* (1989–1999) with radio personality Howard Stern attached as an executive producer. Although FX succeeded in attracting a niche audience of men, it still lacked a cohesive brand identity. In this context, *The Shield* 'presented itself as the appropriate vehicle for a niche network looking to distinguish itself in the crowded media marketplace' (Nichols-Pethick 2012: 162). Like the subscription-based cable network HBO appeals to niche rather than mass audiences, *The Shield* 'exhibited a certain amount of "edge," meaning it clearly defined the boundaries of its intended audiences and deliberately excluded some tastes and sensibilities' (Lotz 2007: 185). Yet, rather than ask its audience to empathize with a character who was traditionally the villain as HBO had done with *The Sopranos*, FX and *The Shield* 'took a classically sympathetic figure and made him into someone you could view as a hero, a monster, or something in between' (Sepinwall 2012: 143).

Not surprisingly, the majority of scholarly treatments of *The Shield* address the paths through which the audience comes to identify with a morally ambiguous protagonist like Mackey. T. White (2012), for example, argues that the show challenges the audience throughout its seven-season run by pushing the boundaries of the genre. He writes: 'by putting a cop who is as morally bankrupt as Tony Soprano at the center of a cop show, *The Shield* sends dramatically mixed messages to its viewers' (White 2012: 89). In particular, the show combines a challenge to conventional morality similar to that of *The Sopranos* with morally ambiguous police officers derived from shows like *NYPD Blue* (1993–2005) and *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993–1999) to highlight the ways in which the desire for safe streets and the ideals of a liberal, democratic society are mutually exclusive. N. Ray provides a different interpretation of Mackey's moral ambiguity and the character's relationship to the show's audience, arguing that despite the protestations of many other characters to Mackey's "'ends justifies the means" policing, and however much *The Shield* sometimes allows its viewers to be visually troubled by the violence of those means, the show never seriously challenges the tendentious assumption that exceptional means do factually – and habitually – lead to beneficial juridical ends' (2012: 179). From this perspective, the audience's willingness to forgive Mackey for his multitude of sins reflects the collective desire to believe that 'security and justice can somehow be consolidated by exceptional means' (Ray 2012: 185).

In relation to the show's anti-heroic protagonist, the limited volume of scholarship addressing *The Shield*'s representations of race and ethnicity offer differing interpretations. M. Chopra-Gant (2012), for example, understands *The Shield*'s racial politics in terms of the connections between masculinity, law and social order. In the context of competing claims to moral authority during the show's earlier seasons, the values and morality associated with Mexican American Captain David Aceveda (Benito Martinez) and the African American Claudette Wyms (C. C. H. Pounder) are consistently subordinated to Mackey's 'maverick solutions' indicating 'that a successfully integrated multicultural society is inevitably dependent on the continuing power of the white patriarch' (Chopra-Gant 2012: 132–33). In spite of challenges from ethnic and female characters, the crises created by Vendrell, a white man, represent the greatest threat to Mackey's power. During much of *The Shield*'s

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1. final two seasons, the positioning of Vendrell 'as a counterpoint "bad father"
 2. to Mackey's "good father"' allows the latter to maintain his status as 'maver-
 3. iker hero' (Chopra-Gant 2012: 139). According to Chopra-Gant, the 'good
 4. father/bad father opposition' (2012: 140) is re-emphasized by the narrative
 5. closure provided by the series finale when Vendrell murders his pregnant wife
 6. and young son with an overdose of painkillers before shooting himself in the
 7. head as his former coworkers storm the house ('Family Meeting'). In contrast,
 8. after learning the extent of Mackey's criminal activity, his wife Corrine is so
 9. horrified by the thought of continuing a life with him that she enters the
 10. witness protection programme with their children. Yet, the series' final scene
 11. hardly presents the image of a heroic good father as Mackey unpacks a box
 12. of personal possessions at his new desk in the FBI and the camera alternates
 13. between close-ups of his face and the framed images of his children and his
 14. most loyal soldier, Curtis Lemansky (Kenny Johnson) who was murdered by
 15. Vendrell at the conclusion of the fifth season, clearly pondering all that he
 16. has lost. Although Chopra-Gant acknowledges that the series' final scene is
 17. 'certainly ambiguous', he argues such ambiguity 'preserves the possibility that
 18. Mackey has not been defeated at all' (2012: 143). Furthermore, this ambigui-
 19. ty contributes to the impression that the conflicts between Mackey and 'a
 20. series of racial Others' were not 'disputes between equals' but rather serve to
 21. 'ultimately provide the opportunity for the triumph of the white, patriarchal
 22. values represented by Mackey, thereby shoring up the image of the power of
 23. the white male in contemporary society' (Chopra-Gant 2012: 144).

24. In contrast to Chopra-Gant's focus on patriarchy, S. Shapiro (2012) inter-
 25. preted the show through the framework of history and social class arguing
 26. that between 11 September 2001 and the Great Recession of 2008, 'a
 27. time that the mainstream media usually portrayed as a period of broad
 28. wealth creation', cable drama series like *The Shield* presented 'a counternar-
 29. rative about the state of the nation' (2012: 189) with characters portraying
 30. 'the spectrum of a struggling middle class who exist in "another coun-
 31. try," far from the contemporaneous representations of dreamy, consum-
 32. erist California' (2012: 190–91) as seen in shows like MTV's *Laguna Beach*
 33. (2004–2006). In contrast to *The Wire* (2002–2008) that gives 'dignity and a
 34. voice to even the most abject of its represented urban individuals, *The Shield*
 35. presents them as little more than soiled trash' (Shapiro 2012: 192) while the
 36. show's white characters 'rely on the internalized privileges of an assumed
 37. whiteness as justification for reinstalling coercive fear' (Shapiro 2012: 193)
 38. on Farmington's minority populace. Rather than understanding these racial
 39. politics as a reflection of 'the show's thematic preoccupation with excep-
 40. tional juridical measures' (Ray 2012: 169), Shapiro (2012) asserts that such
 41. 'Klannish whiteness' is the show's 'form for expressing its larger concerns
 42. about the fragility of the petit bourgeoisie' (2012: 194) and, as such, speaks
 43. to 'the anxieties of a higher-middle-class fraction that intuitively sensed that
 44. it too had become overextended' (2012: 204).

45. Yet, by addressing 'the white patriarch' (Chopra-Gant 2012: 133) or
 46. 'Klannish white masculinity' (Shapiro 2012: 205) in singular terms, these read-
 47. ings fail to address *The Shield* as a show that 'essentially deals with masculini-
 48. ties' and, therefore, cannot address the ways in which 'it uses its ensemble
 49. [cast] to contrast different versions of [white] masculinity' in the context of an
 50. anti-heroic narrative (Jowett 2012: 71). Within the pluralities and hierarchies
 51. of masculinities that compose hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995), 'certain
 52. masculinities are more socially central, or more associated with authority and

4. 'Marginalized masculinity' in this schema refers to men who are disadvantaged regarding class or race.

social power, than others' (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 846). Hegemonic masculinity, as constructed and enacted by heterosexual, white, middle-class American men, includes 'a configuration of practices' that remains dominant 'through marginalizing practices of white masculinity that fail to meet and exemplify racial expectations' (Hughey 2011, 2010).⁴ In post-civil rights era America, the particular racial expectations associated with hegemonic whiteness are frequently described as 'post-racial' (Wise 2010).

In contrast to the brutal enforcement of racial inequality and the assumed biological inferiority of African Americans associated with 'Jim Crow racism' (Bonilla-Silva 2009: 2-3), 'new racism' (Collins 2004) is associated with the emergence of a 'colour blind' framework that requires assertions of essential sameness between racial and ethnic groups despite unequal social locations and distinctive histories (Frankenberg 1993). Yet,

post-race colorblindness is not so much a literal refusal to see race as it is the belief that race does not ultimately matter; race must be 'present' in public discourse, and especially popular entertainment media, but contained in contexts that reinforce the sense that race has no political or historical weight.

(Thornton 2011: 425)

On popular television, which privileges white, middle-class audiences as 'ideal viewers' (Gray 1995: 71), such containment is frequently associated with images of diversity. As D. J. Thornton argues in his examination of interracial friendship in the lighthearted US series *Psych* (2006-), 'images of racial diversity, and especially representations of black-white friendship, situate the "problem of race" in personal and emotional terms, suggesting that whites' positive feelings toward blacks and their eagerness to welcome black friends are definitive markers of the end of racism' (2011: 427-28). As Chopra-Gant notes, however, although *The Shield* 'conforms to the general trend of depicting ethnic minority characters as successful and well integrated into the fabric of mainstream American life', it nonetheless 'makes race highly visible by repeatedly undermining this ostensibly progressive image of a racially integrated society' (2012: 132). The clearest example of this occurs in the pilot when Mackey questions Aceveda's authority by asserting: 'in the real world, I don't answer to you. Not today, not tomorrow, not even on Cinco de Mayo' ('Pilot'). As B. J. Malin observes, the use of an 'overly exaggerated Spanish accent' in this scene works to 'make the racism of [Mackey's] comment as obvious as possible' (2005: 181).

Furthermore, in this post-race context, any embrace of racial identity is linked to historically oppressive racial boundaries and anyone 'who "sees" or talks about race becomes complicit with racism' (Rossing 2012: 47). As a consequence, 'overt racism', which S. Hall describes as 'those many occasions when open and favourable coverage is given to arguments, positions, and spokespersons who are in the business of elaborating an openly racist argument or advancing a racist policy or view' (2003: 91), becomes associated with individual-level moral deficiency and 'using words such as "Nigger" and "Spic" is seen as an immoral act' (Bonilla-Silva 2002: 43). This moral deficiency is also closely associated with marginalized class status as images of racist 'rednecks', 'hillbillies' and 'white trash' abound in American popular culture (Newitz and Wray 1997). As J. Hartigan explains, stereotypical images of deficient whiteness are social means to

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1. achieve some distance from [...] those volatile social dangers of racism
 2. and sexism. Part of what the epithet 'white trash' expresses is the
 3. 'general view' held by whites that there are only a few extreme, danger-
 4. ous whites who are really racist [...] In this naming operation, 'bad'
 5. whites perform as examples by which the charges of racism can be
 6. contained.

(1997: 324)

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 9. Nonetheless, '*The Shield* never seriously encourages its viewers to distance
 10. themselves from its characters' racism' (Shapiro 2012: 195).

11. To address the ways in which *The Shield* uses the relationship between
 12. racism and deficient whiteness to minimize the problematic racial attitudes
 13. and behaviours of its anti-heroic protagonist, Harris' (2012) category of post-
 14. masculinist television is a useful framework. Just as post-feminism 'has been
 15. framed as a backlash against, or repudiation of second wave feminism that
 16. harks back to pre-feminist times; a recognition that this feminism has achieved
 17. its goals and is now redundant', postmasculinism signifies an 'ambiguous/
 18. ambivalent relation' (Harris 2012: 443) to feminism and other social move-
 19. ments associated with declining white male privilege. Considering *The Wire*
 20. in reference to the critical discourses surrounding *The Sopranos* and in refer-
 21. ence to *Deadwood*, *Mad Men* (2007–), and *Sons of Anarchy*, she argues all
 22. these dramas are fictions situated in contexts where sexist, homophobic and
 23. racist behaviour are common while simultaneously working to create 'ironic
 24. distance' from such attitudes (Harris 2012: 443). In *Sons of Anarchy*, for exam-
 25. ple, despite the presence of 'strong and complex female characters', the pursuit
 26. of 'generic realism', including the 'rules of separate domain of the motorcycle
 27. club', acts to justify 'the depiction of a world dominated by sexism, at times
 28. brutal misogyny, homophobia, and casual racism; in turn, this 'circumscribes
 29. the characterization and dramatic function of the female and other "marginal"
 30. figures and rationalizes the fact that the primary focus is on the actions and
 31. the "psyches" of its straight (white) male characters' (Harris 2012: 450).

32. Yet, by virtue of 'its genre affiliations, its setting in a distinctly "mythical"
 33. small town but above all by the fact that Seasons 1 and 2 are modeled on
 34. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c.1600)' (Harris 2012: 451), *Sons of Anarchy* distances
 35. itself from its own sexist and misogynistic representations. Harris adapts
 36. this notion of distancing from R. Gill's post-feminist media culture, which
 37. posits that irony has 'become a way of "having it both ways," of expressing
 38. sexist, homophobic or otherwise unpalatable sentiments in an ironized form,
 39. while claiming this was not actually "meant"' (2007: 159). As she observes
 40. regarding sexism in British 'lad mags' whose target audience is 'men "who
 41. should know better,"' 'It is precisely the knowingness of the "transgres-
 42. sion," alongside the deliberate articulation of feminist and anti-feminist
 43. ideas that signifies a post-feminist sensibility' (Gill 2007: 162). Similarly, in
 44. postmasculinist dramas, the use of melodramatic narrative devices associ-
 45. ated with the feminized genre of the soap opera to address the psyche of
 46. hyper-masculine protagonists represents 'an appropriation and recuperation
 47. of the twentieth-century discourses that sought to de-centre the traditional
 48. white, masculine subject' (Harris 2012: 460). By largely focusing on gender
 49. and sexism, however, Harris' consideration of masculinity-in-crisis television
 50. drama leaves race and racism unaddressed.

51. In the next two sections, I argue that like post-feminist media texts, FX
 52. anti-hero crime dramas use the representation of multiple white masculinities

to 'have it both ways'. Ideologically, the juxtaposition of an anti-hero with post-race signifiers including interracial relationships with the racially marked, marginalized form of white masculinity associated with the label 'white trash' promotes the myth that 'it is only "those people" who are racist' (Hartigan 1997: 323) while still allowing for the depiction of unacceptable racist attitudes and behaviour. In the context of *The Shield*'s anti-heroic narrative characterized by the use of 'relative morality' whereby the ethically questionable behaviour of the protagonist is 'juxtaposed with more explicitly villainous and unsympathetic characters' (Mittell 2013, 'Character'), the construction of Mackey as less than 'truly evil' (Means Coleman and Cobb 2007: 101) cannot be divorced from the presentation of Vendrell as the embodiment of marginalized white masculinity. As a result, the moral implications of Mackey's bigotry are minimized in relation to Vedrell's blatant racism.

Although the later FX hyper-masculine crime dramas addressed here depict 'American locales generally ignored by television' and provide 'a glimpse of American life beyond the confines of New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago' (Shuster 2012: 1040), nonetheless, like *The Shield*, they use conflicts between white men to produce ideological economies in which a racially ambivalent anti-hero is positioned as morally superior to marginalized forms of white masculinity. Beyond the relationship between the protagonist Jax Teller (Charlie Hunnam) and his step-father Clay Morrow (Ron Perlman), which mirrors Mackey and Vendrell, *Sons of Anarchy* also includes group dynamics informed by relative morality that position the eponymous all-white motorcycle club as superior to other overtly racist white criminal collectives. In *Justified*, the contrast between the aggressive racial hostility exhibited by the abundance of characters adorned with the Confederate flag in this fictionalized version of rural Kentucky, and Raylan Givens' (Timothy Olyphant) expressions of colour blind racism minimizes the moral implications associated with the anti-hero's ambivalent attitude towards racial equality. This alignment of moral standing with class-stratified masculinities, however, differs from *The Shield* and *Sons of Anarchy* by inviting viewers to embrace the 'prevailing image of whiteness as racially unmarked and removed from the blot of racism' (Hartigan 2003: 111).

RACE AND RACISM IN THE SHIELD

Whether his behaviour is 'casually racist' (Fuchs 2002) or merely lacking 'cultural sensitivity' (Malin 2005: 180), Mackey hardly embodies the post-race ideology associated with hegemonic whiteness. Unlike *NYPD Blue*'s Andy Sipowicz (Dennis Franz) who begins the series as a racist, sexist, alcoholic and is eventually redeemed (Ouellette 2006), *The Shield*'s anti-heroic protagonist experiences little (if any) development on these fronts. Yet, by reading Mackey as 'a morally ambiguous patriarch' responding to the 'onset of a new historical phase of modern capitalist development' with 'asphyxiating frustration, anger breathing, and the occasional Sturm und Drang of shouting and pointless violence', the show becomes a story 'of the psychic contortions of an awkward lower middle class' and a tale 'of white ethnic distress, often conveyed with racist, violent, and sociopathic tones' (Shapiro 2012: 196). If, however, one interprets *The Shield*'s 'ideological economy' (Chopra-Gant 2012: 139) in terms of a plurality of white masculinities, then as the lower-middle-class 'anger-driven male who cannot articulate his frustration other than through embodied performances of simmering stasis' (Shapiro 2012: 196), Mackey's ultimate

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1. triumph over Vendrell represents the rejection of a more anachronistic, more
 2. marginalized form of white masculinity.

3. One exchange between Mackey and his 'redneck' ('Fire in the Hole'), 'hill-
 4. billy' ('Back in the Hole') foil Vendrell usefully illustrates the different masculinities
 5. these characters embody. At the beginning of Season 4, Mackey and
 6. Vendrell are discussing the recent birth of Vendrell's son Jackson ('Back in
 7. the Hole'). After hearing the boy's name, Mackey, with a grin on his face,
 8. unthinkingly asks, 'As in Michael?' After a brief pause, Vendrell looks up from
 9. his young son and replies, 'As in Stonewall', which immediately removes
 10. the grin from Mackey's face and the scene ends with an uneasy air hanging
 11. between them. As this veneration of Confederate history implies and as his
 12. choice of 'Dixie' as a ringtone later confirms, Vendrell represents a marginal-
 13. ized form of white masculinity associated with the pre-Civil Rights movement
 14. American south ('Postpartum').

15. The anxiety Vendrell experiences in the face of perceived and actual threats
 16. from African American men supports this interpretation as it is largely in line
 17. with the stereotypical association between racism and poor whites who are
 18. assumed to 'project their fears, their sense of losing out, and their concerns
 19. with demographic, civil, and political changes in America onto racial minori-
 20. ties' (Bonilla-Silva 2009: 132). In Season 3, for example, when Tavon Garris
 21. (Brian White), an African American, joins the Strike Team, Vendrell imme-
 22. diately feels threatened and a rivalry develops between Mackey's two sub-
 23. ordinates. After a brief discussion in which Garris asserts that he doesn't mean
 24. to threaten Vendrell's role on the Strike Team, the two men shake hands.
 25. However, the good will quickly dissipates when Vendrell advises, 'As long as
 26. you remember your place, we'll be alright' ('Streaks and Tips'). Garris' mood
 27. immediately shifts and, with hands on hips, he asks Vendrell, 'My place?
 28. What like the back of the bus?' Vendrell, with combination of dismissal and
 29. disgust on his face, replies, 'What? You think you are driving the bus?' The
 30. confrontation erupts into violence when Vendrell says of Mackey, 'He is my
 31. best friend. He has been my best friend for seven years. Do you really think he
 32. is going to push me aside for some darkie?'

33. In contrast to this threat to his status, much more is at stake when African
 34. American drug kingpin Antwon Mitchell (Anthony Anderson) murders an
 35. 11-year-old African American girl with service pistols belonging to Vendrell
 36. and his partner Armando 'Army' Renta (Michael Pena) ('Tar Baby').⁵ During
 37. an interrogation later in the season, Vendrell removes Mitchell's handcuffs in
 38. an attempt to provoke a physical confrontation with the hope of killing the
 39. gang leader in self-defense ('The Cure'). After raising the issue of Mitchell's
 40. imprisoned son's sexual orientation and the consequences it would have on
 41. the streets, Vendrell removes the strap from his holster, leans across the table
 42. and screams, 'You know, even with all that money, all that respect, at the end
 43. of the day? You're still just a Nigger with a faggot Nigger son! And where's
 44. the respect in that?'

45. Unlike the racial attitudes and behaviours that consistently align Vendrell
 46. with the stereotypical images of marginalized white masculinity associated
 47. with the label 'white trash', Mackey's racial attitudes are ambivalent. His use of
 48. epithets like 'wetback' ('Moving Day') or derogatory characterizations, includ-
 49. ing a reference to Wyms as the 'African queen' ('Money Shot'), are clearly
 50. bigoted. Yet, his interracial partnerships reflect the type of colour blindness
 51. that replaced Jim Crow racism. In an early episode of Season 2, for exam-
 52. ple, the audience learns that Mackey's mentor and former partner, Joe Clark

5. Vendrell describes this partnership as a pairing of 'the hick and the spic' ('Grave').

6. In contrast to interactions reflecting the desire to dominate African American men, Vendrell's relationship with African American females is more complicated. Although his motives are unclear, Vendrell does seem to take a moral interest in providing the girl Mitchell murdered with a proper burial. While this interest could perhaps relate to her status as an innocent in the judicial sense or to her association with the broader innocence of youth, it could simply be self-serving since Mitchell had done the murder with two police weapons, which, if the bullets were discovered in the body, would implicate both Vendrell and Renta. In addition to the ambiguity surrounding Vendrell's relationship with this African American child, the issue is further complicated by his affair with an African American teenaged prostitute with romantic ties to a high ranking member of One-Niners gang ('Haunts'). Based on these relationships and the larger context of his anachronistic racism, it is reasonable to read Vendrell as only being able to interact with African American women paternalistically, as in Season 4, or as sexual objects in Season 6.

7. As a racial slur, 'spook' suggests African Americans are dangerous in 'supernatural terms' (Henderson 2003: 64).

(Carl Weathers), is African American ('Partners'). Although Clark was forced into retirement after a beating he delivered to a suspect resulted in a successful lawsuit against the city, Mackey defends him repeatedly by first claiming Clark as 'a friend of mine' and later comparing him favourably to Vendrell, 'Joe's twice the cop you'll ever be'. In addition to his past partnership with Clark, in the early episodes of Season 3, Mackey begins grooming Garris as a potential protege precipitating the conflict with Vendrell discussed above.

This contradictory ambivalence is also reflected in Mackey's discomfort with the overt racism of other white characters and his angry resistance to governmental interventions intended to mitigate institutional racism. When interrogating a teenage white supremacist, for example, Mackey challenges and mocks such a world-view, 'Come on, you've got special insights in life – let's hear it – 80 per cent of the world doesn't look like you and I bet it drives you crazy' ('Breakpoint'). Although this interaction provides the opportunity for Mackey to directly confront an overtly racist white character, *The Shield* also portrays his discomfort more subtly. During the sixth season, for example, Mackey reunites with Clark to clear a gang of Jamaican drug dealers from an apartment complex ('Haunts'). In explaining the job, Clark asks Mackey to provide backup for himself and Lester (Patrick St. Esprit), his 'patently white supremacist colleague' (Ray 2012: 183). As the three men are sitting in a van outside the apartment complex, from the back seat Lester asks, 'How long does it take to cop [buy drugs]? Spook gives the money, spook gets the dope. They've been in there for twenty minutes'.⁷ As he hears this, Mackey shifts awkwardly in his seat and feigns agreement with a begrudging mutter, 'With brothers, the goddamn handshakes can burn up ten minutes easy'. From the uneasy look on Mackey's face and the muddled delivery of the line, he is clearly uncomfortable with Lester.

In spite of this discomfort with white racists, Mackey strongly resents structural remedies that address the consequences of structural racism like affirmative action. In the pilot, Terry Crowley (Reed Diamond) attempts to curry favour with Mackey by claiming the Strike Team's extrajudicial tactics are ultimately necessary but that 'guys like Captain Aceveda ... they never understand'. Mackey responds, 'What do you expect from a damn quota baby?' Similarly, Mackey describes Aceveda and civilian auditor Lanie Kellis (Lucinda Jenney) attempt to add a minority to the Strike Team as 'trying to ram something down my throat' ('Carte Blanche'). This opposition to affirmative action and the invocation of white victimhood resemble important tropes of colour blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2002, 2009).

The different racial orientations Mackey and Vendrell embody are particularly significant in the context of *The Shield*'s anti-hero narrative as the contrast between the two allows the audience to 'feel more connected' to Mackey as the character with relative morality 'even if [both] of the characters would be reprehensible in real life' (Mittell 2013, 'Character'). As a corollary, Vendrell's moral standing is less ambiguous than Mackey's despite the fact that at times each engages in nearly identical behaviour. Although, for example, each violates the taboo of murdering fellow police officers, only Mackey's murder of Crowley is presented as a justifiable response to the situation at hand ('Pilot'). Furthermore, as R. Means Coleman and J. Cobb (2007: 116–17) observe, the guilt Mackey experiences in the aftermath of Crowley's murder provides an element of vulnerability, which reduces the extent to which he can be considered truly evil. In contrast, Vendrell's murder of fellow Strike Team member Lemansky appears impulsive and unnecessary ('Postpartum'). The

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1. subsequent guilt Vendrell experiences exacerbates the audience's antipathy
 2. towards him as he descends into the recklessness of drug addiction thereby
 3. creating a slew of additional crises.

4. Despite making 'bigotry and fear visible, more normal than exceptional' (Fuchs 2002), *The Shield* employs narrative devices including images of diversity and stereotypical depictions of the white underclass that depoliticize race by drawing attention to personal feelings and minimizing the impact of social, political and economic inequality. Like the representations of racism in popular culture, which rely disproportionately on classed images of 'rednecks', 'hillbillies' and 'white trash', Vendrell performs a 'critical function in the maintenance of whiteness' as a figure white audiences can use 'to delimit an attention to the subject of racism' (Hartigan 2003: 111). Similarly, Mackey's interracial partnerships function both as images of diversity that validate the "end" of race and racism by providing visible evidence of racial integration' and representations of multicultural cooperation that 'situate the "problem of race" in personal and emotional terms, suggesting that whites' positive feelings toward blacks' mark the end of racism (Thornton 2011: 227). Yet, by depicting an image of contemporary America where white men are the perpetrators of and beneficiaries from racial injustice, *The Shield* highlights the distinction between 'cable's anti-hero leads and broadcast's more likeable protagonists' while also serving as a template for conflicts between morally ambiguous white men in other FX shows (Newman and Levine 2012: 34).

FX CRIME DRAMA AFTER *THE SHIELD*

It is difficult to overstate the importance of *The Shield* when considering the recent history of FX as the network's ratings nearly doubled in the five years following the show's debut (Becker 2007). To capitalize on this success, in late 2007, FX unveiled a multimillion dollar re-branding campaign and the new tag-line 'There is No Box'. *Sons of Anarchy*, the first drama introduced after this re-branding, debuted alongside the start of *The Shield*'s seventh and final season.⁸ Created by former *Shield* writer and producer Kurt Sutter and set within the fictional town of Charming in Northern California's Central Valley, the show chronicles the *Sons of Anarchy* Motorcycle Club Redwood Original chapter (SAMCRO), an all-white outlaw motorcycle club (MC) fashioned after the infamous Hells Angels and representative of the most hardcore 'one-percenter' subset of biker MCs.⁹ While the central characters are ostensibly working-class men who self-identify as 'mechanic[s] and motorcycle enthusiast[s]' ('AK-51'), SAMCRO's main source of income comes from illegal weapons purchased from from an Irish Republican Army splinter group (the Real IRA) and resold to other criminal organizations. Other revenue streams include prostitution, pornography, drug running and extortion. Like the rules governing the behaviour of Italian-American mafiosi in *The Sopranos* (Licata 2011; Villez 2011), members of SAMCRO are bound to an alternative (non-judicial) system of rules based on loyalty, respect and 'brotherhood' (Mahon 2013).

With narrative elements that resemble Shakespearean drama (Sheffield 2012) and soap opera melodrama (Lotz 2011), the show's central conflict between the young prince Jax Teller and the usurper Clay Morrow (Ron Perlman) relies upon many of the same tropes as Mackey and Vendrell's conflict in *The Shield*. Like Mackey, Teller, who is SAMCRO's vice president, seems willing to exist as part of a multicultural society. During the show's first

8. Although *Sons of Anarchy* was initially overshadowed by *The Shield*, it went on to become the first FX series to produce *Shield*-like commercial success as the fourth and fifth season premieres set new ratings benchmarks (Andreeva 2011; Kondolojy 2012).

9. Following the 1947 Hollister riots, the American Motorcycle Association allegedly announced that 99 per cent of motorcyclists are honourable, law-abiding citizens, and that it is 1 per cent of riders who give motorcyclists a bad name (Wolf 1991).

Michael L. Wayne

10. The show frequently uses 'offhand racial remarks as gallows humor,' in the pilot, for example, upon finding the bodies of two Mexican women who were burned alive when SAMCRO's weapons warehouse was robbed and torched, Morrow 'tosses off the line "Goddamn, fried and refried," with a self-satisfaction seldom seen outside David Caruso's performance in *CSI: Miami* (2002–2012) (Alston 2012).
11. According to one critic, the scene depicts 'an attempted self-lynching, one of the most spectacular acts of internalized racism and self-loathing that's ever been seen on American TV' (Zoller Seitz 2011).

season, for example, he repeatedly asserts that the justification for the club's conflict with their Latino rivals, the Mayans, is economic rather than racial ('Patch Over'). In the fourth season, Teller's comparatively progressive attitude is again demonstrated in a scene in which he intervenes with a military commando working for a Mexican cartel and convinces him to spare the lives of several members of the One-Niners, an African American street gang by proclaiming, 'We [SAMCRO] have to work with other people. We have to build relationships. You do this – no one will trust us' ('Kiss'). In contrast, Morrow, SAMCRO's president, sets in motion a plan to reignite a long-standing racial conflict and deflect attention away from himself by 'Play[ing] the niggers against the wetbacks' ('The Sleep of Babes'). Indeed, throughout the series, Morrow, like Vendrell, frequently uses overtly racist language regarding people of colour, including 'beaner' ('Hell Followed') and 'chink' ('Giving Back').¹⁰ Given the contrasting racial attitudes of Teller and Morrow, Teller's ascendancy to the rank of club president at the conclusion of the fourth season could, like the conclusion of *The Shield*, be read as a rejection of marginalized white masculinity in favour of more inclusive sensibilities ('To Be, Act 2').

Yet, unlike the urban, multicultural milieu of Los Angeles, the town of Charming is racially homogenous. Nonetheless, from the beginning of the series, the show makes significant efforts to distance SAMCRO, as a collective, from overt racism. In the pilot, after discovering that his ex-wife was using methamphetamine while pregnant with his son, Teller finds her drug dealer in a sleazy bar frequented by members of a white supremacist gang called 'The Nords', short for Nordics. Without speaking, Teller walks into the bar and delivers a severe beating that only ends when other members of SAMCRO pull him away after he stabs the dealer in the groin with a broken pool cue. As he turns to leave, still enraged, Teller says, 'Stupid peckerwood shithead! Enjoy your lunch' ('Pilot'). In this scene, the use of 'peckerwood', a pejorative term for poor whites (Bonner 1999), reflects the ways in which members of SAMCRO mark themselves as distinct from other groups of white men throughout *Sons of Anarchy*. At the beginning of Season 2, the arrival of the League of American Nationalists, a white separatist organization associated with the Aryan Brotherhood, provides additional opportunities for SAMCRO to stand in opposition to overt racism. Like the juxtaposition of Teller and Morrow, the ideological contrast between SAMCRO and these other white collectives in *Sons of Anarchy* aligns racial attitudes with moral standing despite the fact that everyone involved is part of a racist group engaging in criminal activity. As such, relative morality ensures these characters 'are celebrated for being less hideous than the alternatives presented in the series' (Mittell 2013, 'Character').

The contradiction at the centre of SAMCRO, the challenge of depicting these characters as less-than-despicable racists, finally become explicit in a storyline centred around Juice Ortiz (Theo Rossi), a minor but regular character. Knowing that Ortiz is half-black, not Puerto Rican as he claims, a member of a local sheriff's office convinces Ortiz to become an informant since having a black father makes one unfit for membership in SAMCRO ('Dorylus'). After stealing some of the drugs the club is transporting for a Mexican cartel at the behest of the sheriff and murdering a club member to conceal the theft, Ortiz attempts suicide by hanging himself from a tree but fails when the branch breaks ('Fruit for the Crows').¹¹ Yet, several episodes later, the significance of race is nullified by a technicality. After Ortiz confides that his father is 'black', an older club member asks, 'What does your paperwork say? Your birth

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1. certificate. Under race, which box is checked?' ('Call of Duty'). Ortiz responds,
 2. 'It's Hispanic' to which his confidant replies, 'Then that's what you are. Half
 3. of us don't know who the hell our fathers are. The paperwork is the only thing
 4. that counts'. The scene ends with the two proclaiming their brotherly love for
 5. each other as they embrace. In addition to resolving the issue of Ortiz's prob-
 6. lematic racial identity in the context of SAMCRO, the show totally abandons
 7. the issue when the sheriff gives Ortiz his file containing the information about
 8. his father ('To Be: Act 2').

9. This storyline, much like the depiction and minimization of racism in *The*
 10. *Shield*, appears to reflect the segregated world of white-only one-percenter
 11. MCs only to later negate the moral consequences of such segregation. As
 12. such, the treatment of race in *Sons of Anarchy* largely functions to amplify the
 13. sense of distance between social exclusion and the realities of racial oppres-
 14. sion. When Ortiz asks an older club member about SAMCRO's whites-only
 15. membership policy, he is told, 'Listen, the rules have been around since day
 16. one. Different time. I'm not saying I agree with them all. But you know, if I
 17. start picking and choosing which ones to follow, then the whole thing just
 18. falls apart' ('With an X'). In reference to post-race ideology, the historically
 19. grounded claim 'that's the way it is' acts to normalize and justify behaviour
 20. that could otherwise be interpreted as racist (Bonilla-Silva 2009: 37).

21. During the break between *Sons of Anarchy*'s second and third seasons, in
 22. March 2010, FX debuted Graham Yost's modern western *Justified* which was
 23. the network's highest rated premieree since *The Shield* (Seidman 2010). Based
 24. on Elmore Leonard's novels *Pronto* (1993) and *Riding the Rap* (1995) and his
 25. short story 'Fire in the Hole', the series is centred on Deputy US Marshal
 26. Raylan Givens (Timothy Olyphant) whose cowboy boots, white Stetson,
 27. and reliance on gun play mark him as 'a man from another time unsuited
 28. to the modern procedural dictates of criminal prosecution' (Joyce 2012: 178).
 29. As a result of only shooting criminals in self-defence, the protagonist's moral
 30. standing in *Justified* is less ambiguous than Mackey's in *The Shield*. In addition,
 31. the show's generic reliance on the western brings Givens closer to traditional
 32. depictions of hegemonic masculinity (Hart 2013) than the FX anti-heroes
 33. addressed above. Nonetheless, this character's 'angry delivery of retributive
 34. justice' (Joyce 2012: 187) places him outside of the traditional dichotomy of
 35. heroes and villains. Yet even if one considers Givens to be a flawed-hero
 36. rather than an anti-hero, the relationship between race, racism and moral
 37. standing relies on archetypes similar to those of earlier FX crime dramas.

38. After his most recent *Justified* killing, Givens is re-assigned to the Marshal's
 39. office in eastern Kentucky where the hunt for fugitives often requires return-
 40. ing to his hometown in Harlan County and provides frequent opportunities to
 41. confront the backwoods culture he fled; 'I grew up in Kentucky. I don't wanna
 42. go back there' ('Fire in the Hole'). Upon Givens' arrival at his new office in
 43. Lexington, viewers are introduced to Boyd Crowder (Walton Goggins), the
 44. show's antagonist. As Givens explains, he and Crowder have history together
 45. from their time digging coal as teenagers. In the next scene, Crowder and a
 46. white supremacist accomplice discuss the feasibility of blowing up a federal
 47. building before driving into Lexington to destroy an African American church
 48. with a rocket launcher. Back in Harlan, when Givens arrives at an abandoned
 49. church to ask about the firebombing, Crowder comes outside to greet him with
 50. a swastika tattoo and a Confederate flag belt buckle prominently displayed.
 51. As the two talk, Crowder explains that the 'moral obligation to get rid of the
 52. Jews' comes from the Bible. Givens responds by stating, 'You know, Boyd, I

12. Although Crowder experiences a religious awakening after the shooting and forms a racially integrated Christian militia intent on preventing his father from distributing methamphetamine in Harlan, the character quickly returns to a life of crime and remains associated with white supremacist ideology. For example, when Crowder asks Devil, a white supremacist former follower with a confederate flag tattoo, to join his current criminal organization, Devil replies, 'I just want to know which Boyd Crowder I'm being asked to follow' Crowder answers:

Well, what if I told you I was a man that recruited you in that church? But then I also told you I was a man who got shot? Who found God? Who betrayed his father? And I was a man who killed men and gotten a whole bunch of men killed? See, Devil, I can't discard my past any more than I can these tattoos.
(*'Harlan Roulette'*)

think you just use the Bible to do whatever the hell you like'. The distance between the protagonist and the marginalized white masculinity associated with his birthplace is further emphasized at the conclusion of the pilot when Givens shoots Crowder in the chest.¹² Indeed, throughout the series, Givens is quick to disparage anything he considers 'master-race bullshit' ('Blowback'). In this ideological economy, Crowder's collection of white supremacists and the hillbillies associated with the Bennett clan in Season 2 'serve as foil to the putatively superior, middle-class, bourgeois notion of American citizenship' (Joyce 2012: 192).

Nonetheless, if Givens' relationship with overtly racist white characters positions him as the embodiment of 'deeply held American values of due process and equal opportunity' (Joyce 2012: 192), his relationship with Rachel Brooks (Erica Tazel), the only African American Marshal in the show, reveals *Justified* to be largely ambivalent regarding racial equality. Like Mackey's partnerships with Clark and Garris, this professional relationship indicates the protagonist's willingness to exist in a multicultural society. In the first episode of Season 2, for example, Brooks asks Givens to help her find a sex offender in Harlan and Givens agrees to escape his paperwork obligations ('The Moonshine War'). In the car, he asks, 'Why'd you ask me to go with you?' She states that she is uncomfortable with people in Harlan and explains, 'Anytime I've gone to coal country, everyone was all polite – "Yes, ma'am. No, ma'am" – trying to keep in mind it's the twenty-first century and what's expected. But when the cuffs come out, then I'm a black bitch'. The next season, Brooks returns the favour when Givens asks her to go with him to a local African American community, Nobles Holler ('The Devil You Know'). Brooks asks, 'So you're bringing me along on a mission to African America to smooth your path?' In response, Givens reminds Brooks and the audience about the reciprocal nature of their relationship: 'I recall being pulled along on a similar mission sometime back'. According to A. Rosenberg (2012), these exchanges are significant precisely because they reflect a measure of equality between the two characters: 'There are places each of them can't walk comfortably, or at all, if they go alone'. Ideologically, however, these exchanges draw attention away from structural issues that create segregated communities while simultaneously situating personal goodwill as the antidote to problems of racial difference.

Furthermore, Givens actively denies receiving any benefits as a result of white privilege. When Brooks is assigned the role of lead investigator on a case Givens believes to be his, he complains that, despite being 'low man on the totem pole' as a result of his recent transfer, his history with the suspect entitles him to 'walk point' ('Long in the Tooth'). Brooks responds by pointing out that Givens frequently receives preferential treatment, 'This isn't just about this case. You did cut to the front of the line. And I don't know if it's because you know the chief from Glynco [training academy for the US Marshal service], but you walked in, and you went right to the front'. Givens responds, 'You ever consider I happen to be good at the job?' Brooks replies, 'And you being a tall, good-looking white man with a shitload of swagger, that has nothing to do with it? You get away with just about anything ... Look in the mirror. How do you think it'd go over if I came into work one day wearing a cowboy hat?' The scene ends with Givens asking, 'Do you want to try it on?' In the context of 'new, slicker' racism, this scene resembles other depictions of interracial relationships that are dependent upon 'enlightened exceptionalism' (Wise 2009: 9) which praises 'exceptional' individuals of colour who are deemed capable of succeeding on the dominant culture's terms, thereby

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1. demonstrating that mainstream (middle-class, white) culture can accom-
 2. modate diversity without serious threat to the privileges of whiteness (Jhally
 3. and Lewis 1992: 93–111). In addition, like colour blind racism more broadly,
 4. this exchange suggests that similar privileges would be available to Rachel if
 5. only she was willing to work hard enough. Here, as in *The Shield* and *Sons*
 6. of *Anarchy*, the relative morality of an anti-heroic narrative is structured so
 7. that the audience is drawn to a white man whose racially ambivalent attitudes
 8. become more acceptable by virtue of the character's conflict with villainous
 9. overtly racist white men.

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CONCLUSION

12. Following *The Sopranos*, FX 'further institutionalized – to something approach-
 13. ing the point of cliché – the Troubled Man as the Third Golden Age's primary
 14. character' (Martin 2013: 228). Yet, rather than interpreting the rise of the anti-
 15. hero as 'a movement dominated by singular white men, whose combination
 16. of ruthlessness, inherently sympathetic nature and sexual charisma has led
 17. them to deeper and darker things' (Van Der Werff 2013b), some critics and
 18. scholars interpret the popularity of such shows as evidence of shifting gender
 19. ideologies. In an article titled 'FX is Feminism for Men', Rosenberg (2013)
 20. claims, 'As a network, FX is the televisual equivalent of publications like the
 21. Good Men Project – a self-proclaimed effort to foster "a national discussion
 22. centered around modern manhood" – but with a healthy dose of bad and
 23. struggling men in the mix'. According to A. Marcotte, the appeal of FX dramas
 24. like *The Shield* and *Justified* relies on the 'tropes of troubled manhood' as

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27. much of the tension of these shows comes from the main characters
 28. facing personal limits stemming from their own views of manhood ...
 29. finding more trouble than not from the belief that men should be in
 30. control, able to act decisively without help, and able to lead without
 31. anyone questioning their authority.

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(2011)

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35. For some television scholars, the inclusion of melodramatic narratives is
 36. particularly significant given the historical association of soap opera and femi-
 37. ninity. Mittell (2013) asserts that 'the infusion of serial melodrama into male-
 38. centered narrative worlds often calls the dominant definitions of masculinity
 39. into question' ('Serial Melodrama'). Despite being set in a 'male, homosocial,
 40. largely patriarchal context', A. D. Lotz (2011) argues that *Sons of Anarchy* is
 41. actually a family drama 'with a more complicated gender politics than non-
 42. viewers might assume'. Yet, even if the representations of white masculinities
 43. on FX can be understood as progressive in a gendered sense by conveying
 44. 'how rigid, toxic ideals [of] masculinity can destroy men's lives' (O'Malley
 45. 2013), by focusing on the depiction of masculinity-in-crisis largely isolated
 46. from race, these interpretations seem to indicate that FX succeeds in provid-
 47. ing 'ironic distance from certain aspects of their own representations' (Harris
 48. 2012: 455) with stereotypical depictions of the white underclass. Although
 49. *The Shield*, *Sons of Anarchy* and *Justified* are 'emphatically polyvocal' shows,
 50. nonetheless, in failing to question the racial ambivalence of its anti-heroes, FX
 becomes complicit in their values (Ray 2012: 174).

51.

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As a producer of popular television, FX broadcasts images of race and
 racism that exhibit 'a degree of resonance with the dominant cultural mood'

of the time, addressing the social tensions and political quandaries particular to a given historical context (Gray 1995: 60). According to G. Kien, the postmodern media context 'in which audience members consider society to have "gotten past" issues of race, gender, class, ableism and so on, thus freeing the signifiers to be consumed as ironic representations of a time gone by' also includes 'a 20th-century modernist temporal context which revives an audience that laughs at images of "the other" with an attitude of bigotry, superiority, and prejudice' (2013: 557). In such a context, the overt racism of FX crime dramas draws attention to race only to limit the potential for critical engagement. Ultimately, like the 'twinning and coupling of racial masculinities' in *Hill Street Blues* (1981–1987) or *Miami Vice* (1984–1989), the conflicts between morally ambiguous white anti-heroes and stereotypical embodiments of marginalized white masculinity central to the racial politics of FX dramas 'are not a somewhat distorted reflection of the real state of race relations in American cities' instead, as Hall argues, 'They are myths that represent in narrative form the resolution of things that cannot be resolved in real life' (1992: 15–16). Unlike network era depictions of multicultural cooperation and interracial friendship that are 'vehicle[s] in wish fulfillment ... where whites are unafraid of blacks, where blacks ask for and need nothing from whites ...' (DeMott 1998: 15), the depictions of white masculinities in *The Shield*, *Sons of Anarchy*, and *Justified* allow white audiences to acknowledge the existence of racial inequality while maintaining their ability to distance themselves from those thought to be responsible for racism thereby disavowing their own participation in the perpetuation of racial inequality. That popular television fails to offer critiques of or alternatives to prevailing cultural ideologies related to both race and racism is hardly surprising. Nonetheless, this analysis indicates that the binaries that once characterized the relationship between race and morality in popular culture have been replaced by more complex moral systems in the post-network era where the relative morality of anti-heroic characters is related to hegemonic whiteness and the norms of colour blind racism.

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TELEVISION PROGRAMMES

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Psych (2006–, United States: USA).

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