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Mitigating Colorblind Racism in the Postnetwork Era: Class-Inflected Masculinities in *The Shield*, *Sons of Anarchy*, and *Justified*

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*This analysis explores the relation between class-stratified White masculinities and moral ambiguity in FX crime drama. Conflicts between morally ambiguous White men in *The Shield* (2002–2008), *Sons of Anarchy* (2008–present), and *Justified* (2010–present) support colorblind racial ideology by positioning a central antiheroic protagonist in opposition to overtly racist characters who embody stereotypes associated with the White underclass. In comparison with traditional crime dramas, these juxtapositions provide realistic depictions of contemporary America by acknowledging the existence of racial prejudice while the antihero's ultimate victory stands as a rejection of anachronistic racial sensibilities drawing attention away from issues related to systemic inequality.*

Although *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–2008) is closely linked with television's increasing cultural legitimacy in the postnetwork era, FX's *The Shield* (2002–2008) was the first “culturally legitimated” show created for basic cable (Newman & Levine, 2012, p. 33). Yet, unlike *The Wire*, which is celebrated for its sociological depictions of inner-city poverty and has rightly become institutionalized in American higher education (Bennett, 2010), the meaning of *The Shield*'s racial politics are contested. Created by Shawn Ryan, set in the fictional Farmington district of contemporary Los Angeles, and centered on Vic Mackey (played by Michael Chiklis), a corrupt detective who murders another police officer at the conclusion of the pilot episode, some observers believe the show provides a realistic depiction of multicultural urban communities (Fuchs, 2002; Ryan, 2008), while others see a fundamentally regressive

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text that relies upon problematic racial hierarchies (Means Coleman & Cobb, 2007) to ideologically endorse a White patriarchal social order (Chopra-Gant, 2007). The present analysis contributes to this discussion by considering the relation between class-stratified White masculinities and moral ambiguity in *The Shield*, *Sons of Anarchy* (2008–), and *Justified* (2010–).

In this article, following a brief discussion of relevant considerations of *The Shield*, literature addressing depictions of race and racism in popular culture foregrounds a textual analysis highlighting the ways by which all three series deploy stereotypical representations of race, class, and gender while paradoxically denying the significance of race. Driven by conflict between characters embodying class-stratified archetypes of White manhood, the moral economies of these FX crime dramas consistently position a primary White antihero who more closely conforms to the expectations of postracial sensibilities as superior to White characters who violate colorblind racial norms. Ideologically, the juxtaposition of an unmarked, hegemonic form of White masculinity with the racially marked, marginalized form of White masculinity associated with the label *White trash* mitigates the moral consequences of colorblind racism by using stereotypical depictions of the White underclass to promote the myth that only those with overtly prejudicial beliefs are racist (DiTomaso, 2013; Hartigan, 1997; West, 1997). This analysis concludes with a discussion regarding *The Shield's* significance to FX's brand identity in relation to the status hierarchies associated with prime-time cable drama.

SCHOLARSHIP ON *THE SHIELD*, WHITE MASCULINITIES, AND POSTRACIAL POPULAR CULTURE

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. White (2012), for example, argues that the show challenges the audience throughout its seven-season run by pushing the boundaries of the genre. In particular, by placing a corrupt detective at the center of its narrative, *The Shield* combines a challenge to conventional morality similar to that of *The Sopranos* with morally ambiguous police officers derived from shows such as ABC's *NYPD Blue* (1993–2005) and NBC's *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. Ray (2012) 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 violent tactics, the show never challenges the assumption that law enforcement by any means produces socially beneficial results. From this perspective, the audience's willingness to forgive Mackey for his multitude of sins—including murder,

torture, and corruption—reflects their collective desire for security and justice regardless of the moral cost. The comparatively limited volume of scholarship addressing the show's representations of race and ethnicity offers a variety of interpretations.

Using the frameworks of history and social class, Shapiro (2012), for example, argues that between September 11, 2001 and the Great Recession of 2008, cable drama series like *The Shield* countered the dominant discourses about expanding economic opportunity with characters portraying the struggles of a middle class excluded from shows such as MTV's *Laguna Beach* (2004–2006) or Bravo's *The Real Housewives of Orange County* (2006–). Yet, unlike *The Wire*, which portrays the complex web of social forces that generate urban poverty and undermines common stereotypes about the urban poor (Chaddha and Wilson, 2010), Farmington's minority populace remains largely invisible when not serving a narrative function related to the district's primarily White police force. Rather than understanding these racial politics as a reflection of the “the show's thematic preoccupation with exceptional judicial measures” (Ray, 2012, p. 169), Shapiro asserts that “Klannish whiteness” is how the show addresses broader concerns regarding the economic insecurity of the petite bourgeoisie as these “racist attitudes operate as the mode of initial enactment of concerns by a social group that is vulnerable to losing its too recently acquired status of inclusion within the middle class” (2012, p. 195).

In contrast, Chopra-Gant (2012) 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 (played by Benito Martinez) and Black Detective Claudette Wymms (played by 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, pp. 132–133). In spite of challenges from ethnic and female characters, the crises created by Shane Vendrell (played by Walton Goggins), a White man, represent the greatest threat to Mackey's power. During much of *The Shield's* final two seasons, the positioning of Vendrell “as a counterpoint ‘bad father’ to Mackey's ‘good father’” allows the latter to maintain his status as “maverick hero” (Chopra-Gant, 2012, p. 139). This opposition is re-emphasized by the narrative closure provided by the series finale when Vendrell murders his pregnant wife and young son with an overdose of painkillers before shooting himself in the head as his former coworkers storm the house [“Family Meeting” 7:13]. In contrast, after learning the extent of his criminal activity, Mackey's wife is so horrified by the thought of continuing a life with him that she enters the witness protection program with their children. However, the series' final scene hardly presents the image of a heroic good father, as Mackey unpacks

a box of personal possessions at his new desk in the FBI and the camera alternates between close-ups of his face and the framed images of his children and his most loyal soldier, Curtis Lemansky (played by Kenny Johnson), who was murdered by Vendrell at the conclusion of the fifth season, clearly pondering all that he has lost. Although Chopra-Gant acknowledges that the series' final scene is "certainly ambiguous," he argues that such ambiguity "preserves the possibility that Mackey has not been defeated at all" (2012, p. 143).

This article builds on such scholarship by interpreting *The Shield* through the prism of class-stratified White masculinity and then extending this interpretation to *Sons of Anarchy* and *Justified*. The construction of gender, according to Connell (1995), is both relational, hierarchical, and composed of multiple masculinities whereby men enact and embody different configurations of masculinity depending on their location within a social hierarchy of power. Following Gramsci, Connell (1995) argues that within the pluralities and hierarchies of masculinities that compose hegemonic masculinity, those at the top become hegemonic and serve to legitimate patriarchal social organization. "Marginalized masculinity" in this schema refers to men who are disadvantaged regarding class or race. In contemporary America, hegemonic masculinity is constructed and enacted by heterosexual, White, middle-class men (Kimmel, 2012). As a label, *whiteness* indicates a set of largely undefined characteristics and qualities, not limited to physical traits, that are considered normative within a given space and confer unrecognized advantages, including the possibility of material and symbolic benefits. The privilege of whiteness, like the privilege of maleness, includes the acquisition of power through its invisibility, its lack of defining boundaries, and it functions as a normalized state of being. "Hegemonic whiteness," according to Lewis (2004), is a set of practices and meanings that constitute normality in American culture and act as "that seemingly 'neutral' or 'pre-cultural' yardstick against which cultural behavior, norms, and values are measured" (p. 634). As it intersects with gender, hegemonic White masculinity represents a configuration of practices that remains dominant by marginalizing practices of White masculinity that are not in sync with racial expectations (Hughey, 2010, 2011).

In post-Civil Rights Era America, the racial expectations associated with hegemonic whiteness are frequently described as "post-racial" (Wise, 2010, pp. 13–14). In contrast with the brutal enforcement of racial inequality and the assumed biological inferiority of Blacks associated with Jim Crow-era racism, "new racism" (Collins, 2004, p. 5) is associated with the emergence of a "colorblind" framework that requires assertions of essential sameness between racial and ethnic groups, despite their unequal social locations and distinctive histories (Frankenberg, 1993). On popular television, which privileges White, middle-class audiences as "ideal viewers" (Gray, 1995, p. 71), such containment is frequently associated with images of diversity

(including interracial friendships) that frame racial issues in personal and emotional terms, suggesting that Whites' positive feelings toward Blacks indicate the end of racism (DeMott, 1998). In the context of "new, slicker" racism, depictions of interracial relationships are dependent upon "enlightened exceptionalism" (Wise, 2009, p. 9), which praises "exceptional" Blacks who are deemed capable of succeeding on the dominant culture's terms, thereby demonstrating that mainstream (i.e., middle-class, White) culture can accommodate diversity without serious threat to the privileges of whiteness (Jhally & Lewis, 1992). As Thornton (2011) observes in his examination of interracial friendship in the lighthearted USA series *Psych* (2006–), however, postrace colorblindness is less the refusal to acknowledge the existence of race than it is an overarching belief that race does not matter. Thus, he argues, "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, p. 425).

Furthermore, in this postracial context, any embrace of racial identity is linked to historically oppressive racial boundaries and expressions of overt racism are associated with individual-level moral deficiency. As one commenter observes, "In modern America we believe racism to be the property of the uniquely villainous and morally deformed, the ideology of trolls, gorgons, and orcs" (Coates, 2013, para. 4). The use of racial epithets such as "nigger" and "spic" epitomizes such ogreish behavior and is understood to be immoral (Bonilla-Silva, 2002). Many scholars note that this moral deficiency is also closely associated with marginalized class status as images of racist "red-necks," "hillbillies," and "White trash" abound in American popular culture (Eastman, 2012; Newitz & Wray, 1997; Slade & Narro, 2012). These stereotypical images of morally deficient whiteness are, as Hartigan (1997) explains, social means to "achieve some distance from . . . those volatile social dangers of racism and sexism. Part of what the epithet 'white trash' expresses is the 'general view' held by Whites that there are only a few extreme, dangerous Whites who are really racist" (p. 324). As such, economically marginalized Whites serve as examples that contain accusations of racism.

In the next two sections, close readings of three FX crime dramas highlight the ways by which the network reassures White audiences of their distance from both race and racism through positive depictions of interracial relationships and through imagery associated with racist "White trash." In the urban world of *The Shield*, moral standing is closely related to the deployment of White masculinities more or less in line with the hegemonic values of color-blind ideology because the construction of Mackey as less than "truly evil" (Means Coleman & Cobb, 2007, p. 101) cannot be divorced from the presentation of Vendrell as the embodiment of marginalized White masculinity. While *Sons of Anarchy* and *Justified* differ from *The Shield* in several

notable ways, such as by taking place in dramatically different social environments, the ideological economies created through the conflicts between morally ambiguous White men central to each narrative are quite similar.

RACE AND RACISM IN *THE SHIELD*

While police officers are lower-middle-class public servants in a socioeconomic sense, if one interprets *The Shield's* "ideological economy" (Chopra-Gant, 2012, p. 139) through the framework of multiple White masculinities, Mackey's ultimate triumph over Vendrell represents the rejection of an anachronistic, marginalized form of White masculinity characterized by the desire for racial segregation. One exchange between Mackey and his "redneck" ["Fire in the Hole" 3:13], "hillbilly" ["Back in the Hole" 4:10] foil Vendrell usefully illustrates the different masculinities these characters embody. At the beginning of Season 4, Mackey and Vendrell are discussing the recent birth of Vendrell's son Jackson ["Back in the Hole" 4:10]. After hearing the boy's name, Mackey, with a grin on his face, unthinkingly asks, "As in Michael?" After a brief pause, Vendrell looks up from his young son and replies, "As in Stonewall," which immediately removes the grin from Mackey's face and the scene ends with an uneasy air hanging between them. As this veneration of Confederate history implies (and as his choice of "Dixie" as a ring-tone later confirms), Vendrell represents a marginalized form of White masculinity associated with the pre-Civil Rights Movement American South ["Postpartum" 5:11]. In addition to employing overtly racist language including "wetback" and "beaner," one incident is particularly emblematic. While interrogating Black drug kingpin Antwon Mitchell (played by Anthony Anderson), Vendrell removes Mitchell's handcuffs in an attempt to provoke a physical confrontation with the hope of killing the gang leader in self-defense ["The Cure" 4:01]. After raising the issue of Mitchell's imprisoned son's sexual orientation and the consequences it would have on the streets, Vendrell removes the strap from his holster, leans across the table, and screams, "You know, even with all that money, all that respect, at the end of the day? You're still just a nigger with a faggot nigger son! And where's the respect in that?" However, the use of racial epithets fails to achieve the desired result. As Mitchell realizes Vendrell's murderous intent, he sits back down, puts the handcuffs back on, and says, "Now . . . what were you sayin' about my nigger faggot son?"

This scene is representative of Vendrell's relationships with Black men, which are consistently characterized by his desire to dominate. Similarly, in Season 3, when Tavon Garris (played by Brian White), who is Black, joins the Strike Team, Vendrell immediately feels threatened and a rivalry develops between Mackey's two subordinates. The storyline reaches its climax when Mackey asks Garris to "make him [Vendrell] feel secure" and "take one for

the team” by apologizing [“Streaks and Tips” 3:04]. When Vendrell arrives at his apartment, he finds Garris talking with his wife Mara (played by Michele Hicks) about her pregnancy. When he asks Garris what he wants, Garris replies, “to clear the air.” After a brief discussion during which Garris asserts that he doesn’t mean to threaten Vendrell’s role on the Strike Team, the two men shake hands. However, the goodwill quickly dissipates when Vendrell, opening the door for Garris to leave, says, “As long as you remember your place, we’ll be alright.” Garris’ mood immediately turns and, with hands on hips, he asks Vendrell, “My place? What, like the back of the bus?” Vendrell, with a combination of dismissal and disgust on his face, replies, “What? You think you are driving the bus?” While tense, the confrontation only erupts into violence when Vendrell says of Mackey, “He is my best friend. He has been my best friend for seven years. Do you really think he is going to push me aside for some darkie?” At this point, Garris can no longer contain himself and throws the first punch. During the fight, Garris is getting the better of Vendrell until Mara, returning from the laundry room, walks in, picks up an iron, and hits Garris with it in the back of the head. In the episodes leading up to this confrontation, the anxiety Vendrell experiences in the face of a perceived threat from Black men is largely in line with the stereotypical association between racism and working-class/poor Whites who are assumed to “project their fears, their sense of losing out, and their concerns with demographic, civil, and political changes in America onto racial minorities” (Bonilla-Silva, 2009, p. 132).

While Vendrell’s relationships with Black women, although still problematic, seem to vary with context, they are similarly characterized by an inability to exist on equal terms. For example, Vendrell and his partner, Armando “Army” Renta (a partnership Vendrell describes as a pairing of “the hick and the spic” [“Grave” 4:02]), are forced to watch as Mitchell murders an 11-year-old Black girl with their service pistols because she informed on his heroin trade [“Tar Baby” 4:05]. Although Vendrell’s motives in the remainder of the season are unclear, perhaps relating to the girl’s status as an innocent in the judicial sense or to her association with the broader innocence of youth, he does seem to take a moral interest in providing the girl with a proper burial. Yet, this interest could simply be self-serving because Mitchell committed 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 Black child in the fourth season, the issue is further complicated by his affair with a Black teenage prostitute with romantic ties to a high-ranking member of One-Niners gang [“Haunts” 6:05]. On the basis of these relationships and the larger context of his anachronistic racism, it is not unreasonable to conceptualize Vendrell as only being capable of interacting with Black women paternalistically, as in Season 4, or as sexual objects in Season 6.

Unlike Vendrell's inability to accept or even tolerate multicultural environments like contemporary Los Angeles, over the course of the series Mackey's interracial partnerships indicate his willingness to work with Blacks as equals. For example, in an early episode of Season 2, the audience learns that Mackey's mentor and former partner, Joe Clark (played by Carl Weathers), is Black ["Partners" 2:03]. 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 referring to Clark as "a friend of mine" and later comparing him favorably to Vendrell: "Joe's twice the cop you'll ever be." At the end of the episode, Mackey literally takes a bullet for Clark in an effort to bring "karmic justice" to the suspect in question. In addition to his past partnership with Clark, in the early episodes of Season 3, Mackey begins grooming Garris as a potential protégé, which exacerbates Vendrell's jealousy. Furthermore, Mackey consistently shows himself to be uncomfortable with the overt racism of other White characters. During the sixth season, for example, Mackey reunites with Clark to clear a gang of Jamaican drug dealers from an apartment complex ["Haunts" 6:05]. In explaining the job, Clark asks Mackey to provide backup for himself and Lester (played by Patrick St. Esprit), his "patently White supremacist colleague" (Ray, 2012, p. 183). As the three men are sitting in a van outside the apartment complex, from the backseat 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 20 minutes." As he hears this, Mackey shifts uncomfortably in his seat and feigns agreement with a begrudging mutter, "With brothers, the goddamn handshakes can burn up ten minutes easy." The contrast between Lester's epithet and Mackey's euphemistic language is stark. From the uneasy look on Mackey's face and the muddled delivery of the line, he is clearly uncomfortable with Lester. After Mackey, Clark, and Lester enter the drug dealers' apartment, it quickly becomes apparent that Lester is out of control. He throws a man out a third story window and motivates the Jamaicans to leave by cutting some of their dreadlocks and sticking one man's head in a toilet filled with urine. Back on the street after the raid, when Clark requests that Mackey help with a similar eviction at another building, Mackey declines. In response, Lester challenges Mackey's tough guy reputation and the scene predictably ends with Mackey punching Lester in the face, further distinguishing the show's protagonist from overt racism.

Although Mackey's interracial partnerships and racial attitudes appear to be largely colorblind, he nevertheless engages in some bigoted behavior and speech. In the pilot episode, for example, 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" 1:01]. However, in most instances, context appears to allay Mackey's racist language, as it frequently occurs in service to some higher purpose. During the second season, for

example, Mackey interviews Kyle Hutton (played by Jason Earles), a White teenager and a friend of the missing Jeffery Cole (played by Elijah Allan-Blitz), about his friend's whereabouts as Aceveda and Wyms observe from another room via a closed circuit television monitor ["Breakpoint" 2:12]. As Mackey enters the room, Hutton asserts, "I already told that monkey cop I don't know where he [Cole] is." When asked to explain himself, Hutton refuses to repeat his remarks. Mackey at first confronts his racism: "Monkey cop? You said it for a reason. Come on, you've got special insights in life—let's hear it—80% of the world doesn't look like you and I bet it drives you crazy." As the interview progresses, it becomes apparent that Hutton's racist views are well entrenched. In response, Mackey changes tactics and begins to work within such a worldview in order to extract information. When Hutton asserts that the Aryan Brotherhood will protect him in prison, Mackey uses knowledge of Cole's biracial identity to pry loose a confession by asking, "I don't get it. You got the attitude. You got the tats [a swastika tattoo]. Why would you help a nigger?" After initially rejecting Mackey's claim and asserting Cole's racial purity, Hutton asks, "Jeffery's a nigger?" Mackey responds, "The worst kind." Although Mackey uses racial epithets in this scene, when contrasted with Vendrell's aggressive and ineffective use of the most vitriolic epithets during the interrogation of Mitchell described earlier, the racial attitudes embodied by the show's central antihero appear intentionally utilitarian.

As a corollary to the different masculinities being embodied, Vendrell's moral standing is less ambiguous than Mackey's despite the fact that at times each engages in nearly identical behavior. 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" 1:01]. Furthermore, as Means Coleman and Cobb (2007) observe, the guilt Mackey experiences in the aftermath of Crowley's murder provides an element of vulnerability that 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" 5:11]. The subsequent guilt that Vendrell experiences exacerbates the audience's antipathy toward him as he descends into the recklessness of drug addiction, thereby creating a slew of additional crises. Until the last moment, the most serious threats to Mackey's authority, and the social order he represents, do not come from women or people of color but rather from Vendrell. By aligning moral standing with class-stratified embodiments of White masculinity, *The Shield* allows its basic-cable audience to mitigate the moral consequences of racism by inviting viewers to embrace the "prevailing image of whiteness as racially unmarked and removed from the blot of racism" (Hartigan, 2003, p. 111). In making "bigotry and fear visible, more normal than exceptional" (Fuchs, 2002), the show nonetheless 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. Furthermore, by depicting an image of contemporary America wherein White men are the perpetrators and beneficiaries of racial injustice, *The Shield* highlights the distinction between cable television's morally ambiguous antiheroes and broadcast television's traditional protagonists.

FX CRIME DRAMA AFTER *THE SHIELD*

Alongside the start of *The Shield*'s seventh and final season, FX premiered *Sons of Anarchy*, which became the first new show to produce *Shield*-like critical and commercial success. 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 fashioned after the infamous Hells Angels and representative of the most hardcore "one-percenter" subset of biker motorcycle clubs (following the 1947 Hollister riots, the American Motorcycle Association was alleged to have announced that 99% of motorcyclists are honorable, law-abiding citizens, and that it is 1% of riders who give motorcyclists a bad name [Wolf, 1991]). While the central characters are ostensibly working-class men who self-identify as "mechanic[s] and motorcycle enthusiast[s]" ["AK-51" 1:06], SAMCRO's main source of income comes from illegal weapons purchased from an Irish Republican Army splinter group (the Real IRA) and resold to other criminal organizations. Additional revenue streams include prostitution, pornography, drug running, and extortion. Like the rules governing the behavior of Italian-American Mafiosi in *The Sopranos* (Licata, 2011; Villez, 2011), members of SAMCRO are bound to an alternative (non-judicial) system of rules that are based on loyalty, respect, and "brotherhood" (Mahon, 2013).

Despite this geographically and institutionally different context, 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 (played by Charlie Hunnam) and the usurper Clay Morrow (played by 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 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" 1:04]. 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, a Black street gang, by proclaiming, “We [SAMCRO] have to work with other people. We have to build relationships. You do this [and] no one will trust us” [“Kiss” 4:09]. In contrast, Morrow, SAMCRO’s president, sets in motion a plan to frame the Niners for the murder of a club member thought to be a snitch [“The Sleep of Babies” 1:12]. After making a peace deal with the Mayans and agreeing to sell them automatic weapons, Morrow tells the Niners’ leader, Laroy Wayne (played by Tory Kittles), about the details of the exchange in order to reignite a long-standing racial conflict and deflect attention away from himself. When discussing the planned ambush, Morrow explains, “The Mayans are going to think that the Niners got their intell[igence] off the street, stepped on the deal Play the niggers against the wetbacks.” Throughout the series, Morrow, like Vendrell, frequently uses overtly racist language regarding people of color, including “beaner” [“Hell Followed” 1:04] and “Chink” [“Giving Back” 1:05]. 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 favor of more inclusive sensibilities [“To Be: Act 2” 4:14].

However, unlike the urban, multicultural milieu of Los Angeles, the town of Charming is racially homogeneous. 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” 1:01]. In this scene, the use of “peckerwood,” a pejorative term for poor Whites (Bonner, 1999), reflects the ways by which members of SAMCRO mark themselves as distinct from other groups of White men throughout *Sons of Anarchy*. Later in the episode, Bobby Munson (played by Mark Boone Junior), the sole Jewish member of SAMCRO, refers to the Nords’ ideology as “extreme hate shit” and, during a sit-down with the leader of the Nords, Morrow banishes Ernest Darby (played by Mitch Pileggi) and his meth-cooking operation to the outskirts of Charming, further highlighting the club’s distance from racist attitudes [“Pilot” 1:01]. 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 all involved are criminals in associated racist groups.

The contradiction at the center of SAMCRO—the challenge of depicting an all-White organization as less-than-despicable racists—finally becomes explicit in a storyline centered around Juice Ortiz (played by Theo Rossi), a minor but regular character. Largely a source of comic relief throughout the first several seasons, in Season 4, Ortiz’s character becomes significantly darker when Assistant U.S. Attorney Lincoln Potter (played by Ray McKinnon) and Lieutenant Eli Roosevelt (played by Rockmond Dunbar) of the San Joaquin County Sheriff’s Department use knowledge of Ortiz’s family background as leverage. Knowing that Ortiz is half-Black, not Puerto Rican as he claims, Roosevelt attempts to turn Ortiz into an informant because having a Black father makes one unfit for membership in SAMCRO [“Dorylus” 4:03]. As Ortiz debates whether or not to cooperate with law enforcement, he asks Chibs Telford (played by Tommy Flanagan), an older member of SAMCRO, “Do you ever push back against the rules?” [“With an X” 4:06]. Telford responds, “Listen, the rules have been around since day one. Different time. I’m not saying I agree with them all. But you know, if I start picking and choosing which ones to follow, then the whole thing just falls apart.” After stealing some of the drugs the club is transporting for a Mexican cartel at the behest of the lawmen 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” 4:07]. According to one critic, that 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).

However, several episodes later, the significance of race is nullified by a technicality. After Ortiz confides that his father is “Black,” Telford asks, “What does your paperwork say? Your birth certificate. Under race, which box is checked?” [“Call of Duty” 4:11]. Ortiz responds, “It’s Hispanic,” to which Telford replies, “Then that’s what you are. Half of us don’t know who the hell our fathers are. The paperwork is the only thing that counts.” The significance of race is further minimized when, in a matter of moments, Ortiz’s suicide attempt becomes a laughing matter. Telford continues, “This is why you tried offing yourself? [Laughs.] Jesus Christ, boy. You’re an idiot. All this is gonna be okay. Listen to me. You tell that sheriff next time you see him he can go and suck your daddy’s big, black cock. [Juice laughs.] There’s not a goddamn thing he can do to you.” The scene ends with the two proclaiming their brotherly love for each other as they embrace. In addition to resolving the issue of Ortiz’s problematic racial identity in the context of SAMCRO, the show totally abandons the issue when Roosevelt, tiring of Potter’s morally ambiguous style of law enforcement, gives Ortiz his file containing the information about his father [“To Be: Act 2” 4:14]. This storyline, much like the depiction and minimization of racism in *The Shield*, appears to reflect the segregated world of White-only one-percenter motorcycle clubs only to later negate the moral consequences of such segregation. As Harris

(2012) observes, in creating “generic realism,” the show uses “the rules of a separate domain of the motorcycle club” to justify the depiction of “causal racism” (p. 450). Furthermore, in conjunction with Teller’s *Shield*-like victory over Morrow for control of the club and the contrast between SAMCRO and more overtly racist White collectives, the treatment of race in *Sons of Anarchy* largely functions to amplify the sense of distance between social exclusion and the realities of racial oppression.

During the break between *Sons of Anarchy*’s second and third seasons, in March 2010 FX debuted Graham Yost’s modern Western *Justified*. On the basis of Elmore Leonard’s novels *Pronto* (1993) and *Riding the Rap* (1995) and his short story “Fire in the Hole,” the series is centered on Deputy U.S. Marshal Raylan Givens (played by Timothy Olyphant), whose cowboy boots, white Stetson, and reliance on gun play mark him as “a man from another time unsuited to the modern procedural dictates of criminal prosecution” (Joyce, 2012, p. 178). The series opens with a confrontation between Givens and Tommy Bucks (played by Peter Greene), a cartel “gun thug,” on the sun-soaked rooftop of a posh Miami hotel [“Fire in the Hole” 1:01]. After giving Bucks 24 hours to leave town and with the deadline quickly approaching, Givens coolly gives Bucks another chance to leave before he “shoots him on sight.” Despite claiming to be unarmed, Bucks pulls his gun from under the table but Givens is quicker on the draw and fires three times at close range. In the next scene, Givens explains to his colleagues investigating the shooting, “Let’s just keep it simple, huh? He pulled first. I shot him.” Yet, when Givens’ ex-wife Winona (played by Natalie Zea) asks if he killed Bucks, he responds, “Yeah. But he pulled first, so I was justified. What troubles me is what if he hadn’t? What if he’d just sat there and let the clock run out? Would I have killed him anyway? I know I wanted to. I guess I just never thought of myself as an angry man.” She responds, “Well, you do a good job of hiding it, and I suppose most folks don’t see it, but honestly, you’re the angriest man I have ever known.” As a result of only shooting criminals in self-defense, Givens’ moral standing in *Justified* is obviously less ambiguous than Mackey’s in *The Shield*. Nonetheless, this character’s “angry delivery of retributive justice” (Joyce, 2012, p. 187) places him outside of the traditional dichotomy of heroes and villains. Yet, even if one considers Givens to be a flawed hero rather than an antihero, the relationship between race, racism, and moral standing relies on similar archetypes as earlier FX crime dramas.

As punishment for killing Bucks, Givens is reassigned to the Marshal’s office in eastern Kentucky, where the hunt for fugitives often requires returning to his hometown in Harlan County and provides frequent opportunities to confront the backwoods culture he fled: “I grew up in Kentucky. I don’t wanna go back there” [“Fire in the Hole” 1:01]. Upon Givens’ arrival at his new office in Lexington, viewers are introduced to Boyd Crowder (played by Walton Goggins), the show’s antagonist. As Givens explains, he and Crowder

have history together from their time digging coal as teenagers. In the next scene, Crowder and a White supremacist accomplice discuss the feasibility of blowing up a federal building before driving into Lexington to destroy a Black church with a rocket launcher. Back in Harlan, when Givens arrives at an abandoned church to ask about the firebombing, Crowder comes outside to greet him with a swastika tattoo and a Confederate flag belt buckle prominently displayed. As the two talk, Crowder explains that the “moral obligation to get rid of the Jews” comes from the Bible. He continues, “See, in the beginning, right, you had your mud people. They were also referred to as beasts because they had no souls, see? They were soulless. And then Cain, you remember Cain, now? Well, Cain, he laid down with the mud people, and out of these fornications came the Edomites. Now, do you know who the Edomites are They’re the Jews, Raylan.” Givens responds, “You know, Boyd, I think you just use the Bible to do whatever the hell you like.” Like Vendrell’s suicide at the conclusion of *The Shield* and the ouster of Morrow as usurper in *Sons of Anarchy*, Givens’ shooting of Crowder at the conclusion of the pilot episode serves to distance the protagonist from the overt racism and marginalized White masculinity associated with his birthplace. Throughout the series, Givens is quick to disparage anything he considers to be “master-race bullshit” [“Blowback” 1:08].

Givens also embodies postracial sensibilities through his professional relationship with Rachel Brooks (played by Erica Tazel), the only Black marshal in the show. In the first episode of Season 2, Brooks asks Givens to help her find a sex offender in Harlan and Givens agrees in order to escape his paperwork obligations [“The Moonshine War” 2:01]. 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.” Givens responds, “So you want me to help you with my people? You know, throw ‘em a pork rind or some Ding Dongs?” The next season, Brooks returns the favor when Givens asks her to go with him to Noble’s Holler [“The Devil You Know” 3:04]. As he explains, “Noble’s Holler. Nice community. Carved out for emancipated slaves after the Civil War. And the good White folks of the county trying to dig them out going on 150 years now.” 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 some time back.” According to 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” (para. 2). Yet, like Mackey’s partnerships with Clark and Garris, the relationship between Givens and Brooks in *Justified* reinforces White audiences’ distance from

race and racism by drawing attention away from structural issues that create segregated communities and situating personal goodwill as the antidote to problems of racial difference. More broadly, as a postracial text, *Justified* is premised upon the embodiment of hegemonic White masculinity successfully imposing an urban, multicultural form of law and order against the wishes of a resistant local populace embodying a marginalized White masculinity associated with classed stereotypes. As Joyce (2012) observes, in this ideological economy, Crowder's collection of White supremacists and the hillbillies associated with the Bennett clan "serve as foil to the putatively superior, middle-class, bourgeois notion of American citizenship" (p. 192). As such, "*Justified*'s conception of villainy . . . looks less like a progressively contemporary take on modern social ills and more like the latest instance of the ascendancy of an Anglo-American gunslinging hero" (Joyce, 2012, p. 192). Here, as in *The Shield* and *Sons of Anarchy*, the racialized morality tale is the same: heroes in FX crime dramas are White men with colorblind sensibilities who are placed into conflict with villainous, overtly racist characters yearning for the return of segregation.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to overstate the importance of *The Shield* when considering the recent history of FX. According to network president John Landgraf, "If we had a building and there was a cornerstone, it would read '*The Shield*: March 2002.' That's really when FX as we know it began" (quoted in Lafayette, 2008, para. 4). Furthermore, in the five years following the show's debut, the network's ratings nearly doubled (Becker, 2007). In addition to its importance for the network it helped make famous, *The Shield* occupies an important place in recent television history, demonstrating that advertiser-supported cable networks could produce high-status prime-time drama. However, HBO has always dominated critical discussions of the "best" shows in television history (Traister & Miller, 2007; Zoller Seitz, 2012), and the relative status of FX as a network and *The Shield*, *Sons of Anarchy*, and *Justified* as cable crime dramas indicates the complexity of the status system associated with cultural legitimacy in the postnetwork era. Despite FX's association with artistic integrity and cultural relevance, AMC remains the advertiser-supported network most closely linked with television's increasing cultural legitimacy (Jaramillo, 2012). As one critic notes, FX "never quite crossed over into the sweet, sweet realm of capital-R Respect," and the network's new dramas, like *The Americans* (2013–) and an adaptation of the Danish drama *The Bridge* (2013–), reflect an ongoing effort to establish "a higher level of 'prestige' while still keeping a toe or two in the butch-ish, crime 'n' grime milieu that made them" (Lawson, 2013, para. 3).

Beyond the context of the postnetwork era, 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, p. 60). Regarding race, images of diversity including Black–White friendship and multicultural cooperation validate the “end” of race by providing visible evidence of integration and the success of race-neutral, neoliberal political and economic arrangements while the absence of White animosity perpetuates the myth that Americans have left racism in the past. Yet, representations of racism in popular culture rely disproportionately on classed images of “rednecks,” “hillbillies,” and “White trash,” as these stereotypes provide White audiences with opportunities to externalize prejudice and conceptualize racism as something that is about marginalized others but not themselves. 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 reading 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 postnetwork era, within which the moral standing of antiheroic characters is related to class-inflected White masculinity and the norms of colorblind racism.

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