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Gender, Suffering, and Humanity in Westworld

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INTRODUCTION

Westworld is a popular television show that HBO first released in 2016. It captures the current fascination and fear our society holds with technological advancements, specifically cyborgs and A.I.. So, why discuss this particular show? On one level, I chose this series because it represents the contemporary science-fiction portrayal of both the fascination with and fear of the near future and the next level of technological breakthroughs. Specifically, there is a whole collection of movies and television shows from the past 50 years that explore the moment when A.I. develops to the point where it is equal or even superior to human beings. Many of the themes of the show, for example what “humanity” means when robots become indistinguishable from people, are shared amongst many movies such as *Metropolis*, *Blade Runner*, *Under the Skin*, *Ghost in the Shell* and *Ex Machina* to name a few. However, *Westworld* provides a unique backdrop to engage with this topic in a context that hasn’t been widely discussed. Instead of heading in a philosophical direction as much of the literature has when discussing cyborg media, *Westworld* has the potential to reveal contemporary societal beliefs about gender. In order to show this, I will be using one of the main protagonists, Dolores Abernathy, as a case study throughout this paper in order to investigate what the show has to say about gender. Because of Dolores’s status as a cyborg, she reveals the constructed nature of gender and of what constitutes humanity. In doing so, she demonstrates the ways that suffering and our empathy toward suffering are gendered. While Dolores makes it easier to see the relationship between gender, suffering and humanity, these connections are not relegated to the reality of the cyborg. By showing how gender is used to define an individual’s status as human, I argue that people, not just cyborgs, are dehumanized when they express their gender in ways that are not accepted by the dominant norms of society.

BACKGROUND

The series itself is dense and complicated with two seasons, so I will be oversimplifying some concepts throughout the paper and will try to only include the information here that is needed to frame the remainder of this work. *Westworld* is the name of the television series, but it is also the name of the futuristic theme park where the vast majority of the show takes place. Westworld is a park where the ultra-rich can pay a vast amount of money to “live without limits;” they have a completely immersive experience in the “wild west.”¹ The guests at the park interact with hosts, incredibly life-like, artificial beings. The hosts were created by Arnold and Ford, the two individuals who founded the park. The hosts allow the guests to indulge in the lawlessness of the wild west and live out their fantasies without causing any real harm. This is possible because the hosts cannot harm the guests, and because the hosts can’t remember anything that happens to them. While the hosts can feel pain in the moment, each time they are “killed” they are repaired and sent back to the park with no recollection of what happened. Instead, they have precoded memories of their past, which help to ground their characters.

However, the show causes audiences to question whether or not there is truly no harm being done to the hosts and whether their suffering is equivalent to that of the humans. Season 1 begins with Ford introducing “reveries” into the hosts; code that is meant to make them more lifelike by allowing them to access fragments of their previous “builds,” or lives in the park.² This code glitches, and some of the hosts begin to actually remember the violence and death that they have repeatedly experienced. The exploitation and suffering of the hosts quickly becomes the central conflict of the show as the hosts react to the realization that Arnold created them to be

¹ Allie Waxman, "Westworld Season 1: Explained," *Westworld*, accessed December 8, 2019, <https://www.hbo.com/westworld/season-01/explainer-recap>.

² *Westworld*, "The Original," episode 1, HBO, first broadcast October 2, 2016, written by Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan.

abused by humans. Now, things begin to get a little complicated, because *Westworld* weaves together multiple timelines throughout the series. While the reveries help to “awaken” some of the hosts, they are not the only mechanism which does so. Season 1 mainly follows Dolores, a female host who is slowly beginning to remember. However, her timeline is set long before the reveries of the present. Dolores is the first host Arnold created, and Arnold tries an experiment with her code in the hopes of helping her develop consciousness. He programs his voice into Dolores’s mind as an “inner voice,” with the hope that Dolores will eventually learn to hear it as her own, unique voice.³⁴

Dolores and all hosts have implanted stories that they follow every day, thus providing structure to the park and different narratives for the guests to play along with. These stories are referred to as “loops,” and the hosts simply follow them until a guest intervenes. Dolores is programmed as the “farmer’s daughter,” and this is her daily loop: she wakes up and heads into town to run errands, where she meets up with her long lost love, Teddy Flood. She and Teddy spend the day roaming the hills and taking in the “natural splendor” before returning to her ranch.⁵ As they approach, they see that the farm has been attacked, and Dolores’s beloved father has been killed. Dolores acts like the “girl next door,” and she really is the picture of a proper young woman, daughter and partner. She is incredibly doll-like: Dolores has very pale skin, with big blue eyes and long, perfectly curled blonde hair. She is always pictured in the same simple but elegant and modest blue dress. Dolores is kind, sweet and naively optimistic; she openly expresses her love for her father, who she cares for, and Teddy, her male partner. In season 2, Dolores’s character changes dramatically. Dolores leads a revolt against humanity in season 2 as

³ *Westworld*, “The Bicameral Mind,” episode 10, HBO, first broadcast December 4, 2016, written by Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan.

⁴ *Westworld*, HBO, first broadcast October 2, 2016, written by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy.

⁵ *Westworld*, “The Original,” episode 1.

Wyatt, and she discards many of the character traits of the farmer's daughter. She becomes violent, controlling and manipulative. In order to understand her transition, this paper examines the "farmer's daughter" role in relation to gender norms and whose suffering matters.

Dolores is a victim of sexual violence, and this violence is not adequately addressed by the institution governing her world. The first episode of the series lays the foundation for Dolores's initial daily narrative as a host, which we discussed in her introduction above. We see this loop repeated many times throughout the series as it slowly devolves, but this showing of the story acts as the "control" for the rest of the series. At the end of this sequence, Dolores is sexually assaulted by a guest. Even though this isn't technically part of her programmed story since the action is perpetrated by a human, the guest states that he's been visiting the park for over 30 years and that he and Dolores have been through a lot together.⁶ Additionally, we later see that the rape is part of the loop when the host who attacks the farm mirrors the actions of the guest from the first episode.⁷ This means that Dolores experiences acts of sexual violence regularly, and that they are even programmed into her story. If the institution that runs the park actively chooses to have Dolores experience this violence, it is clear that none of the humans are bothered by her suffering or planning to fight the system that perpetuates it. This is further supported by the narration playing over this sequence. Throughout the attack on the farm, we hear a voice saying that "there are no chance encounters" and that Dolores was "built to gratify the desires of the people who pay to visit [the park]."⁸ This statement works to normalize the violence Dolores experiences, implying that this violence is an accepted and even expected

⁶ *Westworld*, "The Original," episode 1.

⁷ *Westworld*, "The Stray," episode 3, HBO, first broadcast October 16, 2016, written by Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan.

⁸ *Westworld*, "The Original," episode 1.

aspect of her role as a host. She was literally created to be abused by the guests, and because of her status as a robot, her suffering isn't seen as valid by the guests or by those who run the park.

METHODOLOGY

I use four different theorists in order to support my argument that suffering is a form of gender performance, and therefore impacts one's "humanity." Judith Butler's concepts of the heterosexual matrix and the performative nature of gender combined with Donna Haraway's work on cyborg feminism situates Dolores as a uniquely effective figure for discussing how actions define gender. Rebecca Wanzo's work on narratives of suffering when combined with Butler's ideas, are examples of gender construction through the performance. Dolores's narratives of progress and sentimentality are uniquely "feminine" ways of responding to suffering. Masahiro Mori's theory of the "uncanny valley" supports my argument that gender performance relates to humanness, and that Dolores receives and loses support from those around her because of how "human" she appears.

GENDER AS PERFORMANCE

Other authors have discussed gender norms in relation to vulnerability, transgression and the cyborg. For example, in "Constructing Womanhood and the Female Cyborg: A Feminist Reading of *Ex Machina* and *Westworld*," author Zoe Seaman-Grant investigates the complexities of the female cyborg through the two case studies mentioned in the title. Her argument is concerned with the relationship between these female cyborgs and their white, male creators, and how the female cyborg can be used to analyze contemporary fears of white male displacement.⁹

⁹ Zoe E. Seaman-Grant, "Constructing Womanhood and the Female Cyborg: A Feminist Reading of *Ex Machina* and *Westworld*" (Honors Thesis, Bates College, 2017), iii.

Her focus on gender does not move far beyond the role relationships between robots and creators, however some of her other points work to introduce the different facets of my argument. First, the author discusses the ways in which *Westworld* reproduces hegemonic norms of femininity. Seaman-Grant says that viewers are encouraged to empathize with the female protagonists because of their “exemplary femininity and, relatedly, [their] vulnerability...These female cyborgs are *good* female cyborgs because they continue to behave in culturally appropriate ways for women.”¹⁰ Here, the author argues that vulnerability is part of the female performance of the robot protagonists in the show. Her connection between hegemonic female norms and vulnerability is the basis for my connection between gender performance and suffering. Second, in her conclusion she states that while stories of female cyborgs “often repeat dominant cultural narratives that entrench racialized and gendered hierarchies,” they are also often “simultaneously offering moments of important transgression.”¹¹ The author focuses more on these transgressions in terms of the liberation of the female cyborg and her moral superiority to the white men that created her. However, I argue that her transgressions actually work negatively to dehumanize her. To start, let’s take a closer look at the performative aspect of “playing” human that are evident with Dolores and her varied performances.

Dolores seems to be a stereotypical female character; she is a woman in the wild west, and she acts accordingly. However, Dolores is not limited to this kind of role, and in fact, in season 2, Dolores seems to play a completely different, “male” character. In order to understand Dolores and her changing character, we turn to Judith Butler and her work with gender and performance. I won’t be diving too deeply into Butler since I am using her ideas only as a foundation for the later theories in this paper. Instead, I hope to outline the most important

¹⁰ Seaman-Grant, "Constructing Womanhood," 113.

¹¹ Seaman-Grant, "Constructing Womanhood," 116.

concepts so that we are on the same page about how I am conceptualizing gender in the remainder of this work.

Butler's concept of the heterosexual matrix helps map the dominant understanding of gender in our society. Butler says that the heterosexual matrix is the "hegemonic...model of gender...that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender...that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality."¹² First, Butler is saying that this concept is part of the hegemony, meaning that it is accepted as the norm and isn't seen as constructed. So, those who don't comply with this framework are seen as deviant. The matrix itself explains the accepted connection between sex, gender and sexual orientation. There are two biological sexes, male and female. Gender is just an outward expression of biological sex, where "masculine expresses male [and] feminine expresses female."¹³ So, sex and gender are fundamentally connected, and are conceived of as one concept: sex-gender. This binary is implicated by the "natural" sexual orientation of heterosexuality. So, for example, a biologically female body acts in feminine ways *because* of this body and therefore has a female gender, with one of these feminine acts being attraction to maleness.

Butler radically critiques this model by destabilizing the "natural" grid of sex-gender-orientation. If a distinction is drawn between sex as a biological binary and gender as a culturally constructed identity, Butler argues that "the construction of 'men' will [not] accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that 'women' will not interpret only female bodies."¹⁴ She is saying that if we reject the implication of gender by sex, then there is no reason to think that, for example, only people with male bodies will create a masculine gender for themselves.

¹² Judith Butler, *Gender Troubles: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990), 151.

¹³ Butler, *Gender Troubles*, 115.

¹⁴ Butler, *Gender Troubles*, 6.

Instead, “man and masculine might just easily signify a female body as a male one.”¹⁵ Beyond that, without a tie to biological sex, gender isn’t restricted to only two formulations; gender as an identity isn’t limited to “masculine” and “feminine.” So, if gender isn’t defined by biological sex, how is it constructed?

Butler defines gender as “an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*,” meaning that gender is constituted through the performance of actions.¹⁶ Additionally, gender is also constituted by “the stylization of the body,” so beyond one’s actions, gender is performed through “bodily gestures, movements, and enactments.”¹⁷ Even the way people walk, hold themselves or emote work to create their expression of gender. So, if gender is constituted by people’s bodies and actions, the possibilities for different performance go far beyond the traditional binary of “masculine” and “feminine.” Instead of being an innate, static identity implied by one’s biological sex, gender as an identity is fluid and dynamic. Gender can transform as an individual performs a different set of acts or subverts their previous stylization.¹⁸ With this understanding of gender, we can look at Dolores and see how her role as the “farmer’s daughter” is defined by her performance of gender.

APPLICATION

Dolores and her initial gender expression is an example of what an understanding of gender as a constituted identity looks like. When we meet Dolores, she is lying in her bed, wearing a frilly nightgown with a pink ribbon. We then see her in her iconic blue dress. Her hair is long and worn down, with ringlets that frame her face on either side. Her voice is higher in pitch and she speaks with a warm accent. These are all examples of Dolores’s stylized body,

¹⁵ Butler, *Gender Troubles*, 6.

¹⁶ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 519.

¹⁷ Butler, "Performative Acts," 519.

¹⁸ Butler, "Performative Acts," 520.

choices made to express a feminine gender. In terms of her actions, Dolores starts every morning by checking in with her father, kissing him on the cheek and expressing her love and support. She is his caretaker. Dolores also physically cannot harm anything; she is unable to shoot a gun. This makes her dependent on others for protection. While we don't see many of her other actions, the two others that appear multiple times are her painting, and her spending time with Teddy, her male host love interest. Instead of seeing these actions and choices as dependent on her sex, we can see them as conscious decisions made by her programmers in order to have Dolores seem ultra "feminine:" kind, soft, caring and dependent. A key here is that they are part of her code. Dolores doesn't choose these, the people who run the park do. While this mirrors the way that society dictates how we "should" perform acceptably to be in line with our sex, it is much more obvious with a robot and their code.¹⁹

CYBORG FEMINISM

Why use a fictional robot to critique hegemonic gender norms that affect real human beings? In order to engage with this critique, I argue that the cyborg body is a uniquely effective case study for discussing gender as a fluid, constructed identity, which is the foundation of this entire paper. In *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Haraway takes the traditional terms used to discuss old hierarchical dominations and reframes them in terms of science and technology. For example, she calls for the transition from "white capitalist patriarchy" to "informatics of domination."²⁰ In this way, she uses technology in order to understand power and pose new forms of radical revolution. Haraway specifically uses the cyborg as a body that can act to undermine traditional conceptions of gender. Butler is arguing against an understanding that gender is an innate part of

¹⁹ *Westworld*.

²⁰ Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* (n.p.: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 30.

us. One of the ways in which this “innateness” is justified is through the origin stories of humanity. Haraway says that the central origin myths of Western culture perpetuate “the inevitable dialectic of domination of male and female gender roles.”²¹ The origin stories she is referring to are the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, in which Eve was created from Adam’s rib to keep him company, and the Freudian conception of the “the phallic mother from whom all humans must separate.”²² These stories portray the origins of women as subjugated to men, and add support to the normalization of heterosexuality and the heterosexual matrix.

Cyborgs do not comply with these origin stories precisely *because* they are not human. Thus, it is easier to see their gender as being a part of their construction and their “natural” state as one of neutrality. The literal creation of the cyborg is often portrayed as part of their story, and “in retelling origin stories, cyborg authors subvert the central myths of origin” that work to support the sex-gender-orientation connection.²³ By removing the history from their bodies, cyborgs can exemplify the theory that gender comes from performance and expression. This is much more challenging with human bodies because it is virtually impossible to separate them from these stories of their original formation.

APPLICATION

Dolores is not a female because she can trace her history back to Eve or the Mother; we see her being created in the show, and we can more easily understand her gender through her performance throughout the series. In the finale of season 1, we see Dolores physically being created; her whole body is made up of a mechanical frame, and the only area covered by human-like skin and features is her face.²⁴ Additionally, there are scenes throughout the series in which

²¹ Haraway, *A Cyborg*, 43.

²² Haraway, *A Cyborg*, 8.

²³ Haraway, *A Cyborg*, 55.

²⁴ *Westworld*, “The Bicameral Mind,” episode 10.

Dolores is asked to turn off her “emotional affect” or to “lose the accent” when talking with the lab technicians.²⁵ While nothing about her physical body changes, she seems like a completely different character. Not only does she lose her accent, but her voice also lowers in pitch. Her posture changes, she stops emoting, and even the way that she holds the muscles in her face shifts. Together, these changes make Dolores seem less “feminine;” this is especially impressive as Dolores is usually nude in these scenes. Even though the sex of her body is on display, she still seems less feminine as soon as she loses her affect. We can see this as an erasure of her gender, leaving her a neutral subject in a physically female body. In this way, Dolores as a cyborg exemplifies both the separation of sex and gender, and the constitution of gender through actions and the stylization of her body.

SUFFERING AS GENDERED

Dolores’s multiple “characters” are varied performances of her gender, and her suffering is a key aspect of her gender performance; suffering acts as the link between gender and humanity. In *The Suffering Will Not Be Televised*, author Rebecca Wanzo interrogates why only some suffering individuals are viewed as legitimate victims by American society. While Wanzo formulates five narratives of acceptable female suffering, two are especially salient within the context of Dolores and *Westworld*. Stories of emotional intimacy which Wanzo refers to as the “sentimental sexual violence narrative,” and progress narratives are particularly applicable to Dolores because gender is created through performance, and I argue that one’s performance of their suffering is part of the formation of their gender.²⁶ Specifically, Wanzo is concerned with the suffering of African American women; she argues “that some stories of African American

²⁵ *Westworld*, “The Original,” episode 1.

²⁶ Rebecca Wanzo, *The Suffering Will Not Be Televised: African American Women and Sentimental Political Storytelling* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009), 114.

women's suffering...are widely circulated and others dwell in obscurity."²⁷ Wanzo does this through the lens of sentimental political storytelling, the "narrativization of sympathy for purposes of political mobilization."²⁸ In other words, Wanzo explores what kinds of stories of suffering are told in the attempt to gain sympathy and support.²⁹ By analyzing the success of different stories, Wanzo identifies a set of conventions that are present in narratives that have affective agency, a term she uses to describe "the ability of a subject to have her political and social circumstances move a populace and produce institutional effects."³⁰ To restate this definition, narratives have affective agency when they garner empathy from others.

As we discussed above, Wanzo's conception of affective agency is dictated by Butler's heterosexual matrix: performances of suffering should be in line with one's "sex-gender" in order to be seen and accepted by society. Wanzo's conventions frame what "feminine" suffering *should* be according to current hegemonic gender roles, and when a female person strays from these narratives, they lose the sympathy and support of society. Identifying when Dolores deviates from these accepted female narratives of suffering explains why her fellow characters as well as her audience's opinions of her change so radically throughout the series.

The original context of Wanzo's work describes specific frameworks that give African American women access to affective agency when they are often denied it. I do not mean to equate the invalidation of the suffering of women of color to that of fictional robots. Instead, I am focusing on how these narratives are uniquely feminine and can be seen as an act that constitutes gender expression. When these narratives are deviated from by women, I will also examine the negative implications of this transgression of gender expression.

²⁷ Wanzo, *The Suffering*, 2.

²⁸ Wanzo, *The Suffering*, 3.

²⁹ Wanzo, *The Suffering*, 10.

³⁰ Wanzo, *The Suffering*, 3.

SENTIMENTAL SEXUAL VIOLENCE NARRATIVE

The sentimental sexual violence narrative describes the use of sentimental discourse as an “answer” to the known failures of the law to bring justice to victims of sexual violence. Wanzo qualifies narratives of sexual violence as sentimental when they “focus on identification and intimacy between victims and a more powerful sympathizer instead of on legal, structural, and systemic concerns.”³¹ Even though the justice system as an institution is unable to successfully handle the suffering of these female victims, the acceptable answer to this problem is *not* to question the system, but instead to engage in an intimate relationship with a figure of power in order to work through one’s suffering. This figure of power is “often a representative of the state,” a person who should be focused on improving the system.³² Wanzo argues that when these political failures are seen as inevitable, the sentimental sexual violence narrative dictates that “only human connection...can begin to heal the wounds caused by both state and interpersonal violence” against the victim.³³ We can refer to the formation of this relationship as the application of a therapeutic salve, and this is constructed as another acceptable performance of suffering and healing for female victims.

APPLICATION

Dolores is a victim who could potentially apply the therapeutic salve, because she is a female who repeatedly experiences acts of sexual violence that are ignored by the institution that governs her world. We can trace her evocation of the sentimental sexual violence narrative. Dolores begins to stray from her relationship with Teddy when she meets Billy, a guest who works for Delos. Delos is one of the main investors in the park and eventually buys Westworld. This makes Billy a real representative of the institution that creates Dolores’s suffering. After

³¹ Wanzo, *The Suffering*, 115.

³² Wanzo, *The Suffering*, 115-116.

³³ Wanzo, *The Suffering*, 116.

teaming up, Dolores confides to Billy that she “used to believe that there was a path for everyone,” but that she only now questions “where that path has taken [her];” every day, her path leads to sexual exploitation.³⁴ Billy responds to this with sympathy, saying that he knows what it’s like to want to start a new life. However, instead of helping Dolores fight her role in the park, Billy continues on his mission to search for bandits and brings Dolores along as his companion. A romantic relationship quickly develops and the two continue to grow closer throughout the season. Dolores says that there is a voice inside of her telling her that she needs Billy, and that only “together,” can they “find a way out.”³⁵ In this way, Dolores uses an intimate and emotional relationship with a representative of the institution in order to work through her feelings and also recover from her repeated exploitation.

Dolores begins to grow stronger because of this relationship. When they first meet up, Dolores is often overcome by sadness and needs protection, both from enemies and from Logan, Billy’s companion who isn’t charmed by Dolores and her farmgirl innocence.³⁶ However, as Dolores and Billy grow closer, Dolores stands up for herself. She still remains opposed to and afraid of violence, but instead of standing back in horror when these acts are committed, she chooses to stand up to Logan and others when they try to kill other hosts.³⁷ It is only when Billy is in danger that Dolores engages in combat, killing a whole group of hosts in order to save him. Dolores even ditches her iconic blue dress in order to fit in on the mission, opting instead for trousers and a button down.

³⁴ *Westworld*, "Dissonance Theory," episode 4, HBO, first broadcast October 23, 2016, written by Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan.

³⁵ *Westworld*, "Contrapasso," episode 5, HBO, first broadcast October 30, 2016, written by Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan.

³⁶ *Westworld*, "Dissonance Theory," episode 4.

³⁷ *Westworld*, "Dissonance Theory," episode 4.

These changes are the beginning of Dolores's shift in gender expression. She wears more "masculine" clothing, she skillfully engages in combat and she gains confidence and strength. However, all of these changes occur within the context of her emotional dependence on Billy. So, while in some ways she is becoming less "feminine," she is still accepted by Billy because of her portrayal of the sentimental sexual violence narrative. Her need for a therapeutic salve and her performance of dependence register as acceptable ways to cope with suffering, and thus her other expressions of gender are allowed.

PROGRESS NARRATIVE

While Wanzo formulates this narrative in a specific context that can be applied to Dolores, the connection between progress and humanity has been drawn by other *Westworld* scholars. In "Westworld: From Androids to Persons," author Onni Hirvonen criticizes the anthropocentric view that personhood is equivalent to being human, and the assumption that only biological humans can have consciousness.³⁸ To do so, Hirvonen discusses three different models of defining personhood. The first is the capacity approach to personhood, which states that "to be a person an entity needs to have certain capacities."³⁹ These capacities include rationality, "possibility of being interpreted as an intentional agent with its own aims and goals, and self-consciousness."⁴⁰ The second model is the performative theory of personhood. Unlike the capacity approach which is focused on "the intrinsic properties" of a being, this model states that personhood is based on one's "performance in our shared social practices."⁴¹ Hirvonen discusses successful performance as keeping promises, taking responsibility and having reasons

³⁸ Onni Hirvonen, "Westworld: From Androids to Persons," in *Westworld and Philosophy*, ed. James B. South and Kimberly S. Engels, Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2018), 61-62.

³⁹ Hirvonen, "Westworld," 62.

⁴⁰ Hirvonen, "Westworld," 62-63.

⁴¹ Hirvonen, "Westworld," 64.

for the actions that one commits.⁴² I argued above that “shared social practices” also include the hegemonic gender norms of the heterosexual matrix. The author introduces a third model, the perspective of historical struggles for personhood. This takes the two previous models and adds to them, claiming that one must also struggle for recognition in order to reach personhood.⁴³ He argues that the hosts show this struggle in two ways: they first struggle for recognition of their suffering and to prove that they should be included in the current definition of persons, and later they struggle to change this definition instead of being included in it. This concept of a “struggle for recognition of their suffering” is present throughout the show, and Wanzo’s progress narrative further explains how this model is connected to gender.

The progress narrative is a performance of suffering built out of American Dream ideology. Wanzo argues that the progress narrative mirrors “stories U.S. citizens tell about how they progressed from troubled beginnings to full citizenship,” drawing on the ideal of self-determination.⁴⁴ She says that “by depicting sorrow, hard work, and uplift, the American life narrative illustrates one of the most prominent means by which U.S. citizens prove their worth.”⁴⁵ Therefore, the suffering body is seen as the origin for citizenship.⁴⁶ However, it is only the origin, and there is an expectation that one will move upwards from this original state. Wanzo defines the progress narrative as “narrating the journey from the suffering body to the ideal liberal [subject:] a fully self-determined citizen.”⁴⁷ The last piece of this narrative is the conception of choice. Progress towards freedom is understood as a choice that all people have

⁴² Hirvonen, “Westworld,” 64.

⁴³ Hirvonen, “Westworld,” 66.

⁴⁴ Wanzo, *The Suffering*, 42.

⁴⁵ Wanzo, *The Suffering*, 42.

⁴⁶ Wanzo, *The Suffering*, 41.

⁴⁷ Wanzo, *The Suffering*, 41.

access to; “every citizen can, with proper discipline, work, and self-realization, progress to freedom and individualism.”⁴⁸

Wanzo problematizes this in the context of African American women by adding the history of slavery into the mix of liberalism and the American Dream. Slavery directly conflicts with the idea that any person could become a free, self-realized individual if they tried hard enough. Because of this, “slave” as a social position in this framework is understood as “the status of a failed citizen.”⁴⁹ Wanzo argues that this has led to African Americans being viewed as lesser citizens, because they “have not transcended their former status as subjects with insufficient will” to escape from slavery and attain freedom.⁵⁰ This implies that all people, even those who are viewed as diminished persons, have some kind of “duty” to strive for total freedom.

APPLICATION

The sentimental sexual violence is the main convention of suffering that Dolores shows, but she also represents the progress narrative. Dolores’s initial narrative is characterized by suffering. Dolores isn’t free either; as a host, her actions are controlled not by her own will but by her programmed story. Thus, according to the basis of the progress narrative, Dolores has a duty to strive for freedom from her programming. Within the show, freedom is represented as consciousness. Becoming conscious would allow for hosts to make choices and have free will. Going further, with free will, it becomes unclear what would differentiate the hosts from the guests. Freedom through consciousness would mean becoming human for Dolores. Throughout season 1, Dolores is working through “the maze,” the journey she is initially set on by Arnold. The maze isn’t a physical maze; it is a metaphor for discovering consciousness. While some of

⁴⁸ Wanzo, *The Suffering*, 43.

⁴⁹ Wanzo, *The Suffering*, 44.

⁵⁰ Wanzo, *The Suffering*, 44.

the hosts resist becoming “awake,” Dolores is loyal to this voice, leaving her farm narrative behind. She wanders the park in order to understand the purpose of the voice.⁵¹

It’s when Dolores is wandering the park that she meets up with Billy, and these two narratives of suffering begin to intertwine. It is the same voice leading Dolores to freedom that tells her that she needs Billy. While she begins her journey alone, her progress towards consciousness is quickly linked to this powerful male representative of the state. As she hears the voice more clearly and approaches consciousness, Billy becomes more and more infatuated with her. Billy openly speaks to Dolores like she’s a robot when he first finds her. For example, when he asks her where she was heading, he says he assumed that “they kept [the robots] in zones or on paths.”⁵² He explicitly talks about Dolores’s status as a host in their conversation.

Additionally, even though Billy is interested in Dolores from the moment he sees her, he won’t engage in any physical contact with her as a robot. However, after she mentions that there is a voice inside of her telling her to escape from the park, Billy’s affect towards Dolores changes.

He holds her hand for the first time after she tells him about her growing conscious.⁵³ When Logan refers to Dolores as a “doll” in the next episode, Billy asks him to not “say that around her” because he feels like “she understands.”⁵⁴ Dolores continues to talk more openly about her journey to freedom and her need for Billy’s help in order to succeed, and their relationship becomes more intimate. Dolores gains affective agency as she demonstrates these two accepted narratives of suffering to Billy. At the climax of their relationship and these narratives, Billy truly believes that Dolores has become human.

⁵¹ *Westworld*.

⁵² *Westworld*, "Dissonance Theory," episode 4.

⁵³ *Westworld*, "Contrapasso," episode 5.

⁵⁴ *Westworld*, "Contrapasso," episode 5.

THE UNCANNY VALLEY

While I argue that the concept of the “uncanny valley” is central to connecting Dolores’s gender expression to her perceived humanity, other writers have used this concept to examine the lack of humanity in the human characters in the show. In “Crossing the Uncanny Valley: What it Means to be Human in *Westworld*,” author Siobhan Lyons argues that the hosts are either viewed with “revulsion or ambivalence by the guests” depending on how human-like the hosts appear.⁵⁵ Lyons introduces the idea of the “uncanny valley,” to contrast his argument that the hosts better exemplify the classical ideals of “human excellence” than the humans of the show. Lyons uses Aristotle’s model of virtue and vice to describe human excellence: people should “act with virtue in comparison to vice, and with self-restraint in comparison to incontinence,” and avoid brutality in order to transcend humanity.⁵⁶ The author argues that the humans of the show exhibit vices that make them seem less than human, while the hosts and their desire to grow and develop throughout the series allows them to “*transcend the human.*”⁵⁷ In this way, he questions whether humanity is “a state of *being*” or “a state of *behaving.*”⁵⁸ To say that in a different way, Lyons is arguing that biology might not be the defining factor in whether or not a being is a human or a person.

While Lyons uses this idea as a foundation to pose a critique of the assumption that the biological humans of the show represent humanity, I map Dolores and her development throughout the series onto the concept of the uncanny valley in order to draw connections between Dolores’s gendered suffering performance and how humanlike she appears to be. The

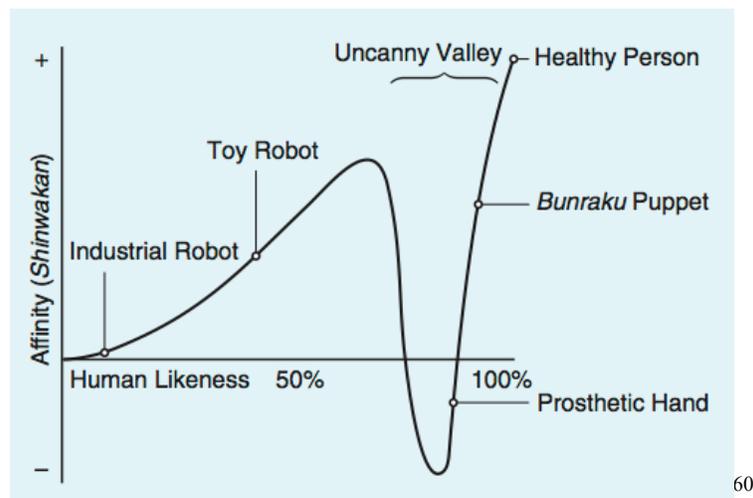
⁵⁵ Siobhan Lyons, “Crossing the Uncanny Valley: What It Means to Be Human in *Westworld*,” in *Westworld and Philosophy*, ed. James B. South and Kimberly S. Engels, Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2018), 41.

⁵⁶ Lyons, “Crossing the Uncanny,” 44-45.

⁵⁷ Lyons, “Crossing the Uncanny,” 45.

⁵⁸ Lyons, “Crossing the Uncanny,” 46.

“uncanny valley” is a concept developed by Masahiro Mori, a robotics professor, to understand the relationship between how human-like robots appear and the affinity that humans feel towards them. Mori argues that one might expect this to be a “monotonically increasing function,” meaning that as one variable continuously increases, the other does as well.⁵⁹ In this case, that would imply that as robots look more life-like, people’s affinity towards them increases. According to Mori, this function does not accurately reflect the ways that humans react to increasingly life-like robots. He uses a graph to explain the relationship between these two variables, which I am including here:



The x-axis represents human likeness, and the y-axis represents human affinity to the robot. Initially, the function is monotonically increasing; as robots become somewhat more lifelike, human affinity increases. However, at a certain point there is a dip in the curve, or a valley, and this area is what Mori refers to as the “uncanny valley.” This shift occurs when the artificiality of an incredibly lifelike robot is revealed. The author uses a prosthetic limb as an example. “Recently, owing to great advances in fabrication technology, we cannot distinguish at

⁵⁹ Masahiro Mori, "The Uncanny Valley," *IEEE Robotics and Automation Magazine* 19, no. 2 (2012): 98.

⁶⁰ Mori, "The Uncanny," 99.

a glance a prosthetic hand from a real one...However, once we realize that the hand that looked real at first sight is actually artificial, we experience an eerie sensation.”⁶¹ From a distance, the prosthetic hand appears real. It isn’t until someone comes into close contact with it that they become aware that it is unnatural. Even though the hand is so lifelike that it can initially pass as real, humans are revolted by it.

This process is the same for humanoid robots, even those as life-like as Dolores. Robots used in factories, hospitals etc. are viewed with relative ambivalence by people because these robots do not resemble humans. Children’s toys, that are only moderately lifelike, are received with great affinity. Robots that are more lifelike, even indistinguishable from humans at first glance, are met with uneasiness and negativity once their artificiality is revealed. Robots enter the uncanny valley when people realize that they aren’t human, so investigating how their reality as robots is discovered is an important part of this concept. Mori focuses on how the physical limitations of robots reveal their artificiality. Returning to the prosthetic example, he states that the “limp boneless grip together with its texture and coldness” causes concern in the human who attempts to shake the fake hand.⁶²

The author also discusses how movement is related to the uncanny valley. First, Mori discusses how movement can intensify the effects of the valley. If a robot is already found to be artificial, seeing it move will “magnify the creepiness.”⁶³ If the “limp, boneless” prosthetic hand suddenly gripped the hand of the human attempting to shake it, they would be freaked out and feel more uneasy about the hand. Second, Mori argues that movement can also be the mechanism that initially reveals the robotic nature of a lifelike robot. If a seemingly human robot moves in an incorrect or unnatural way, they can “easily tumble down into the uncanny

⁶¹ Mori, "The Uncanny," 99.

⁶² Mori, "The Uncanny," 99.

⁶³ Mori, "The Uncanny," 100.

valley” because movement is fundamental to human beings.⁶⁴ For example, the author discusses a robot with enough artificial facial muscles that it can create facial expressions. When working properly, the robot can smile. But, when the speed of the muscle movements is manipulated so that the robot smiles more slowly, “instead of looking happy, its expression turns creepy.”⁶⁵ The robot’s incorrect expression of a smile reveals that it isn’t human and that its expressions are programmed and not reflexive responses; thus, the robot enters into the uncanny valley.

This theory was created within the context of innovation and the desire of designers to create robots that are more and more lifelike. Mori uses the concept of the uncanny valley as a limit to how lifelike robots *should* become; he recommends that designers “take the first peak as their goal, which results in a moderate degree of human likeness and a considerable sense of affinity.”⁶⁶ Because of the uncanny valley, it isn’t safe or productive for engineers to strive to replicate humanness in robots. Instead, Mori suggests that robots can have their own unique form and style, and that there is both more safety and more affinity in “deliberately pursuing a nonhuman design.”⁶⁷

APPLICATION

Let’s impose Mori’s graph of the uncanny valley onto our analysis of Dolores so far, combining his axis of “affinity” with our concept from Wanzo of “affective agency.” Since the theory is specifically related to how human robots are *perceived* to be, we will begin with Billy’s reaction when he first finds Dolores. While she is already incredibly lifelike visually, Billy is very aware that she is a robot. Dolores begins somewhere near the “toy robot” area of the graph. Billy immediately feels a sense of affinity towards her, offering to escort her home because she

⁶⁴ Mori, "The Uncanny," 99-100.

⁶⁵ Mori, "The Uncanny," 100.

⁶⁶ Mori, "The Uncanny," 100.

⁶⁷ Mori, "The Uncanny," 100.

doesn't belong on a dangerous mission, but as was previously discussed, he remains distanced from her and explicitly talks to her about her robot status.⁶⁸ As Dolores becomes more and more "human" due to her developing consciousness, her relationship with Billy intensifies, and thus she moves further up the graph.

In episode 9, Billy believes that Dolores is human and pleads with his companion Logan to attempt to smuggle her out of the park. He says that "she's not like the others" because she "remembers" and has "her own thoughts and desires."⁶⁹ Just in this one phrase, Billy connects Dolores's supposed status as human to her growing consciousness and freedom, and to her desire for him, thus showing that her feminine performances of suffering and recovery make her seem more human. Billy wants to "get her out" of the park because "keeping her in a place [like this] isn't right."⁷⁰ Dolores has successfully gained affective agency; Billy recognizes Dolores's suffering, which previously has been systematically denied because of her status as a host.

Logan decides he needs to remind Billy what Dolores really is. He stabs her in the stomach, revealing the mechanics, not organs, beneath her skin.⁷¹ According to Mori's graph, this should put Dolores deep within the valley, near the "prosthetic hand" point. Even though she seemed so real to Billy, her physical artificiality being revealed to him should cause him to feel revulsion. However, he doesn't. Logan tells Dolores that the park was made for humans, and she understands; in response, she says that someone needs to "burn [the world] clean," and she attacks Logan before shooting her way out of the group and fleeing. In episode 1, Dolores speaks sympathetically about the "newcomers," as she refers to the guests as part of her code. She repeatedly says that she "chooses to see the beauty in this world," so this new statement is a

⁶⁸ *Westworld*, "Dissonance Theory," episode 4.

⁶⁹ *Westworld*, "The Bicameral Mind," episode 10, HBO, first broadcast December 4, 2016, written by Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan.

⁷⁰ *Westworld*, "The Bicameral Mind," episode 10.

⁷¹ *Westworld*, "The Bicameral Mind," episode 10.

real departure and a sign of progress. Because of this, Billy *still* sees Dolores as human. Even though she is physically artificial, her performance of gender suffering is so successful that it overrides her cyborg body.

After searching the park, Billy returns to Sweetwater in the hopes that Dolores has already found her way home. He finds her, but she is back in her old clothes, on her old loop. Dolores doesn't recognize Billy; she doesn't remember him or anything they went through. It is at this moment that Billy is revolted by Dolores, and she loses her affective agency as a suffering woman. She has completely abandoned the progress narrative. Happily home and on her loop, Dolores will once again experience repeated acts of violence every day. She doesn't remember Billy, or she isn't able to pull away from her loop, meaning that she's lost her memories and desires; she is no longer conscious. Dolores has therefore rejected the therapeutic salve she applied using Billy. Their relationship is over, so her sentimental sexual violence narrative is over as well. It is her deviance from these narratives that causes Billy to hate Dolores; the next time they meet, Billy tells Dolores that she "really is just a thing."⁷² Dolores's failure to perform her suffering as a host in accordance with her sex is what reveals to Billy that she isn't human.

CONCLUSION

Dolores has the most affective agency when she is seen as human by Billy, and this is dictated by her "feminine" performance of suffering and recovery which aligns with her physical female sex. I want to conclude by emphasizing the ways in which, more broadly, looking at Dolores and Billy reveal something about gender and humanity. First, to restate what I just said in the previous paragraph, Billy perceives of Dolores as inhuman when her expression of gender,

⁷² *Westworld*, "Reunion," episode 2, HBO, first broadcast April 29, 2018, written by Jonathan Nolan and Carly Wray.

in the form of her suffering, doesn't align with her female sex. To say this more broadly, Billy perceives of Dolores as inhuman when she transgresses her assumed gender. And, to get even more general, Billy perceives of Dolores as inhuman when she reveals the distinction between sex and gender. So, what does this say about gender and humanity in a purely "human" context? Let's rephrase the statements concerning Billy and Dolores: we as a society perceive women as inhuman when their expression of suffering doesn't align with their female sex, we perceive people as inhuman when they transgress their assumed gender, and we perceive people as inhuman when they reveal the distinction between sex and gender. Because of the hegemonic status of the heterosexual matrix, those who deviate from it are seen as "other," and in order to keep this system of sex-gender-orientation as the norm, those who transgress are seen as violating what is "natural." By looking at gender, suffering and humanity within the context of a cyborg, the myth of a fundamental, "natural" connection between sex, gender and expression becomes clear, and we can be more critical of the ways in which this dominant system works to dehumanize those who do not comply.

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