

Politics of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Altered Carbon

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Abstract

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Politics of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Altered Carbon

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Altered Carbon is a Netflix series that offers a valuable opportunity to analyze a significant contemporary media text from a Marxist feminist perspective. *Altered Carbon* is a snapshot of problematic modern conceptions of women in labor and society.

Women's main avenues of survival are through their bodies and services they provide men. Female characters are still defined by their proximity to male characters struggling to be defined independently from the male. A potential avenue for these problematic representations to change is by changing the producers of media that rely on old stereotypes that confine women to secondary servile positions to men.

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Introduction

The focus of my thesis will be on sexuality, embodiment, and the creation of gender norms in society as it relates to women's ability to perform labor as it exists within social fictive social structures. Specifically, I will explore gender norms, which refer to the construction of sexuality and how sexuality is treated, through the 2016 Netflix series *Altered Carbon*. Sexuality is rarely challenged within the series wherein society creates specific avenues for hyper-masculinity to dominate all other forms of sexuality to the point that they barely exist. This is an important avenue of research because the focus of *Altered Carbon* is on both the technological and cultural advancements of humanity, and women are still primarily seen through the commodification of their body. This brings me to the central question of my thesis: Where are the women in the series? Moreover, why are women in this media text portrayed as only having limited societal value and only serving to further the hyper-masculine character's goals and narrative? I have chosen a focus on *Altered Carbon* as the medium of analysis because of both its capacity to interpret existing bias within American society and its ability to create new imagined worlds that, in theory, should be different from our own but fails to do so.

Altered Carbon focuses on the exploits of a man, Takeshi Kovac who awakens in a new body centuries after his death. In that time, much of Earth is dedicated to industrial production, creating massive cities and slums. The body has become a commodity to be produced and destroyed as technology has progressed to allow for the consciousness of an individual to live on after death. In principle, this would allow for all to be immortal. However, longevity becomes a luxury only the rich can afford. Bodily violence and

destruction become common with industries dedicated to the torture and destruction of the body flourishing. Women, however, are the main focus of bodily violence within the series as mental trauma caused by physical abuse becomes separate from one another. *Altered Carbon* allows for the examination of violence against women to be understood as being derived from societal structures of power that devalue women.

Altered Carbon is essential for research because it offers a view of late-stage capitalism in its commodification of the human body and entertainment that centers around the destruction of the body. Embodiment is questioned within the series as it relates to the human consciousness to be transferred into different bodies that can be drastically different from the original. The question within this dynamic is why, in a universe of body fluidity and immortal consciousness, are the bodies classified as women unique in their suffering? The suffering that women face in the series is often sexual in nature or a result of a hierarchical system that allows for their willful destruction. The jobs women are portrayed are either in the role of providing pleasure or policing pleasure. Sex work in *Altered Carbon* is both regulated and non-regulated, meaning that there exist areas where sexual pleasure is permissible and areas of society where it is not acceptable. Non-regulated sex work often results in a woman either losing her body or her life. Regulation, in this sense, creates environments where the bodies of women are used as a reward for the completion of work. This is a dual relationship, as punishment for women is often of a sexual nature that results in harm to their bodies.

A Marxist analysis of *Altered Carbon* is essential to understanding the social problems presented in the series as being a result of an unchecked capitalist system that

grows to subvert most forms of government. There is a clear distinction between the social classes within *Altered Carbon*, as the ruling class are those that own the means of manufacturing or possess a monopoly on other avenues of wealth such as exploitative sexual labor. Labor in *Altered Carbon* is used only to maintain social rank, offering little to no room for upward mobility. This creates a social category that is extreme but noticeable as the rich live in clouds above the poor. Being classed as poor in *Altered Carbon* allows for a permissible cause to be established for the rich to interfere as they see fit.

The commodification of the body is unique in *Altered Carbon* because of the existence of extreme body modification or body replacement. Consciousness is separate from the body in *Altered Carbon*, and this allows for individuals to change bodies on a whim or if they have the financial means to do so. While *Altered Carbon* presents a future that allows humanity to become immortal, it is a process that only the rich and influential can afford. This creates unique commodification where poor women use their bodies to survive and maintain their physical existence. Rich women, however, modify their bodies to serve their partners and maintain position. While the circumstances are different, women exist and survive only through the commodification of their bodies. Markets exist in *Altered Carbon* that allows for the modification of the body for sexual purposes.

Gender is an omnipresent categorization in *Altered Carbon*, dictating what profession and avenues of society are open to either men or women. Men are depicted in positions of privilege and power, while women are shown as subordinates and rarely

leaders. While there exist women in positions of power in *Altered Carbon*, this is a result of class rather than being derived from their ability. This appears in various environments, from household relations to corporate offices. Women who are in power are questioned on how they achieved their rank and are accused of sexual manipulation. This follows common stereotypes of women in power as being ineffective to lead because of feminine attributes such as sentimental attachments to intimate relationships.

Secondly, sexuality is a fluid dynamic within *Altered Carbon* because of the ability for individuals to move into various bodies of different genders, making attraction to a specific partner problematic if they cannot be reuploaded into a body they identify with. Sexuality, while potentially fluid within the series, is always portrayed as being heteronormative. This is shown through various relationships primarily being formed by heteronormative couples, while non-heteronormative couples are treated as outliers and outcasts. *Altered Carbon* portrays humanity as being able to change physical form at will through relationships, and sex seems to follow heteronormative social structures that resist the devaluing of the body in a relationship.

I will also attempt to outline and detail contemporary constructions of feminism concerning the construction of the body and sex work. *Altered Carbon* fails to be progressive in narrative structure, using outdated and harmful stereotypes of women. There is a lack of uniquely feminine characters in positions of strength in *Altered Carbon*, and often they are portrayed as the damsel in need of saving by the masculine hero.

Story Synopsis

Altered Carbon takes place on Earth hundreds of years in the future. The premise of the show is that humanity has become functionally immortal through the incorporation of advanced technology into the body. The technology was discovered on an alien world left behind by a more advanced civilization and called stacks. Stacks are small objects that are implanted at the base of the neck that store and record the human consciousness in case of bodily destruction. The body begins to be replicable in both artificial lives and organic life, meaning a person's consciousness can be implanted in a flesh and blood body or an android. A stack can be destroyed, and the person remains to live, but if the stack and the body are both destroyed, they experience "real death." Humankind has also colonized and visited numerous different planets throughout the galaxy, making an intergalactic government. This is done out of necessity because the population and pollution of the planet have increased to the point where life would soon be unsustainable. The galactic government oversees these planets with a military force called the protectorate. The protectorate is both the primary military body and a type of federal police force that makes sure planets are secure. With humanity spread thin and a shifting focus on space exploration, the Earth begins to be governed by social and industrial elites called meths.

Meths figuratively and literally live in the clouds above the majority of the population, often being discussed with reverence and fear. Meths are predominantly men who control or have significant investments in the corporations that either create or mine the materials necessary to create stacks. They govern and live with near impunity, only

ever being challenged when they disrupt the working or access of the larger galactic government. They are allowed to organize and move local police to best work in their interest, even if that goal is illegal. These activities include crimes such as sexual assault, murder, witness tampering, and robbery. Outside of these factors, law enforcement is stretched to the limit, only able to police the most severe of crimes. This allows for the universe of *Altered Carbon* to feature a robust and thriving criminal underworld filling the spaces that legitimate authority leaves behind. Criminal networks are not isolated to Earth, often being depicted as interplanetary. While criminal networks are illegitimate forms of power, they operate unchallenged if they abide by the same rules the Meths do, i.e. to not interfere with the galactic government.

The story of *Altered Carbon* centers is about the life of Takeshi Kovac, an intergalactic terrorist called an envoy who is brought back to life 300 years after his death. The intention of the envoys was to fight the galactic government from ensuring people become immortal. They believed that human existence should not be eternal and that for life to have value, it must come to an end. They are ultimately betrayed and wiped out by the government, with Takeshi believing he is the only survivor. A Meth named Lawrence Bancroft tries to solve his own murder. Lawrence has the technology to continually upload his consciousness to a satellite so that if his stack is destroyed along with his body, he will be able to come back. It looks strongly like he had committed suicide in a moment of depression on a drug and alcohol bender. He offers Takeshi a pardon for his past crimes, along with enough money to live whatever life he desires. Takeshi initially refuses and is unable to come to terms with his death and rebirth, as well

as the villainization of a cause that he saw as worthwhile. He eventually finds himself in a hotel that is run by an AI who emulates Edgar Allen Poe. Takeshi is then confronted by an underground enforcer who is convinced that he is someone who he is not. After he kills the enforcer and deals with the police that had been following him, he agrees to take on Lawrence's investigation in order to find out if there were any more survivors from his group.

The story of Takeshi Kovac is a generic trope within male-driven action narratives. He grew up poor as a colonist outside of Earth to two parents who worked for the local mining operation. The father was an abusive alcoholic who would beat both his wife and two children. Eventually, his father would kill his mother in a drunken rage in front of his children, disposing of the body in a local water hole. In a moment of desperation, Takeshi's sister Raelene kills their father, and the two try to escape the planet. Takeshi is approached by the protectorate who offers to train him and put him into a more mature body in return for his service. Takeshi accepts the offer on the condition that they take care of his sister, something that they agree to. Takeshi serves the protectorate for many years until he is asked to kill the head of a local Yakuza crime family. On the mission, Takeshi learns that the protectorate sold his sister to the Yakuza on the belief that Takeshi and his sister would never meet again. The two kill the other protectorate officers and try to escape the law. While in hiding, they are approached by Envoy forces that offer to help them escape. They join the envoy forces and learn the truth behind slack technology. That truth is that eternal life will lead to eternal exploitation, and only a few would be truly free. Takeshi and the leader of the Envoys fall

in love before the Envoys are eventually betrayed and wiped out. Takeshi is the only survivor and flees the planet, where he is eventually caught by protectorate forces and killed.

Lawrence Bancroft is also an alcoholic, abusive father prone to beating his family to death. They hide this through repeated body transfers, and Lawrence also has a ritual of killing sex workers and then paying for them to be resleeved. This is a common enough practice that eventually, one of the sex workers named Lizzie gets pregnant, and he does not kill the body. His wife, however, conspires to kill Lizzie, something she does unsuccessfully. Lizzie eventually receives the mental help she needs following her intense physical trauma and is reuploaded into an android body. It is later revealed that Lawrence owns Takeshi, so even if he refused his offer, he would never be free, and he would eventually be forced to say yes.

Takeshi learns that his sister is alive and running the most powerful criminal syndicate on Earth. She is also operating a large sex trafficking network that only deals with the most influential clients. She becomes obsessive with Takeshi, testing him numerous times to make sure that he is not a clone. It later revealed that Raelene is the one who betrayed the Envoys to separate Takeshi and the Envoy leader from continuing their romance. It is also revealed that she had a hand in what happened to Lawrence. Takeshi is forced to kill his sister after learning the truth of her betrayal and the likelihood of her killing his newfound friends.

Lawrence committed suicide after he was no longer able to take the guilt of all the violence he had committed against his family. What caused this was destroying the

body of his son after learning he had stolen his body and pretended to be him in a business deal. Lawrence's life is unchanged by the dealings with Takeshi, even though he learned he killed himself in a moment of depression. He follows through with his offer to Takeshi, giving him a pardon for his past crimes against the government and giving him a sizable amount of money to re-establish his life. However, he is wary of Takeshi since he knows the truth about his death. In the world of *Altered Carbon*, any signs of weakness are tacit permission to allow someone to take ownership of both your station and property.

Takeshi ends Season One with the knowledge that his former love is still alive and that it is possible for him to find her. He gives up his current body because it belonged to the romantic interest of a police officer who helps him throughout the series named Officer Ortega. Lizzie is reunited with her parents even though her mother is now in a man's body, and her father is a wanted criminal.

Chapter 1: Commodity Form and the Female Body

The issue of commodification in society has been a relevant issue for discussion that stems from the work of Karl Marx. Marx notes the need for individuals to interact within society, “The human being is in the most literal sense a political animal not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society. Production by an isolated individual outside of society a rare exception which may well occur when a civilized person in whom the social forces are already dynamically present is cast by accident into the wilderness is as much of an absurdity as is the development of language without individuals living together and talking to each other.”¹ Humanity is created by society and vice versa, meaning humanity can only fulfill their nature amid society. Commodification interrupts this balance by limiting human expression. Cultural theorist Fredrick Jameson extends this in *The Hegel Variations: Phenomenology of The Soul* where he discusses how the individual negotiates themselves in a capitalist system. The works of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer help inform this discussion. This is done through defining commodity form manufacturing as well as detailing how art is folded into commodity form.

The focus of this chapter is how commodity form threatens female identity by changing self-perception and the ways that others view women. The show *Altered Carbon* is a useful tool for an analysis of contemporary viewpoints of the bodies of women. The problematic representations of women in *Altered Carbon* show that

¹ Marx, Karl. 1993. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. Reprint edition. Penguin Classics.

contemporary society views women through the value of their body. There are progressive views of women within the series, but they are drowned out by a social structure that imposes violence on women who break conventional understandings of power and the body.

In this chapter I also argue that there is a need to incorporate feminist literature to supplement the work of classical German critical theorists such as Adorno and Horkheimer. Critical theory's male centric understandings threaten to leave the perspectives of women as invalid. This is important as feminist representations of the body are under threat in popular culture. By adding feminist perspectives into critical theory and the Frankfurt school allows for wholistic view of the female body in an advanced capitalist system. Specifically, the works of Simon Beauvoir show how perceptions of the woman are formed at an early age and are furthered by social interactions.

In *The Second Sex* Beauvoir makes the argument that technology allows for women to enter traditionally male driven industries. She states, "The problem of woman can be reduced to that of her capacity for work. Powerful when technology matched her possibilities, dethroned when she became incapable of benefiting from them, she finds again equality with man in the modern world."² Technology is meant to equalize the perceived differences between men and women, but from an analysis of contemporary media such as *Altered Carbon* this has not happened even with the addition with

² Beauvoir, Simone de. 1993. *The Second Sex*. First Edition edition. New York: Everyman's Library.

advanced technology. Beauvoir's analysis of cultural frameworks and understandings allow for a link between female perceptions around women and sex to be linked to commodity form.

The need to analyze Marxist and media texts on commodity form and the self from the perspective of the woman allows for a deeper understanding of social roles and where they come from. The discussion of commodity form centers around objects and services that either alter the consumer or change the surroundings for them. *Altered Carbon* allows for the process of commodity form to be taken to its conclusion, that being to encompass the body itself. Commodities that focus on the alteration of the body are already heavily marketed toward women and young girls. Jameson notes the need to challenge hegemonic perceptions of labor that can be applied to views of the body and commodity, "The future is already present within the present of time: the present is already immanently the future it "ought" to have. The historical change exists, but it is systemic change; it is the movement between the great Hegelian "shapes or *Gestalten*, which foreshadow later structural conceptions of the social totality, of epistemes or even modes of production."³ Jameson, in this quote, is stating that the ways that we envision labor and commodification in the present are likely to be similar to the ways we envision them in the future. This makes the change of perception toward the commodification of the body paramount for women to exist within a space that is not decided by the value in their body or their ability to change their body through products specifically aim toward

³ Jameson, Fredric 2010. *The Hegel Variations: On the Phenomenology of Spirit*. 1st Edition edition. London ; New York: Verso.

them. These products focus on correcting societally defined imperfections of the body, and these products include makeup, clothing, and plastic surgery. The commodification of aspects of the body become unique violence that primarily targets women. This can be furthered by adding intersectional views on race and class, as products become more specifically marketed along with those aspects. *Altered Carbon* shows the potential effect of hegemonic views of the body and how women are forced to navigate these avenues to ensure mobility and physical survival.

Altered Carbon, while science fiction, is representative of the way in which contemporary society views the female body and its relationship to commodity form. An analysis of this specific media text allows for a greater claim of these societal understandings to be made. While *Altered Carbon* changes the way in which the body is produced and how society treats that body, it rests firmly in societal stereotypes of what gendered roles bodies perform. The representation of women as robust characters is lacking because they are placed into positions where they can only be defined by their bodies. While there are characters that resist these constructions, they are outliers within the series. Since the body becomes replicable through the means of production, an analysis of how the bodies of women are marketed compared to men becomes possible. This analysis will be similar to the way's products are gendered within contemporary society.

The Commodification of the Body

Altered Carbon operates under contemporary understandings of what the body of a worker is, and what it is not. This is a common critique of classic Marxist texts that

detail labor as being performed by men and household labor being performed by women. What makes *Altered Carbon* problematic is that the vision of science fiction is what humanity might look like in the future. The future that *Altered Carbon* depicts is understood as being for the gain and social mobility of men. Men in *Altered Carbon* are in positions of authority or in a position where authority is possible. Women, however, are in positions where authority is enacted upon them.

Adorno and Horkheimer's discussion of the mass production and commodity form of art can be applied to an analysis of *Altered Carbon*'s commodification of the body. "While the mechanism is to all appearances planned by those who serve up the data of experience, that is, by the culture industry, it is forced upon the latter by the power of society, which remains irrational. However, we may try to rationalize it; and this inescapable force is processed by commercial agencies so that they give an artificial impression of being in command."⁴ The body becomes a commodity form to be sold, and this is problematic because bodies that are being sold are always for the satisfaction of the male gaze. Miriam Bancroft is open with the fact that her body is modified to produce a chemical that makes the pleasure from sex more intense than average. She uses this to seduce Takeshi to her side. While she uses her sexuality to manipulate men, this type of modification is commercially used in order to please men.

The body becomes an item that is capable of being mass-produced through the capitalist system in the same way commodities such as cars are. People within the series

⁴ Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. 2007. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. 1 edition. ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press.

are depicted as having many different bodies with different specifications. The bodies of women become an extension of hegemonic views of what the female form should be. While the body of the man is designed to be physically versatile, the body of women are for the singular purpose of pleasing men. This creates a predetermined path based on commodification that a woman can follow that is entirely different from men's path for social growth. This is a critique of contemporary media that depict women's value as being defined by physical attractiveness and not ability to perform tasks not related to the body.

An analysis of Beauvoir allows for a bridge between the commodity form that creates women as specific sexual beings and the reality of the sex worker in *Altered Carbon*. Beauvoir states, "it is through sexual activity that men define the sexes and their relations, just as they create the meaning of value of all the functions they accomplish: but sexual activity is not necessarily implied in the human being's nature."⁵ Men that own the means of media production are replicated by social understandings of the uses of men and women. This reality creates circumstances in which they can reproduce the means that created them. This echoes Marx who stated that nature creates humanity and humanity creates nature. In this case, however, humanity creates reality and reality creates humanity.

The buying and selling of sex is documented in contemporary society. However, what makes *Altered Carbon* interesting is that the literal body is a product to be sold. In *Altered Carbon*, the sexual commodification of the female body is unique compared to

⁵ Beauvoir 44

men. This is due to violence being incorporated into sexual pleasure, with the body being replaceable, and replicable violence against women is on the rise within the series. The destruction of the "Sleeve" (body) during sex is not uncommon and not illegal if a replacement sleeve is provided. Violence against women in sex work often exceeds simple sleeve replacement, as businesses surrounding "real death" emerge. This suggests that violence against women as a commodity form goes beyond purely sexual pleasure and is more linked to the desire to control and dominate the female form to the point of death.

The body becomes a part of the commodity form in *Altered Carbon* because it can be bought and sold the same way traditional goods are. This is only possible when the body becomes replicable and itself an item within the capitalist system. Marx, in the *Grundrisse*, details how industry separates the human from personal identity in order to survive. This means that workers, instead of following their passions, follow industry in order to fulfill labor that allows them to live.⁶ *Altered Carbon* furthers this analysis by showing how the human is separated from the body itself as an extension of market desire. The bodies of women can be marketed for upgrades and replacements when the current model of the body is no longer desirable. This is similar to the products that are designed to alter the bodies of women. These bodies become hegemonically commercialized to be like one another in an attempt to please the male gaze. The denial of the self, both physically and mentally, is a violence that is unique to women. *Altered Carbon* presents a society that allows males to have autonomy over their form and life

⁶ Marx, Karl 1993

path while women are forced into the role of either the prostitute or the housewife. In both cases, women are used in order to replicate the environment in which men can return to labor. From this perspective, *Altered Carbon* has failed to create a believable space for women to exist outside of these gender roles.

The Violence of Commodity

The crisis in the commodification of art and that of the body can be noted in Frederick Jameson's *The Hegel Variations*. Jameson states, "What could possibly be individual, in some existential sense, about the dialectic of sense perception? That dialectic, to be sure, does involve some commonsense empiricist ideologies, which it undertakes to deconstruct. However, one can hardly maintain that operations of the individual sense and objects absorb the totality of individual existence (or at least one cannot do so until a certain modernism in art)."⁷ What commodity form manufacturing does to both art and the body, as is the case in *Altered Carbon*, reduces the ability for individual expression. Art becomes what is profitable instead of what is provocative and critical. The body becomes an extension of hegemonic views of desirability. This is harmful because their bodies become extensions of what is most profitable and accepted for men. Women in *Altered Carbon* are left behind in the advancements of technology and instead are confined to traditional roles of mothers and wives. This can be attributed to the reality that they are denied individual expression and are guided toward predetermined paths. This can only be achieved in a society that has adopted the ideals of late-stage capitalism fully. This is not an uncommon critique of mainstream beauty

⁷ Jameson 16

culture, which portrays beauty and bodies as only existing and acceptable in a few forms. In a society like that depicted in *Altered Carbon*, what paths are available for a woman to exist outside of the commodification of her body? Women from this perspective can be either the object or the pariah. Kristin Ortega, a female cop who is obsessed with solving cases and fulfilling career goals, is an example of this. She resists objectification, and because of that is ostracized; she is constantly reminded that by resisting the norms set by the society, she lessens her potential to find a man and form a family. This continues harmful perspectives that define women by their ability to reproduce, and if they cannot achieve that goal, then they have reduced value.

How Hegemonic Commodity Form is Created

Adorno and Horkheimer extend this idea in a discussion of how the industry imposes standards onto the consumer, in this way negating free choice in expression. They state, "The man with leisure has to accept what the culture manufacturers offer him. Kant's formalism still expected a contribution from the individual, who was thought to relate the varied experiences of the senses to fundamental concepts, but industry robs the individual of his function. Its prime service to the customer is to do his schematizing for him." They go on to state that cultural industries create how we perceive the reality around us. This is how hegemonic masculinity can commodify certain forms of female bodies and predetermine how they are to act. If they do not conform to societal standards, they are outcasts to be avoided and shunned. This helps to explain why violence against women is both accepted and commodified within *Altered Carbon*, because it becomes an extension of the male desire to control the female in all aspects. This is an observable

reality in contemporary media in which masculinity and femininity are displayed as having few forms of expression.

Beauvoir illustrates this understanding in *The Second Sex* when she details how the perception of women was first founded before the industrial age. She notes, "Similarly, it is impossible to deduce woman's oppression from private property. Here again, the shortcomings of Engel's point of view are obvious. While he clearly understood that woman's muscular weakness was a concrete inferiority only in relation to bronze and iron tools, he failed to see that limits to her work capacity constituted in themselves a concrete disadvantage only from a certain perspective."⁸ Women's place in contemporary media such as in *Altered Carbon* is not because of the realization of physical shortcomings (despite technology that makes it irrelevant), but because unchallenged social structures condition them to believe so. From this perspective female oppression lies in mental perceptions of women and not their physical reality.

In *Altered Carbon*, it is often stated that those who live in the clouds control most aspects of media and arts, and these social elites are also predominantly men who express their gender in hypermasculine ways. Douglas Kellner, in "Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism, and Media Culture,"⁹ details that an issue within media is that a few corporate entities maintain ownership of media and arts, so the lack of variety in ownership helps explain why the media's societal perspectives are often repetitive and

⁸ Beauvoir 91

⁹Kellner, Douglas. 2014. Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism and Media Culture. In Gail Dines and Jean Humez (Eds., 4th edition), *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader* (pp. 7-19). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

non-critical. Cultural understandings in *Altered Carbon* are never changed, because those who own the media production never change, and because of this, any change in representation is minimal. This helps to explain why the representations of women within the series is stagnant and unmoving. With social elites holding a monopoly on political power and the means of production, there is little need for them to change. A more diverse group of owners in the series and in contemporary society can challenge the hegemonic norms that hypermasculinity fosters and change how the body and actions against it are understood. While a simple solution variety in ownership allows for non-hegemonic views to be progressed and continued which would slowly lead to social progress.

The body as a commodity form is something that only the social elites can afford to maintain. The social elites of *Altered Carbon* are shown as having many clones of themselves that they use and give away for various purposes. However, while the body is the most important commodity form that a lower-class family will possess, it is not easily replaced by a worker's salary. Class from this perspective is the hindrance to the quality of a commodity form that the social elites enjoy that the poor cannot. Those that own the means of production can maintain their position through commodity form marketing and selling. This defines the existence of the non-elite as being relative to their ability to consume and produce without limit. Poor women are kept out of this cycle by being confined to positions where their labor only produces value for someone else. The commodities that are marketed toward women are to the service of men. The case of Officer Ortega is a testament to that fact, because she acts and lives differently than

hegemonic norms; she can produce labor and efforts that are for her social mobility. From this perspective, those that resist hegemonic perceptions of the body function as a sort of anti-labor because they cannot be marketed to and do not further market interests. These people in the series and contemporary society are at odds with physical and cultural commodities because they cannot be marketed to. This becomes the primary way that capitalist interests are resisted since, without the consumption of goods, they become less financially safe. This is a constant fear for the elites of *Altered Carbon* as they try to outmaneuver one another while maintaining their position above the rest of society.

Intersectional Commodity

Jameson discusses how class exists both socially and culturally, meaning that for a classless society to emerge, one must get rid of both. *Altered Carbon* operates under one hegemonic state that is run by corporate elites, while the broader government is concerned with colonizing planets. Jameson states, "In one, a convergence between the United States and the Soviet Union concretely realizes Hegel's alleged hypothesis of a "universal and homogeneous state" (145): something which has been interpreted as the inauguration of a classless society. However, this is so only if "class" is grasped as a purely social concept and redefined around the notion of recognition. The more profound historical truth in Kojève's assertion is to glimpse only if we understand this decisive moment as the disappearance of the aristocracy and its culture (and the effacement of the peasantry as well)."¹⁰ This means that perceptions of the body understood through commodification can exist as both a socially defining characteristic and a cultural one. If

¹⁰Jameson 76

bodies in *Altered Carbon* are akin to any other physical good, then having a "state of the art model" makes you part of the aristocracy and being part of the aristocracy gives you access to better quality goods.

An analysis of goods consumption can be extended to an analysis of gender as well. Jameson can be used to reveal that a primary difference between rich and poor women becomes what commodities they have access to and what they do not have access to. This makes social violence against poor women distinct from affluent women because of the potential of losing and not being able to replace their body. This can be understood in contemporary society when any less affluent person loses a vital item that they cannot afford to replace that a more affluent person can. It is not uncommon in *Altered Carbon* for the mind of someone still categorized as alive to be "put on ice" for an extended period (the main character was separated from a body for 300 years). The characters that this happens to most often are poor women who are exposed to both physical and mental trauma to the extent that they can no longer function. This is different from affluent women who suffer similar types of violence but maintain the ability to maintain a body.

Chapter 2: The Effects of Hegemonic Masculinity on Culture and Gender

Expression

Hegemonic masculinity is the dominant form of gender expression in *Altered Carbon*. Hegemonic masculinity is structurally enforced both formally and informally. It becomes formally enforced through unchallenged laws and a lack of turnover in corporate elites that create those laws. Informally hegemonic masculinity is continued through social and cultural interactions that favor aggression as a legitimate action. Simone Beauvoir and Jessica Valenti both illustrate how hypermasculinity confines the woman to lesser roles within society, through perceptions of sex. *Altered Carbon's* pervasive sex work culture allows for a useful opportunity to examine how in hegemonically defined culture, gender expression becomes a permissive cause for violence. This violence is gendered and affects men and women differently in the series in a way that mirrors contemporary society.

Valenti's analysis of cultural perceptions and policing of sexuality allows for the reality of women in *Altered Carbon* to be connected to contemporary society. *The Purity Myth* chapter "Legislating Sexuality" details the long history of the paternalistic legislation of the female body through policing sexuality.¹¹ Valenti in this chapter shows that in contemporary society female sexuality and gender expression is labeled as either being the victim or the promiscuous. What the *Purity Myth* and this specific chapter realize is that stigmatization of sexuality and gender expression are defined by the

¹¹ Valenti, Jessica. 2009. *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity Is Hurting Young Women*. 32340th edition. Berkeley: Seal Press.

masculine sexuality and gender expression. This means that non-hypermasculine gender expressions are defined outside of themselves by hegemonic forces.

Beauvoir in this chapter is used to detail how the feminine is defined and how other non-conforming gender identities are formed. The root of these perceptions can be traced through historical perceptions that over time form the narrative of the masculine that must exist for society to function. This forms the basis for the hypermasculine to flourish, because instead of being reactively aggressive the hypermasculine becomes proactively aggressive. This becomes problematic when unchallenged because it creates a new status quo that promotes and excuses violence. From Beauvoir's perspective this can be rooted in a psychoanalytical discussion of the upbringing of males who are taught to be emotionally distant and aggressive.

Betty Friedan's discussion of women in culture is extended here to understand the competition that is forced onto women by hypermasculine structures. Women enter competition with one another because it is understood that masculine desires must be satisfied to survive.¹² The perception that "if you don't do it someone else will" is the primary mindset that drives this understanding. This is noted in an analysis between the violence between Miriam Bancroft and Lizzie Elliot. In this the two characters are driven to violence over the perceived loss of male support for the other woman. This is an example of how hypermasculine structures both encourage violence and alter

¹²Friedan, Betty, and Gail Collins. 2013. *The Feminine Mystique*. 1st edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

traditionally feminine pursuits such as motherhood and the housewife to be violent and aggressive.

The Forms of Violence

Violence exists in two forms in *Altered Carbon*: violence that is culturally appropriate and violence that occurs because of or in the absence of laws. Hegemonic hypermasculinity functions as the predominant form of social interactions. Gender roles are created through this process by informing how each gender should perform their sexuality and what expressions become deviant. Males are pressed into proving their toughness and ability to maintain their social standing, leading to extensive displays of violence. The link between hypermasculinity and male expression is evident in the universe of *Altered Carbon*, and while some women are portrayed as aggressive and in normatively male contexts, they are the minority. Groups that do not conform to the hypermasculine blueprint are exposed to violence because they cannot protect themselves and property. This creates a cycle of violence that forces people to aggressively pull themselves up to higher social levels, leaving the people they displaced to do the same.

Unchecked violence allows for hypermasculinity to be a transformative social force that makes other gender expressions more challenging to perform but also changes the perceptions of those expressions. This means that traditionally feminine roles such as the housewife become more masculine through exposure. Gender expression creates avenues that allow problematic gender roles to function and go unchallenged. An application of Beauvoir is useful here, "This shows the young girl becoming passive; they take a wife. In marriage, they seek an expansion, a confirmation of their existence but not

the very right to exist; it is a charge they assume freely."¹³ When hypermasculinity is added, the wife is still taken and given, but the responsibility to maintain that existence becomes the role of the woman. The woman becomes proactive in the protection of her role as a housewife, becoming aggressive and violent toward other women that seek to take that role. This mirrors contemporary understandings of the role between the feminine and masculine. The masculine is something to be appeased, and it is the role of the feminine to serve that purpose.

The Effect of Law

The laws that are created in *Altered Carbon* are designed to protect elites and keep less affluent classes in states of near self-government. Thus, while laws are in place, they are not likely to be enforced at lower levels of society. Sex work exists in a gray zone because of this political reality. However, sex work in *Altered Carbon* can be extended to understandings of the female body in contemporary society. In *Altered Carbon*, women are defined by their proximity to either the housewife or the sex worker. The proximity to these two avenues of living determines whether women are exposed to extreme forms of violence or not. I define extreme violence as violence that destroys the body or causes irreparable harm to the mind. It is common within the series for a female body to be destroyed and result in no penalty because of a lack of structural enforcement. This allows hypermasculinity to be a pervasive social force within the series.

The structural enforcement of the law is the medium that allows toxic hypermasculinity to progress unchallenged. Social and government elites in *Altered*

¹³ Beauvoir 505

Carbon are majority male, and with quasi-immortality, their position is not likely to change. With the demographic of those in power not likely to change, it leaves little hope for purposeful change. This creates instances where social forces no longer change.

While bleak, law is not immutable or as slow to change as social perceptions if a strong social movement is behind it. The issue becomes when rigid social structures and law join to create forces that limit non-conforming gender identity.

Socially and culturally hegemonic masculinity becomes the way that social interaction occurs. This is because the way that social mobility is achieved is through violence. This forces individuals to adopt hegemonic masculinity as a lifestyle to survive and move upward socially. This affects women, most of all, as they are perceived as the most vulnerable. This leads to depictions of violence against women that go unchallenged as a legitimate form of behavior. The women that face this violence are predominantly in the sex industry, which exists in both formal and informal sectors. The formal occurs in government-sanctioned businesses that are publicly advertised and endorsed. The informal areas that the sex industry occupies is the trade of real death. The women that in this industry are tricked into working in this real death club in the hopes that they will receive higher financial compensation. The real death sex trade surrounds the idea of destroying the "stack" of the person destroying their consciousness permanently. This becomes an industry that caters to the most successful members of society. While this industry is a secret amongst the poor, it is well known among the richest.

How Hegemonic Masculinity Creates Violence

In *The Purity Myth*, Valenti details how cultural understandings of the female body hurt women. Hegemonic masculinity dominates all other forms of gender expression by defining what bodies are used for and what they are not used for. The Purity Myth can be extended to view the prevalence of sex work in *Altered Carbon* as the social perception of the use of women in society. This perspective allows women's expression to be limited to two options, one being acceptance of gender roles that are decided by hegemonic forces and the other to break those norms and face the danger of not conforming. This is an example of cultural norms leading to legal structures that police women. This is problematic because gender expressions get caught in a cycle where social norms that are prone to change are creating laws that promote certain forms of gender expressions over another. Without the structural change or enforcement of laws there is little opportunity for women to change how their gender roles are defined or to challenge toxic hypermasculinity.

A significant plot point in *Altered Carbon* surrounds Lizzie's bodily destruction. The violence is so severe that Lizzie requires intensive mental health treatments in order to recount her ordeal. At the end of the series, it is revealed that she is killed on Miriam's orders because Lizzie is pregnant with the child of Miriam's husband. While sex is inconsequential, the creation of life is a serious matter. Miriam takes pride in the fact that she is the only woman to have Lawrence's children. Friedan outlines a potential explanation for this aggression, "and their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers; their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, their only

fight to get and keep their husbands. They had not thought about the unfeminine problems of the world outside the home; they wanted the men to make significant decisions. They gloried in their role as women and wrote proudly on the census blank: "Occupation: housewife."¹⁴ In a hypermasculine culture where status is conferred by proximity to the masculine, having another woman challenge your status is a threat. Coupled with a culture that glorifies violence and aggression as avenues for settling disagreements, Lizzie's bodily destruction fits a cultural standard rather than an anomaly. Hypermasculinity becomes a force that polices gender expression and transforms traditionally feminine understandings such as pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood into positions where violence is needed in order to subsist.

An answer to why men are more prone to forms of hypermasculinity can be found in de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. In this book, it is explained that at a young age, men are taught to hold in emotions and only express the "masculine" emotions associated with manhood. Beauvoir states, "It is here that little girls first appear privileged. Second weaning, slower and less brutal than the first one, withdraws the mother's body from the child's embrace; but little by little boys are the ones who are denied kisses and caresses; the little girl continues to be doted upon, she is allowed to hide behind her mother's skirts, her father takes her on his knees and pats her hair; she is dressed in dresses as lovely as kisses, her tears and whims are treated indulgently, her hair is done carefully, her expressions and affections amuse: physical contact and complaisant looks protect her

¹⁴ Friedan 5

against the anxiety of solitude."¹⁵ The male is taught that he is alone and independent of the cares of others. The issue of him being alone to face his own problems is a spark that leads to aggression. He is taught that the best way to deal with these issues is to be aggressive and find dominion over others. This forms what it means to be masculine and, by extension, hypermasculine. Masculine existence in contemporary society and in *Altered Carbon* is centered around perception, and the angrier and more aggressive someone is, the more power they are likely to amass because of it. Women, however, are taught to be more self-expressive and caring and are often closer to their parents, which could explain why women are more often portrayed as understanding and motherly in *Altered Carbon*. The creation of the masculine as being created through isolation and aggression is heavily alluded to within the series, as the main male protagonist is portrayed as being the focus of their father's rage while the daughter is spared. This is continued when Takeshi forms a deal with the galactic government that allows him to join the military and relocate his sister to a better life. He becomes a trained killer and assassin, seemingly becoming the ideal of what is masculine in the process. This furthers the understanding that men are more prone to violence and that violence is a common and accepted way for men to express emotions.

The violence that sex workers face in *Altered Carbon* is pervasive and systematic. As previously noted, the industry operates in the formal and informal sectors of society., though there is an intersection of violence that both face. Beauvoir notes this when she says, "in prostitution, the masculine desire can be satisfied with anybody as it is

¹⁵ Beauvoir 332

specific and not individual. Wives or courtesans do not succeed in exploiting man unless they wield a singular power over him. The main difference between them is that the legitimate woman, oppressed as a married woman, is respected as a human person; this respect begins seriously to bring a halt to oppression. However, the prostitute does not have the rights of a person; she is the sum of all types of feminine slavery at once."¹⁶ The sex worker in *Altered Carbon* becomes the personification of hypermasculinity's dominance over both the individual and society. Femininity becomes a tool to relieve masculine rage and aggression rather than to exist as an individual. Sex, either consensual or non-consensual, becomes the predominant way that femininity is experienced. When the sex worker's body is destroyed, or real death thrust upon them, there is little chance that any policing body will care as it phases into everyday interaction.

Altered Carbon leaves little hope for non-conforming gender identities to exist safely without being defined by their relationship to toxic hypermasculinity. Because *Altered Carbon* leaves little room for other gender identities to exist without being defined by hegemonic forces, it leaves a blueprint for contemporary society. With the structural change to the social ordering of society that creates and enforces laws, it is possible for non-conforming gender expressions to become more prevalent. The change would not be immediate, as the forces that shape social understanding are slow to enact change, often taking many years or more. This can be noted in the works of Beauvoir and Friedan, who wrote many years before Valenti, showing that many of the issues that are discussed today in terms of gender expressions create specific ideas surrounding gender

¹⁶ Beauvoir 681

normativity. That is, while gender norms and expressions are different, one can affect the other. Gender expressions such as toxic hypermasculinity create what a male is supposed to be.

Chapter 3: Women as Characters

Women as characters in *Altered Carbon* follow a split trajectory. One is toward progressive understandings of the robustness of female leads. The other follows traditional stereotypes that put women as secondary characters and subservient to male characters. Larbalestier in *Battle of the Sexes* discusses the history of women in science fiction, starting from science fiction's progressive roots that allowed for women to be round and interesting characters to later iterations that put male characters as the driving force. *Altered Carbon* involves a mix of the two kinds of representations. I argue that while progressive characters exist in *Altered Carbon*, they are far outnumbered by problematic ones. *Altered Carbon*'s portrays woman characters as having power in subservience. However, I argue that by applying Larbalestier account of history of science fiction, it makes it clear that there is no progressive characterizations of women through subservience.

Simon Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* details the hope that technology is an equalizer in labor that makes physical perceptions of the difference between men and women irrelevant. She notes, however, that this is not the reality that women find themselves in. While the advanced technology that would accomplish this exists in the *Altered Carbon* universe, it only serves to control women further. Jelaca (2018) can be applied to an understanding of when characters cross the line through technology to demand equality. Those characters are defined as monstrous, thus embodying what is known as the monstrous feminine. The monstrous feminine is what happens when women attain equality to men through traditionally male actions. Those actions being

violence and aggression that cannot be mitigated. The monstrous feminine represents a reclaiming of female identity that is not connected through subservience to the male.

Science fiction is a necessary media form to be progressive because it represents ways in which human society can progress (even within fictional narratives). The women of *Altered Carbon* can be classified into three categories: the career woman/housewife, the sex worker, and the monstrous feminine. The housewife and career woman are similar in this analysis, because while the career woman and housewife operate in different spaces, they both serve the same function that being the upward mobility of the man. The force of nature character are people who are chaotic in the sense that they are either self-serving to the point of antagonism or able to resist the definition of humans by changing their fundamental being. The monstrous feminine characters are products of their environment, created through various social circumstances. Reileen Kawahara is a central antagonist to her brother Takeshi Kovacs who is the main character of the series. Reileen's chaotic nature can be derived from her upbringing, where she witnesses her mother being beaten to death by her father. She goes on to be sold to an off-world cartel that teaches her to be an assassin after Takeshi makes a deal that is supposed to protect her. The other chaotic character is represented by the character Lizzie Elliot, who suffers from such severe mental and physical trauma she forgoes a human body in preference to an artificial android one. By the end of the series, she has left most vestiges of humanity behind her.

The common link between these two characters is that the violence that they are traumatized by is male-perpetrated. This is a prominent issue within not only *Altered*

Carbon but also in media in general, where the character development of the woman is driven by the actions of the man. If the media reflects reality, then it can be stated that society continues to see women as the product of their interactions with men. While not all media is guilty of this, mainstream media has a heavier responsibility to portray a variety of characters because of its reach and exposure.

Science fiction has been a progressive field in terms of the representation of women for many years. This is due to the reality that early science fiction works allowed women a space to create stories that allowed them to escape classical narrative stereotypes. Early women's science fiction centered around the escape from the household and freedom from being defined by their relationship to men. Larbalestier notes that in many science fiction storylines, there is a conflict between the sexes, noting, "Gardner's "The Last Woman" (1932), for example, is set in a world entirely populated—with the exception of one woman—by real men. Men have become the dominant sex since they defeated women's attempt to "feminize civilization."¹⁷ While this quote references a story from 1932, the story is not dissimilar to the contemporary stories that we tell one another. Men are depicted as rational and forward-thinking, while women become irrational and prone to being held by emotion. This is how the women of *Altered Carbon* are depicted as often emotional and irrationally angry characters. This is problematic from the standpoint that it furthers harmful narratives that dictate how women are viewed.

¹⁷ Larbalestier, Justine. 2002. *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction*. 1st edition. Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press.

Masculinity and Femininity in Science Fiction

Male dominance in science fiction is understood through a monopoly of technology that allows them to control and dominate social function. Contemporary gender norms are represented through the focus on the male protagonist. *Altered Carbon* is representative of this model for having the main characters be men who embody hegemonic gender norms. While powerful female characters exist, they hold no real power other than what men allow them. "The form of masculinity that ideologically fuses technological competence to men is technomascularity. It associates masculinity with the ability to employ complex techniques to manipulate advanced technical hardware and software. Technomascularity is based on the playful manner of the antiauthoritarian hacker, who takes pleasure in the ability to manipulate computerized systems."¹⁸ Technology becomes the medium that allows for male dominance because fiction at a micro level often deals with the conflict between men and women. *Altered Carbon* is no exception from that truth. Larbalestier notes that in the early 1950s, there was a growing narrative within science fiction that men and women would be at odds to the point where one sex would have to leave the planet altogether.¹⁹

While that extreme is not represented in *Altered Carbon*, men and women seem to be divided along with emotional value sets. Miriam Bancroft is devoted to her life as a mother and homemaker to the point where she would conceal her son's illegal activities and covers up her husband's suicide for their family to remain powerful. Her husband is

¹⁸ Johnson, Robin S. 2013. "Temp Cyborgs: Gender, Technology, and Immaterial Labor in Popular Science Fiction Television." *Television & New Media* 14(2): 106–23.

¹⁹ Larbalestier 135

kept in the dark of this because of the secret lives both live. Her husband is a furious character prone to beating people to death in drug binges. This is one of the reasons why Miriam keeps so many secrets from him. This shows that, at some level, there are inseparable differences between the character of men and women. Miriam represents the classical feminine character that is only interested in protecting her family and devoting her time to raising children. Her husband represents what is considered hypermasculine, which is angry, cruel, and ambitious to a fault. The issue is that without breaking that mold of action, then no other reality can exist as "normal." Female characters that show masculine traits are subject to violence within *Altered Carbon*. Male characters that show feminine traits are also subject to violence because "weakness" must be punished. So, while *Altered Carbon* does not depict the division between the sexes as being severe enough for one sex to be sent to another planet, it does depict a need to separate them. The female characters are shown as passive and reactionary to the wills of men, who are depicted as violent for the sake of violence. Miriam Bancroft, as a character, is defined by her role as a mother and wife even though she is a powerful businesswoman in her own right. This continues the narrative that the woman is defined by her relationship with the man.

Larbalestier further analyzes the role of women in science fiction when addressing "The women men don't see." She states, "A woman is only visible when she is a potential love interest. He misreads what is happening around him because he can only think of women within such a narrow perspective."²⁰ This is true for most female

²⁰ Larbalestier 146

characters that have interactions with the main male protagonist. However, Miriam Bancroft follows this model by only being defined by the potential sex she offers. She is depicted throughout the series as wearing extremely revealing clothes and seducing men who can offer her political gains. Miriam resists a progressive narrative by only being defined through her body. Miriam's character can be read as being independent and authoritative by taking control over the use of her body. However, these actions reinforce a much more massive structure that a single individual cannot change. Miriam's character is systematic of a more significant issue within media and science fiction more specifically. Women, as characters, are only understood through their relationship to men. This reinforces the stereotype that women need a man's influence in order to survive and thrive. Miriam Bancroft is a powerful businesswoman in her own right, but she is only depicted or referred to as a wife and mother. This is further problematized in *Altered Carbon* when the prevalence of sexual labor and sexual assault are considered. Women are portrayed in the background as tools to be used by men when they want them. This makes it difficult for women to function as characters when the world around them depicts them as people living on the fringe of society. Larbalestier is proven correct in her analysis, because the women who do exist within *Altered Carbon* never escape classification derived from biological functions and the uses of their bodies. Beauvoir states that a technologically advanced society would close the gap between the abilities between males and females.²¹ However, this is not the case as the differences are strong in mind of society of *Altered Carbon*. Characters like Lizzie who cross the

²¹ Beauvoir *The Second Sex*

boundaries between human and technology create the framework for the monstrous feminine to be created. The monstrous feminine in this case is not an alien beast or a cyborg that destroys humanity. The monstrous feminine is the closure of the gap between men and women perceptually.

The Monstrous Feminine

The final type of representation of female characters in *Altered Carbon* is the monstrous feminine. Lizzie Elliot is a survivor of intense mental and physical trauma that allows her to take the body of a free form android. What makes Lizzie a monstrous character within *Altered Carbon* is her ability to resist characterization through the feminine form. Jelača illustrates this point, stating, "My use of the term "alien" does not simply entail an entity that is "out of this world," or extraterrestrial, but rather an entity that is simultaneously familiar and strange, humanoid and posthuman, while not adhering to preconceived notions about subjectivity, gender, and identity that have historically come to stifle feminist political projects."²² While not "alien," she represents the feminine that cannot be controlled or used for the pleasure of men. This allows her to be a force that can successfully change the structure by dismantling it altogether. This can best be achieved by characters that work outside of social structures instead of within them. She becomes the woman that Larbalestier is looking for or, instead, the woman we do see. Lizzie is not understood through the potential use of her body but by her survival within a

²²Jelača, Dijana. 2018. "Alien Feminisms and Cinema's Posthuman Women." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43(2): 379–400.

system of trauma. This is what makes her both alien and monstrous she represents the freedom of women from confines of the body.

The monstrous feminine becomes a crucial character for progressive representations of women. Jelača makes this point, commenting, "Cinema is a tableau onto which we (still) project our fantasies and anxieties but is also an organic extension of our technologically infused realities that frequently blurs fact and fiction."²³ Lizzie represents the emancipation of the woman from the defining principles of the masculine. She represents the break between the woman and husband/father dichotomy that form the woman for their use and aims. The fear that Lizzie creates is that the technology that advances man forward is also the force that frees women from the need of him. The monstrous feminine from this perspective becomes the social taboos that break from the norm. Women who break socially acceptable gender norms become aspects of the monstrous. Jelača notes, "the monstrous feminine undoubtedly deserves attention and reflects patriarchy's anxieties about inorganic, non-domesticized femininity and the reproduction made possible through technology."²⁴ The patriarchal fears that Lizzie represents is the possibility of a world no longer defined by the masculine. Larbalestier's analysis of science fiction is rich with the history of a patriarchal medium in which men were free to create visions of potential societies that they dominated. Lizzie breaks that model by representing a societal teleology that undoubtedly is defined by women or at

²³ Jelača 381

²⁴ Jelača 383

least incorporates them. Lizzie is born from patriarchal violence that is meant to curtail and repress feminist forces for social change.

Lizzie's transition into an android body is also the moment when humans and technology are fused to become fully mechanized, but, at the same time, remain undeniably human. This is achieved through the reclaiming of a body and a resolution to trauma though it is still present. While technology and humanity are closely connected in that technology allows humanity to become immortal, it does not free them from the need of the body. While Lizzie can possess a physical form, she does not need it in order to move through the world. Technology is the freedom that allows women to resist being defined by perceived biological function.

The availability of technology separates rich and poor understandings of characters. This is the third aspect that makes Lizzie a monstrous character. The rich and successful have a monopoly on the access of technology that allows for the manipulation of the body. Lizzie interrupts that monopoly by creating a reality that allows for the poor to have access to previously unobtainable technology. Lizzie becomes a force that disrupts both masculine and affluent monopolies allowing for the possibility for structural change to occur. This differs from Miriam's actions because Lizzie is not bound to or responsible for another force outside of herself. Technology allows for the freedom from the necessities of life that ties the woman to the man in the social construction of survival. Miriam enjoys a large amount of freedom compared to less affluent women in *Altered Carbon*, but she is still responsible for her family and her husband. Lizzie is only responsible for herself, though she chooses to stay with her parents. When technology is

combined with and within the human body, it allows for the freedom that previously would have been impossible. The woman no longer needs to fear social constructions that limit social mobility because she no longer needs to rely on those constructions in order to survive.

The monstrous feminine must exist for science fiction to move forward because it allows for social norms to be challenged. Lizzie lays the framework for femininity to be reclaimed outside of the confines of the masculinity. The monstrous feminine is the realization that progress can be made through reclaiming feminine anger. What makes the monstrous feminine unique is that she is the primary actor in a world that must respond to her. This changes the dynamic in science fiction that shows female characters as being reactionary instead of proactive. The monstrous feminine from this perspective is what occurs when female characters take the principle dominion of action away from male characters. They cannot be contained or sent away like in traditional science fiction that sees the female character as a hindrance.

Science fiction as a medium for progressive thought has progressed in recent years in terms of representation. However, large scale productions such as *Altered Carbon* show that science fiction still needs to progress in concern to progressive representation. As shown in this analysis, there are only two female characters of note that act independently from male characters. However, they are defined by their proximity to the male protagonist, making them less robust than they would be otherwise.

Conclusion

The world that *Altered Carbon* creates is an exaggerated form of contemporary society. The complex representations of women in *Altered Carbon* show that while the show has progressive elements of representation, those representations are drowned out by problematic structures. These structures reinforce antiquated ideologies that define what a woman can and cannot be in narrow paradigms. The restriction of women's movement in society is a class issue that understands women's place as being different from men. Women's value to society is decided by male forces that create environments where women can only find value in their body. This explains why women are portrayed in servile positions to men largely focused in either sex work or the housewife. The markets that are created to commodify the bodies of women reinforce masculine paradigms that seek dominance over non-conforming gender identities through violence and sex. The violence against the bodies of women is a dualism between the body and the mind, creating instances where women begin to embody the violence enacted on them. This is best represented in the series when Miriam has Lizzie killed for potentially having the child of her husband. This shows that the oppression women face is also mental and socially enforced.

Beauvoir's critique of the equalizing effect of technology rings true in the analysis of *Altered Carbon*. The issues that women face are both structural and cultural. The cultural perceptions of women create the structural laws that keep them on the fringes of society. The physical differences that technology mitigates show that women are oppressed by society definitions of what is appropriate for them to do. This creates the

environment that women are forced into competition with one another in order to survive. Competition in this scenario leads to violence between women, as seen in the relationship between Miriam and Lizzie. Women from this perspective begin to socially adapt to their surroundings, adopting more hegemonically masculine actions to solve issues.

Women as characters are also narrowly defined within the series, depicted and valued by the proximity to the male proximity. This reflects cultural understandings of what women are capable of and how they function socially. The monstrous feminine becomes an important example of what the emancipation in futuristic environments can be. The monstrous feminine becomes dangerous in science fiction universes because it defines the woman outside of her usefulness to the man. The monstrous feminine becomes monstrous because it represents opposition to the masculine forces that attempt to define it.

In constructing problematic social structures *Altered Carbon* allows for potential solutions to be brought to light. The simplest answer that can be applied is turnover and representation, meaning that the social structures that allow and reinforce problematic gender and sexuality norms need to be changed or altered. Without structural change, the likelihood of social change occurring is low. By putting the same people or equivalently the same people in positions of power, the change people need to survive is not likely to occur. This is prevalent in media ownership because the media that we consume plays a role in how we construct reality around us.

Altered Carbon is a snapshot of contemporary understanding of women. In this analysis it is observable that women are defined by three relationships in media: character

design, their relationship to structure, and how their bodies are seen as having value.

Altered Carbon becomes problematic when structure is unchallenged and progressive characters are swept away by it. While problematic, this is not dissimilar to the experience activists face when trying to change political structures. In terms of contemporary representations of women being defined by their sexuality and body to change, there must be a shift at foundational definitions of women that are not related to biology or biological perceptions. This can be achieved through media texts that show women as independent characters not defined by their proximity to the male. There must also be change in media leadership that create new perspectives rather than reusing old stereotypes of female characters. Through this process it becomes possible for women to reclaim science fiction as a medium that is progressive and representative of their lives. Shows like *Altered Carbon* show some women characters as they could be; however, the myriad of stereotypically gendered characters makes the show difficult to call progressive in terms of representation.

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