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“The Modality in Which Class is ‘Lived’”: Literalizing Race and Class in *The Expanse*

Bryan Banker

Science fiction often centers on questions of identity and how different identities relate to one another in some future society. In the Syfy network’s acclaimed space drama, *The Expanse*, the identity forms of race and class are not singular constructs, but are inscribed into one another. The television series describes a universe hundreds of years from now, where humans have colonized much of the solar system. Earth and Mars are competing superpowers that maintain a tense alliance to continue to manage the resources and people, known as “Belters,” of the Asteroid Belt. The Belters have lived and worked in deep space for many generations in hostile conditions that have dramatically altered their anatomy. In its depiction of the Belters, *The Expanse* makes literal what contemporary theories of identity treat abstractly; namely, that social relations of race and class cannot be divided, but are inseparable, and must be theorized as such. Analyzing the vivid portrayal of the lived experiences of Belters’ race and class relations under advanced capitalism in *The Expanse* offers lucid perspectives on identity and capital in the contemporary moment.

Keywords: Science fiction, *The Expanse*, Marxism, race and class identity, social relations under capitalism

The constitution of this fraction as a class, and the class relations which ascribe it, function as race relations. Race is thus, also, the modality in which class is “lived,” the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and “fought through.” — Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*

We do not want to live under anyone’s boot, Fred Johnson [. . .] Even a friendly one, afraid that if we disobey, we will have our air cut off, our water rationed, be spaced, or be herded into chambers to be used like animals. This is the way it has been until now. — Anderson Dawes (*The Expanse*)

Race and Class in Science Fiction

Adilifu Nama writes that science fiction is the “most imaginative genre because within its confines there are no confines” (2). Science fiction enables and enacts a multiplicity of creative systems within its narratological and visual structures. Producers and consumers of science fiction have fashioned and modeled the genre to investigate how people “see” and “think” about their contemporary and historical moment. The genre provides a critical lens through which to meditate upon contemporary society and politics, because much of science fiction builds upon the rich tableau of what Nama calls the “cultural urges, political yearnings and ideological dispositions” of American culture (3). Despite the appearance of otherworldly or distant temporal settings in science fiction, especially American science fiction, the genre is very much linked to the real political changes, dominant social discourses, and cultural practices at work in American society (96). As Sean Redmond contends, “if you want to know what really aches a culture at any given time don’t go to its art cinema, or its gritty social realist texts, but go to its science fiction” (x).

This essay focuses on the ways that science fiction tackles the “aches” of racial and class identity in a hypothetical future society. The Syfy network’s acclaimed space drama, *The Expanse*, depicts a universe hundreds of years from now, when humans have colonized much of the solar system. Earth and Mars are competing superpowers that maintain a tense alliance in order to continue to subjugate the resources and people, known as “Belters,” of the Asteroid Belt. Earth and Martian capital controls and manages both productive property and wage labor throughout the Belt. As Belters do not command nor possess their own means of production or labor, Earth and Martian capital utterly dominates the Belters’ material lives. Belters have lived and worked in deep

space for many generations in conditions that have dramatically altered their anatomy.¹

In science fiction, bodily difference is often implicitly racial. Different physical appearances have historically been coded racially, as racial justice scholar Ian F. Haney-López notes, because bodily difference marks the ways in which people of color have been treated over time (3). According to historians Barbara J. Fields and Karen E. Fields, bodily differences are “imagined” and presented historically and culturally “to the mind and imagination as a vivid truth” (24) – the “truth” of *race*. Just as perceived bodily features such as hair and skin complexion imply racial difference in everyday social reality, those same fabricated meanings of body dissimilarity are found in science fiction’s “spectacles of alien difference” (Nama 71). Science-fiction critic Ed Guerrero argues that science fiction enables readers to defamiliarize and discuss the social construction and representation of race, and how it interacts with other social identities (56). He writes that social identities often work themselves out in “many symbolic, cinematic forms of expression,” but in particular, “in the abundant racialized metaphors and allegories of the fantasy, sci-fi, and horror genres” (56). Guerrero explains that the practice of “seeing” the social construction of identities plays out in science fiction in the “genre’s dependence on difference or otherness in the form of the monster” (56). With the “vast technological possibilities of imagining and rendering of all kinds of simulacra for aliens, monsters, mutant outcasts,” science fiction can explore social identity formation in “fantastic narrative horizons and story worlds” (56, 57).

While there is a rich tradition of critical race studies in science-fiction criticism, this essay focuses on race *and* class and attempts to remedy a lack of attention to the *amalgamation* of race and class in science fiction. In doing so, this essay builds on Nama’s exceptional reading of the 1960 film *The Time Machine*, adapted from H. G. Wells’s novel. The film depicts a scientist who creates a time machine that transports him to the distant future, where he uncovers a world where two races exist: the Eloi and the Morlocks. The Eloi are white, healthy, and leisurely; the Morlocks, however, have blue skin, deformed facial features, and use technology. These bodily differences are byproducts of working underground (Nama 16). Nama writes that while the film “is commonly regarded as a reflection of cold war fears of nuclear annihilation” (15), it also “articulates multiple anxieties surrounding the redistribution of

¹ While *The Expanse* spans three seasons, with a fourth season slated for 2019, the early episodes of the first season are principally examined as they establish important representative themes found throughout the series.

power and privilege that the civil rights movement represented, the demise of the separate and unequal world of Jim Crow racial segregation” (16). But if the Morlocks are “symbolically black” (16), the racial coding in the film suggests that the Morlocks are differentiated by bodily appearance *and* by their subservient class position. *The Time Machine* provides a direct parallel to the coding of bodily difference, race, and class in *The Expanse* because the Morlocks are differentiated from humans not only in allegorically racial terms – they have different skin colors and body types – but also in class terms, as the Morlocks are manual laborers and use technology. While the Morlocks’ underground work has caused them to (d)evolve into a distinct working-class “race,” the Belters’ work in deep space has racialized and classed their bodily differences.

Marxist Theory and *The Expanse*

In its depiction of the Belters and their relationship with Earth and Martian capital, *The Expanse* attempts to portray the interconnections of race and class under advanced capitalism. Marxist thought, while perhaps polemical in its “seeing” and “thinking” about race, is nevertheless a useful apparatus for investigating the intricacies and connections of race, class, and capitalism, and therefore provides clarity to unpack what is showcased in the television series.

Marxism has a complicated relationship to race. Some thinkers argue that capitalism functions apart from race, that only “for historical reasons” does race happen to be a mechanism of class reproduction (Wood 276). Others see race as a mystification of class (Reed), while yet others think the two are always intertwined (Roediger and Esch).² Recently, Marxist thinkers have revisited the race and class debate in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, the role of the white working class in the electoral victory of Donald Trump, and the resurgence of socialist politics around Senator Bernie Sanders. Often at the heart of the discussion about race and class within contemporary Marxist thought is what kinds of social relations should be foregrounded in tackling inequality. Some thinkers attempt to distinguish race from class, “creating a dichotomy between them such that there’s an either/or” (Backer). Others, however, argue that there is a “fundamental social ex-

² Richard Seymour helpfully maps out the ongoing debates within Marxism (especially regarding Roediger and Wood) on the relationship between class, race, and capitalism (Seymour).

perience of the unity of race and class” (Clover and Singh) that cannot be ignored.

The idea of unity recalls Michael Lebowitz’s claim that capital always produces “workers who are separated” (*Beyond Capital* 157). Workers are separated by accumulation and competition, both of which, Charles Post adds, create race and class inequalities “within the working class” (“Marxism and the Race Problem”). Post writes that “race and class are co-constituted under capitalism” and that the division of social relations amongst workers is “a necessary outcome of capitalist competition” (“Comments”). In other words, capital inspires divisions amongst social identities in order to foster a kind of competition amongst laborers that will increase the accumulation of surplus value. Similarly, in *The Production of Difference*, David R. Roediger and Elizabeth D. Esch explicate how capitalists have historically differentiated workers racially, in order to enhance capital’s ability to raise the rate of exploitation (3-5). In his *Class, Race and Marxism*, Roediger asserts that “since capital produces difference in its own interests,” capitalist management has “both exploited and reproduced racial division as part of processes of expansion, production, and accumulation” (32).

Representations of race and class in *The Expanse* resonate with these positions. *The Expanse* portrays race and class relations as a combined product of capitalist relations. Racial and class identities are not singular constructs, but are inscribed into one another. In line with Lebowitz’s assertion that “capital’s deployment of racism” (among other discriminatory practices) fosters divisions and competition among workers to increase capitalist accumulation (“The Politics of Assumption” 39), *The Expanse* portrays Earth and Martian capitalist power bearing down upon the Belters in order to dominate the extraction of both resources in the Asteroid Belt as well as to command the surplus labor of the Belters who perform the labor. Lebowitz contends that “capital must divide and separate workers as its necessary condition of existence” (39). This separation not only fosters competition amongst workers, thus granting capitalists value from that competition, but separation also inhibits worker solidarity movements to challenge capitalist social and economic power (46). The television series makes this overarching narrative clear in showcasing how Earth and Martian capitalist power often undercuts Belter worker solidarity and autonomy movements. Post, in particular, is useful in the discussion regarding race and class under capitalism, as his thinking also frames *The Expanse*’s portrayal of the same social relations. What viewers see in *The Expanse* relates not only to Post’s arguments that “capitalist production necessarily produces *inequalities*,” or the “fun-

damental basis for the production and reproduction of racism in the working class under capitalism” (Souvlis et. al.), but also that capital “produce[s] systematic racial disparities among workers” (Post, “Marxism and the Race Problem”). Essentially, race is an “ideological construction of the way that people organize their *lived experiences*” (Souvlis et. al.; emphasis added).

Ultimately, *The Expanse* makes literal what contemporary theories of identity treat abstractly; namely, that social relations of race and class are inseparable and indivisible. Belter workers are separated and exploited not only due to their class position, but also along racial lines that the show represents as bodily and linguistic differences. Not only does *The Expanse* underscore what Marxist theorists emphasize in the capitalist process of differentiation – Earth and Martian capital owns the working and living conditions in deep space, which in turn assist in an anatomical and linguistic racialization process – but the series also complements theory with the aesthetic representations of how racialized and classed workers live, self-identify, and self-organize. In the show, science fiction works in tandem with theory. Whereas theory works through the abstraction of social relations, unpacking and demystifying everyday social life through concepts and categories, science fiction can vividly communicate the experience of those social categories – the “modality” in which they are “lived,” as Stuart Hall and his coauthors put it (347). Theory needs aesthetics to connect to experience and make abstract concepts more coherent and relatable, while aesthetics needs theory to expand the frame of reference and show the larger significance of everyday social life. Analyzing the aesthetic communication of lived experiences in *The Expanse*, therefore, offers perspectives that correlate the way theorists unpack and interpret the articulation of race and class in social and political consciousness.

Produced by the science-fiction writer Naren Shankar, *The Expanse* was developed by Mark Fergus and Hawk Ostby from the series of novels written by Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck (who also serve as writers and producers for the television show) under the pen name James S. A. Corey. Although the timeline takes place 200 years in the future, the show’s creators depict science and technology as what Shankar calls a “plausible reality” (qtd in Karlin). Shankar designed the show to “use the reality of space, which tends not to be done in most science fiction” (Karlin), and to ground technical and scientific elements in a conceivable reality. The show’s reality is informed by the working-class perspectives of characters who are shown working, in space, with plausible technology. The show has a clear working-class or “blue-collar”

concentration, as Shankar notes: “we’re not building a show around gadgets. It’s a blue-collar version of space; it’s just people doing a job out there. The technology is in the world, people use it, but they don’t sit around talking about it” (qtd in Karlin).

Unlike more fantastic science fiction examples, *The Expanse* projects existing science and technology into the future, making human-technology interfaces seem second nature to the characters in the show. Much of the technology revolves around space travel and industrial mining. The narrative of the series similarly follows a proletarian subjectivity as it traces a Belter police detective named Josephus Miller (Thomas Jane), who lives and works on one of the stations in the Belt. The detective is assigned to find an important young woman who has gone missing. Miller’s story intertwines with that of a working-class spacecraft captain, Jim Holden (Steven Strait), an Earther who, along with his mixed Earther/Martian/Belter crew, works in and around the Belt. Chrisjen Avasarala (Shohreh Aghdashloo), a major political player on Earth, attempts to broker an alliance with Mars amidst the rising tensions regarding Earth and Martian interests in the Belt. The peace amongst Earthers and Martians (those who make up the Martian colony) is soon threatened by a series of political incidents involving a radical Belter political group, the Outer Planets Alliance (OPA), formed to bring the people of the Belt together to further their socioeconomic and political interests. Earther, Martian, and Belter ventures are soon intertwined in a vast conspiracy over the control of a powerful but seemingly unstable “proto-molecule” that threatens humanity.

Lived Experiences of a Racialized and Classed Other

Throughout the series, Belters appear almost alien-like, with extraordinary towering and slender figures that are a consequence of living in low-gravity environments in and around the Belt. The harsh conditions of interplanetary life cause poor musculature development and inelastic bones, as well as elongation of the spine, all of which render Belters tall, thin, and frail. Coupled with the effects of microgravity, radiation poison and cancer are another ever-present threat to Belters. As these physical markers indicate, *The Expanse* stresses from its opening episode how capital differentiates and separates Belters from the rest of humanity. This first episode underscores Belter segregation, as the viewer is treated to a planetary view, with spaceships large and small flying around and performing various industrial tasks. Much of the work is

centered on mining and extracting ice from a resource-rich asteroid called Ceres. The viewer's perspective zooms in past these ships, towards the gray asteroid where much of the work is being done. As the scene progresses, with the viewer's gaze continuing to drive towards the asteroid, a heavily accented voice gives a powerful political speech. The first spoken dialogue of *The Expanse* is the voice of the subjugated Belt.

The Belter speech provides the history of Ceres, where generations of Belters have "toiled and suffered," working for Earth and Mars ("Dulcinea"). Belters have mined the asteroid, worked the shipping docks, and performed other necessary jobs throughout the station to keep Ceres livable. The voice decries the amount of wealth that has been amassed by Earth and Mars as they strip the ice from the asteroid. The speech is overlaid with images of the levels in Ceres station where people live and work above and on the asteroid. The camera descends from the labor in Ceres' atmosphere, down through underground levels of sparsely populated but serene clean spaces where, we learn, corporate elites manage their interests, and finally into the depths of the asteroid, landing upon familiar science fiction scenes. The underground spaces are filled with unclean air, and are home to the Belter working class. The scene ends in this location, with crowds of people gathered to hear the Belter deliver his speech as he towers above the throng.

The Belter states that "the immense wealth" gained from Ceres – wealth that the viewer has just seen generated by the proletarian labor in space and appropriated in the clean corporatized spaces below – "was never meant for us" ("Dulcinea"). He describes the terrible living and working conditions on Ceres and infers the exacting environmental realities of living in climatized asteroid stations. The speaker invokes the word "slave" in characterizing how Earth and Mars "see" Belter "difference," as Earth and Mars have separated Belters from the rest of humanity, forcing these conditions upon them. The Belter finishes his speech by declaring, "to them, we [*sic*] not even human any more" ("Dulcinea"). The Belter then turns to Detective Miller, who is from Ceres, and asks him the historically loaded question of which "side" is he on: "Hey you, badge, [. . .] when the blood is on the wall [denoting a potential Belter uprising], *sasa que*³ which side you're on?" ("Dulcinea"). This question introduces the viewer to Miller, a central character, through the lens of racial and class difference as it remains uncertain whether he is a real Belter or "passing" as an Earther. Miller replies to the inquiry that he does indeed know what side he will be on and is

³ "Do you know" (Farmer) in the Belters' invented language, on which see *infra*.

promptly called “traitor” by the Belter, who mimics putting on a fedora (“Dulcinea”). This scene is noteworthy as it introduces the viewer to the differentiation processes that divide Belters. When Miller is accused of passing as an Earther, the episode showcases how Belters are considered something *else*.”

Miller’s passing is elaborated two scenes later, when he and his Earther partner Dimitri Havelock (Jay Hernandez) walk through Ceres. When Havelock attempts a Belter hand gesture, Miller tells him that he will “never pass for a Belter. They’ll look at you and will always see Earth.” To which Havelock, noting Miller’s clothes and hat, responds that this is “coming from a guy dressed like an Earther” (“Dulcinea”). The dissimilarities between Belters and Earthers develop in the following scene in a bar, where the two detectives point out the ways in which Belters are physically “different” from Earthers. Havelock, new to Ceres, asks Miller to identify distinguishing Belter traits as they scan the other patrons. Miller begins by singling out one extremely thin Belter, towards the back of the bar, who is visibly shaking: “See that piss-poor rock hopper?” – that is, someone who works out in space, amongst the “rock” asteroids – “he’s trying to cover it up with that baggy flight suit – skin’s hanging off his bones, you get that red eyes, the shakes, when your body rejects the growth hormones, the tremors are from growing up in low-G [low gravity], the muscles don’t develop right” (“Dulcinea”). Again, we are treated to the idea of passing, or “covering” up the fact that Belters live under strenuous living and working conditions that transform their bodies in racially and class-specific ways.

Havelock then points to another unusually tall and thin Belter man walking by displaying an OPA badge: “I guess that’s [also] from generations in low-G?” Miller responds, “one day, they say every Belter will look just like that” (“Dulcinea”). It is important here to note the futurity of the Belters. At some point, they will no longer be physically recognizable as human. Again, *The Expanse* demonstratively marks the Belters’ physical distance from the rest of humanity, the process by which this distance develops, and the material conditions of that distancing which stem from the fact that they are forced to work and live in deep space.

As Miller and his partner continue to scan the bar, looking at other Belter attributes and characteristics, Havelock, knowing his partner is a Belter, asks what his Belter “tell” is. The tall and thin Belter doubles back to answer the partner’s question with a degree of menace: “let me help you with that [. . .] this one” – here the Belter pulls back Miller’s shirt collar – “has spurs at the top of his spine where the bones didn’t fuse right. He probably got that cheap bone-density juice, as a child,

probably a ward of the [Ceres] station” (“Dulcinea”). The Belter then makes the point that no matter how hard Miller may try to “disguise” himself, “he’s just like me.” Miller, taking offense, arrests the Belter, saying, “I will never be like you, Longbone.” Miller’s use of the slur “Longbone” centers on Belters’ tall and lanky appearance. This bar scene is essential. Not only does it help establish the world of *The Expanse*; it also signals a number of ways in which Belters are othered as less than human. The scene identifies modes in which Belters attempt to control the muscular degeneration from living and working in deep space by taking hormones or treating space-induced osteoporosis with “bone-density juice,” as the Belters describe it. Belters develop inhuman bodies from physical toil in space and thus must take hormones to cope with the demands of gravity.

Since bodily difference has often been coded racially, what is telling here is how anatomical differences intertwine “race” and class – both race and class are inscribed into the Belters’ status as exploited proletarian labor. In this aesthetic gesture, the television series forces viewers to think about these social relations as amalgamated. Moreover, *The Expanse* indicates how Belter bodies reject growth hormones needed to combat their changing anatomy through Miller’s subtle comment that the hormones that are available are of a poor quality, a reference to the Belters being lower and working-class subjects. The Belter working-class position is additionally shown when the Belter gestures to Miller’s upbringing, his being an orphan on Ceres, and thus also susceptible to poor health conditions. In fact, being an orphan (although never fully addressed, but clearly hinted at through the first season) provides an apt metaphor here: Belters, far away from Earth, are orphaned by capital. Capitalist labor demands that Belters work in and around the Belt, apart from the rest of humanity. This estrangement fittingly morphs their bodies into increasingly unrecognizable forms.

Capital, the Body, and Torture

Capitalist power, as a material process of inequality, transposes a set of racial and class differences upon Belter workers to organize and manage Belters into submissive, dehumanized worker categories. *The Expanse* presents this material process in three major examples. First, in the torture of a Belter in the first episode, the series underscores how capital inflicts racial and class oppression upon Belters’ bodies. Second, *The Expanse* portrays Belters as immediate and intimate, as well as unwilling,

participants of deindustrialization, as capital forces Belters to the margins of the galaxy for work. Lastly, as Belters are those who live and perform industrial labor in an otherwise deindustrialized solar system, their human form is physically altered, creating a new, seemingly dehumanized race and class status.

The Expanse clearly differentiates between two kinds of humans from the outset: the “Inners” (those from the inner solar system, namely Earth and Mars) and the Belters. In the first episode of the series, Avasarala, the Earther leader, interrogates and tortures a Belter by exacting punishment on the Belter’s racialized and classed body (“Dulcinea”). The scene underscores how Belters are othered and excluded from social normality. As the scene unfolds, Belter identity via his anatomical differentiation emerges as a racialized second-class entity. The Belter is considered a political radical, bent on Belter independence, and *The Expanse* thus inscribes “difference” with “identity.” Avasarala is able to torture the Belter on Earth, as he, in her eyes, is no longer human. Torture is illegal on Earth, a fact that viewers learn in the second episode, as a colleague reminds Avasarala of the “anti-gravity torture” legislation (“The Big Empty”). Yet, in the first episode, the torture scene takes place at a “black site,” thus illustrating that Avasarala does not consider a Belter to possess the same Earther (i.e., human) rights. The torture is simple: Earth’s gravity crushes the Belter’s body. The perceived raced and classed anatomical differences, stemming from living in deep space, exemplify what Earthers conceive as unnatural. Avasarala stands close to her captive, knowing he is unable to move and threatens that Earthers will do whatever it takes to get to the truth of his OPA political agenda. She mocks the fact that he is too weak to exist on Earth: “I’m sorry the gravity of a real planet hurts. It is appropriate. The Earth that is now crushing your weak Belter lungs and your fragile Belter bones” (“Dulcinea”).

The theme is continued in the following episode, where the interrogation has changed to a less severe surrounding. Here, the Belter prisoner, now housed in a water tank to better deal with Earth’s gravity, redirects Avasarala’s Earther gaze, proving the point that he is being seen as other: “you talk to me through a piece of glass, see my body which can no longer survive on the same planet that bore my great grandmother” (“The Big Empty”). Though veiled by Avasarala’s interrogation, the scene underscores the way in which differentiation and domination are inscribed and inflicted directly upon the Belter’s racialized and classed body.

Deindustrialization and Dehumanization

The Expanse portrays the deindustrialization⁴ of earth as a reorganization of industry away from Earth and Mars – and their normative social relations – to the Belt. The viewers see deindustrialization up close and personal, as the Belters, through their embodied identity, their bodies, are depicted as the living results of those who actually live through deindustrialization. In *The Expanse*, deindustrialization of substantial industrial interests is moved away from Earth, out to the margins of the galaxy.

Traditionally, science fiction represents the processes of deindustrialization as happening elsewhere, away from the main characters and plot. The quintessential example of this removal of industry from view is the film *Blade Runner* (1982), where synthetic humans labor in faraway places. *The Expanse*, however, does not disguise or hide forms of outsourced labor resulting from deindustrialization. Instead, it tracks these forms across the galaxy by illustrating how performing outsourced labor is a constitutive part of Belter identity. Thus, the series showcases the lived experiences of people under conditions of deindustrialization that the genre often renders “invisible” (Wells 75). What is made clear in *The Expanse*, then, is the impact of deindustrialization upon human life and social relations. The series depicts deindustrialization as a process with distinct industrialist effects inasmuch as it causes a generational disintegration of the Belter human form.

The dissolution of Belter humanity, resulting from the interaction of deep space and human anatomy, underscores what Isiah Lavender III calls “posthuman technicities” (186). These seemingly “posthuman” positions, visible in *The Expanse*, indeed follow a long science-fiction tradition of othering the body – especially that of the deindustrial worker.⁵ But the Belter posthuman figures that emerge in the television series do not represent what Brian Carr terms a “celebratory rendering of the ‘post’-human”; rather, they resonate with what he terms a “figure of the *dehumanized*” (120; emphasis mine). Carr clarifies that “obsession with the ‘post’ of the human [. . .] evacuates any kind of inquiry into the historicity of how the human is categorically accessed, who enters its circuits of symbolization and desire, and who is barred from it” (120). Ac-

⁴ The term “deindustrialization” is used here instead of “postindustrialization,” to indicate the reduction or the offshoring of heavy industry from the core to the periphery, as is the case in *The Expanse*. “Postindustrialization” denotes an economy that no longer relies on heavy industry, which is clearly not true of Earth in *The Expanse*.

⁵ I would like to thank J. Jesse Ramírez for bringing this tradition, stretching back to H. G. Wells, to my attention. See Ramírez.

cordingly, Carr argues that thinking in somewhat positive posthuman terminology distracts from the very figures that are most likely to be removed from humanity. Thus, this essay conceptualizes the Belters as de-, not post-, human because they are not a positive development of humanity but a degraded one. Abused by capitalist social relations, they are pushed and altered into new “other” categories. At no point in the series does being altered by deep space provide Belters with any prized qualities. Rather, Earthers and Martians consider Belters dehuman, a privation and separation from the human.

Belter Resistance through Language, Tattoos, and Political Organization

Belters are not only differentiated by their anatomical idiosyncracies; race and class under Earther and Martian capitalist power also segregate Belters. While Belters did not choose the way in which they are categorized, they still recuperate those ascriptive differences as a means of self-organization. Through the manner in which Belters communicate, through language and their use of tattooing, they place value on what separates them from Earthers and Martians.

Belters not only look different, but sound different as well. Belters speak in a creolized patois, a constructed language “of the oppressed working class [. . .] the lingua franca for the universe’s most dispossessed peoples” (Dreyfuss). Developed by linguist Nick Farmer, the Belter language functions as a dialect, yet producers of the series looked to Farmer to create a fully embodied language that might intertwine Belter physicality with linguistics.⁶ Language, then, is another form of racializing and classing a group with an implicit historical precedent. As a language spoken by workers at the margins of space, Belter language mirrors the historical creoles of those who were also pushed to the margins of colonial empires, and is thus patterned after Haitian Creole (Dreyfuss). Like most creoles, the Belter language is also based on a set natal language but influenced and encompassed by others. Farmer believed Haitian Creole was “the best correlate on Earth because it developed after people from all over the world arrived on the island – in many cases by force” (Dreyfuss). The relation to the Haitian example is useful. Farmer’s Belter language is based on the history of slavery as an

⁶ While only the Belter verbal language is discussed here, throughout the series Belters also are seen using stylized hand gestures and arm movements to communicate. These gestures are replicated from the type of communication they would need while working in space without communication devices.

important element in the development of Haitian Creole, which was created by enslaved workers. Although not enslaved, Belters are, nonetheless, exploited subjects and view themselves as wage slaves to capital. As the Belter in the first episode explains: “we Belters toil and suffer, without hope and without end, and for what? We will always be slaves” (“Dulcinea”). Belters, similar to the enslaved, transported population of Haiti, descend from people who were brought to work the Belt for capitalists on Earth and Mars.

Similar to Belter language, self-identification is also made visible by Belter body art. The distinct black markings on temples, foreheads, necks, and forearms function as low-grade body modification. Tattoos are a symbol of Belter racial and class positions. Through tattooing, Belters attempt to transform the scarring where their cheap spacesuits and uniforms have insufficiently protected the body. The older and often more prominent Belter political figures in the series, such as Anderson Dawes (Jared Harris) and Klaes Ashford (David Straithairn), exhibit contact burns on their necks, where the helmet seals to the spacesuit. As the burns are considered rites of passage, the product of hard labor performed with poor materials, these leaders proudly display their scars for any would-be political challenger. Younger generations, however, like the protagonist Naomi Nagata (Dominique Tipper) – a Belter engineer on Holden’s work crew – use tattoos to cover and modify their scars. While tattoos in *The Expanse*, as in reality, are examples of individual aesthetics, much of the larger geometric shaped tattoos in the series are used to connect the scars from their exploited labor. In this way, then, the younger, more politically radical Belters reframe their scars and tattoos into a form of political expression, to employ the OPA’s project of self-identity and self-determination against capitalist Earth and Martian power. Belter tattoos are also messages which stress attempts by Belters to organize politically. The political tattoo of the OPA, an unfinished circle with an “A” in the center, receives the most attention in the series. Those who display the OPA tattoo are deemed the most politically radical of the Belters. The tattoo not only confirms one’s affiliation, but also enables political organization. In a brief exchange with a Belter worker who openly exhibits his OPA tattoo, Miller asks, “your boss let you wear your colors like that?” The worker replies, “my boss has one just like it” (“Dulcinea”).

OPA leaders, like Dawes, also use unifying rhetoric to consolidate Belter workers and those who are sympathetic to Belter causes under a banner of political autonomy for the Belt: “I have a million brothers and sisters” who live in the Belt with shared experiences and interests

(“Rock Bottom”). The OPA centers their political ideology on the lived experiences of being racialized and classed as “second-class citizens” compared to the Inners who own the means of production in the Belt. Thus, Belters use tattoos to connect their racialized and segregated status with others who share similar political ideologies. This reconfiguration of Belter social relations is then wielded as a weapon against Earther and Martian capitalist domination.

Lessons from *The Expanse*

It is in the aesthetic representation of Belter lived experiences of being racialized and classed that *The Expanse* articulates a perspective that parallels the way scholars and theorists comprehend social relations under capitalism. The representation of the Belters’ racialized-classed relation, by inscribing race upon class relations, and vice versa, makes literal how social relations are interlaced under Earther and Martian capitalist domination. This literalization answers Karl Marx’s warning in his “Speech on the Question of Free Trade” (1848) that those who “cannot understand how one nation can grow rich at the expense of another” will be even less prepared “to understand how in the same country one class can enrich itself at the expense of another” (464–65). Marx is describing the systematic exploitation of Ireland and Irish workers by the British Empire (Losurdo 31–37; Lebowitz, *Beyond Capital* 159), but *The Expanse* matches Marx’s descriptions of Irish subjugation in that, similar to the Irish proletariat, the Belters are subject to “enslavement” and are unable to secure their “economic and social emancipation” (Losurdo 32) from Earth and Mars. As Earther and Martian capital institutes a wage-slave existence upon the Belt “without disguise” (Marx, “The Poverty of Philosophy” 168), Belters use a raced and classed relation to struggle against “the economic relations which constitute the material foundation” of their subjugation (Marx, “Wage Labor and Capital” 197).

By literalizing and integrating race and class relations, this series delivers concrete illustrations for their inseparability. Not only do the Belters acknowledge what capitalist power structures have done to separate and suppress them, but also they redirect the dissimilarity as a means to organize and collectively challenge capitalist inequality. As Post makes clear, “only when workers are able to organize themselves collectively” – and here we may add universally – “against capital and the state do they have the potential to develop radical, revolutionary class-consciousness” (Souvlis et. al.). In turn, depictions of uniting race

and class relations against capital in *The Expanse* potentially offer prototypes of defiance and challenge to capitalism on-screen and, in the process, signal “that the same could and needed to be done off-screen” (Nama 97).

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