



## MAD MEN'S POSTRACIAL FIGURATION OF A RACIAL PAST

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Teddy told me that in Greek, "nostalgia" literally means "the pain from an old wound." —Don Draper ("The Wheel," 1.13)

To think of *Mad Men* as nostalgic, as desirous of the past, might strike faithful viewers of the show as counterintuitive, because the show's embrace of the past is not merely a loving but also an uncomfortable one. As such, *Mad Men*'s nostalgia is both like and not like Hollywood films such as *Pleasantville* (1998). Like *Pleasantville* it has a largely white cast and its narrative functions by way of whiteness. Yet unlike *Pleasantville*, *Mad Men* does not promise audiences secure, white, suburban domestic spaces, or loving white families with rebuilt home lives (Dickinson). Even as *Mad Men* is more dystopic in its imagining of the suburbs, it does not reject suburbia entirely. The show draws a dichotomy between city life, where one can encounter people of color and pot smokers, and the less daring suburbs, where one can always return, where people of color are subservient domestics, and where alcohol and cigarette consumption top the list of quotidian vices. In short, *Mad Men*'s vision renders the lives of its characters "more meaningful through nostalgic invocations of the past and more tantalizing with just the slightest hint of racialized or sexualized danger, or both" (Dickinson, 218).

To conceive of nostalgia as psychological as well as romantic—as "the pain from an old wound," in Don Draper's turn of phrase—helps to explain the show's representation of the racial past. *Mad Men*'s account of the past

uses *demographic realism*: in other words, the show documents the actions of characters through the lens of white society, from a vantage point resonant with contemporary logics of whiteness. The focus of this chapter, therefore, is not past but present-day racism—especially *Mad Men*'s racist representational strategies, which are made possible through its construction of past racism.

To understand *Mad Men*'s representation, it is necessary to elucidate racial politics' distinct rhetorical strategy in contemporary postracial culture. Less often discussed than postfeminism, postracism's analogous cultural condition is premised on the assumption that race and racism are of little importance in modern life (if they ever were significant) and are therefore passé. For Ralina Joseph, postracism assumes "that the civil rights movement effectively eradicated racism to the extent that not only does racism no longer exist but race itself no longer matters" (239). In his discussion of whether Barack Obama's presidency signifies the end of racism in the United States, Thomas F. Pettigrew describes postracism as a "national hunger for racial optimism" and a moment when "race has substantially lost its special significance" (279). Postracism is characterized by a discomfort with, and related desire to forget, race and racism, which enables them to operate beyond ordinary thresholds of popular consciousness through deferral, repression, and forgetting. Popular culture tends either to absent racism altogether, or to demonstrate progress by staging overt racism that is magically cured by good white people.<sup>1</sup> Typically, narrative representations of race indirectly (and perhaps inadvertently) juxtapose a mature and modern postracial present against the no longer relevant—and backward and archaic—racial past.

*Mad Men* is self-conscious about race and racism, as it is about gender and sexual politics, history, and, thus, its production values. Because of its self-reflective mode of representation, *Mad Men* may appear to operate outside of traditional racial logics. It may seem *extraracial* or *transracial*, or even (from a perspective of reflective white people) *antiracist*—which, of course, fits the definition of *postracial*. Furthermore, the show's lack of major characters of color and lack of complex perspectives of characters of color—including point-of-view shots, narrative development, and home or family settings—construct a white racial perspective. The series also displays longstanding racially exclusionary practices in televisual and popular culture.<sup>2</sup>

Because actors of color play such a minor role on the show, making *Mad Men* a typical "white show," studying its representation of race may appear to be an obvious exercise. There are certainly things about *Mad Men* that

are typical of the representations of race on U.S. television. Nevertheless, in what has been hailed as a “postracial” era, when the appearance of race in media is rarely straightforward, identifying racial dimensions alone is not sufficient for understanding the representational politics of *Mad Men*. The task requires careful attention to inferentiality, absence, and alternative representational possibilities.

The rhetorics of postracism function to insist that racism is elsewhere but not here, in this time or place, thus bracketing or altogether ignoring present-day racism. Yet, even as they defer racism in the here and now, postracial rhetorics cannot escape history. As William Faulkner wrote in *Requiem for a Nun*, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (92). Thus *Mad Men*’s representations of race are often self-reflective in relation to the representation of African Americans, but less so in relation to Asians and Asian Americans. *Mad Men*’s postracial rhetoric, then, operates both by way of self-reflectivity and by reproducing historical representations of race well ensconced within U.S. television culture. A study of the series has much to tell us about the way race functions in today’s popular culture and in U.S. society more broadly.

While this is not an audience study per se, part of the complexity of the representation of race in *Mad Men* is evident in the largely paradoxical response of reviewers. Many articles and blogs celebrate the show’s smart production values, visual elegance, and attention to historical detail. The *San Francisco Chronicle*, for instance, finds the show “a stylized, visually arresting piece of work” and “wonderfully evocative of time and place” (Goodman). For many, the mise-en-scène—mnemonically equipped with mementos of an earlier era—is evidence of the show’s at times sublime engagement with the historical.<sup>3</sup> The *Boston Globe* noted that *Mad Men* “is a gorgeously fashioned period piece, from its IBM typewriters and rotary phones to the constant fog of cigarette smoke hanging over every scene” (M. Gilbert). The show effects a nostalgic mood through the striking placement of referents from the early 1960s, whether the quotidian consumption of alcohol and cigarettes, the performance of feigned deference, or the panoply of period clothing. *Mad Men*’s fastidious attention to detail and handling of the script, direction, tempo, dialogue, cinematography, editing, and particularly mise-en-scène (including props, fashion, architecture, and so on) affirm the show’s ability to “get things right,” which for critics often includes getting race “right.” Media articles commonly mention that race is a regular theme on the show (as are gender, sexuality, class, and ability). Reviewers thus praise *Mad Men* for, as Alex Williams puts it, “its unflinching portrayal

of Eisenhower/Kennedy-era sexism, racism, anti-Semitism and Scotch before 5 p.m.”

Yet some articles, while praising *Mad Men*’s care for production, challenge the problematics of racial representation. For example, Latoya Peterson, writing in *Slate*, suggests that despite its inventiveness, *Mad Men* fails to recognize the material reality of racism (“Afraid”; see also Schwarz). She comments on the lack of affective black characters and the thinness of black culture and contexts. For instance, she notes the lack of tears shed by the show’s characters when they hear of “the little girls killed at the 16th Street Baptist Church.” Melissa Witkowski describes *Mad Men* as “an attractive fantasy that creates an illusion of distance between our past and our present.” The histories of “women and people of color,” she believes, are trivialized through “the erasure of [their] real accomplishments,” and the “downplaying” of “institutional and systemic oppression in favour of presenting easier (and more salacious) targets such as sexual harassment and racist banter . . . in the workplace.”<sup>4</sup> Hence commentators who reflect on the role race plays in people’s lives existentially criticize *Mad Men* for the disjuncture between its racialization of characters and the history of race and racism in the 1960s (see also Little).

Given reviewers’ bifurcated responses, how do we make sense of this smartly dressed television show’s politics of racial representation? The answer is to look further at *Mad Men*’s self-conscious representational style, which pairs awareness of how far U.S. race relations have come with recognition of just how awful they were in the early 1960s. The show thus comments intelligently and knowingly on how race functioned just before the civil rights successes of the 1960s and ’70s. Some might suggest that by representing the racial past, the show indirectly comments on contemporary race relations. Is it possible that *Mad Men*’s awareness of the distance between “us now” and “them then” simultaneously implies that the distance is not as great as one might think?

Herman Gray’s work on the television of the 1980s and ’90s provides an important schema for addressing this question. In *Watching Race*, Gray emphasizes not only racial demography but also the degree to which cultural sensibility is televisually encoded, developing three different categories for specifically racial analysis. *Assimilationist* shows, he explains, may include characters of color while treating race as largely irrelevant. As on *L.A. Law* (NBC, 1986–94), characters of color are included primarily for diversity’s sake (85). By contrast, *pluralist* shows may be made up primarily of Afri-

can American characters, yet the story lines are not dissimilar from story lines for shows with predominantly white characters, with specific experiential and institutional differences between racial groups downplayed; for instance, *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (NBC, 1990–96) (85). Gray calls shows with the greatest awareness of ethnicity and race *multicultural*. These shows—for example, *Frank's Place* (CBS, 1987–88)—emphasize cultural and racial identities and experiences and, unlike assimilationist and pluralist programs, are not determined by an overarching logic of whiteness. However, Gray notes that few shows are truly multicultural: even when shows foreground racial identity and experiences, they mostly fail to be progressive since they do not challenge political institutions and are rarely socially critical in a general way (91).

What Gray's scheme does not anticipate are shows like *Mad Men* that are both limited in numbers of characters (and therefore actors) of color, like assimilationist shows before them, but that are nevertheless self-conscious about race. Indeed, *Mad Men* seems to require a fourth category of racial representation that we might label *self-reflective*. Although these shows do not generate narratives from the perspective of characters of color, they nevertheless contain a thoughtful and thought-provoking representation of racial politics. In a sense, what Gray does not anticipate, but which his schema can help us understand, is the *postracial* context that affords *Mad Men* the capacity both to maintain historical demographic segregation for the most part and to bypass the cultural sensibility argument Gray makes, while simultaneously projecting itself, at least to some viewers, as aware, knowledgeable, and progressive about racial representation.

*Mad Men* emerges out of a contemporary postracial context when straightforward racial representation is no longer (if it ever was) the principal means of representing race—the very terms of racial representation on which *Mad Men* draws have changed significantly since Gray's book. As the sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva suggests, we now live in an era saturated by “color-blind racism.” More than a decade ago, the scholar George Lipsitz noted the historical emergence of a race-neutral and race-conscious racism, both of which figure in Bonilla-Silva's conception of “color-blindness.” Lipsitz argued that racism was “created anew” over the fifty years that saw “the putatively race-neutral, liberal, social democratic reforms of the New Deal Era” along with “the more overtly race-conscious neoconservative reactions against liberalism since the Nixon years” (5). Thus, postracial representation grows out of a putatively race-neutral standpoint, in an attempt to avoid negative forms of racial presentation. Moreover, an entirely new racial sig-

nifying system has emerged—one that operates primarily through relatively subtle processes of deferral, indirection, and self-reflectivity. Postracial representational politics are typically not straightforward: race is more commonly represented indirectly and inferentially; thus what is being said about race requires careful analysis of rhetoric that obfuscates more direct ways of understanding racial politics and racial experience (see, e.g., Ono).

Under Gray's schema, *Mad Men* is assimilationist insofar as it lacks major characters of color or focus on diverse cultures. Yet because it in fact takes race seriously, even as characters of color and themes and content related to them are sparse, it cannot be understood through the representational logics of the Gray-era studies. That said, the series cannot simply be championed for acknowledging the history of racism and offering nuanced depictions of whiteness since these achievements depend on the marginalization of characters of color, issues relating to race, and racial consciousness of the other. To put this another way, just because we recognize that *Mad Men* operates in a self-conscious mode does not mean that its representation of race is beyond critique; nor does it mean that the show moves beyond race. Hence, though *Mad Men's* televisual production qualities and representational practices may be exceptional, its politics of racial representation are familiar.<sup>5</sup>

When characters of color do appear on the show—notably Carla (the Drapers' maid), Sheila (Paul's girlfriend), and Hollis (an elevator attendant)<sup>6</sup>—they are frequently the subject of racism, as when Betty Draper's father Eugene seems to imply that Carla has stolen his missing five dollars (“My Old Kentucky Home,” 3.3). Although racism is often the main point of the scenes in which these characters appear, the show circumscribes their roles, creating an aching and overpowering sense of the absence of their agency and home life. Carla's world as she privately sees it, along with her house, friends, family, and acquaintances, is never visible. We learn about her only through her relation to the white characters. As the lives of the white characters unfold in front of our eyes, Carla stays in the background: a crucial, yet supplemental, element.<sup>7</sup> For example, noting the Drapers' marital difficulties, Carla tries to get Betty to open up to her, saying, “I've been married almost twenty years, you know” (“Six Month Leave,” 2.9). Although we see that Carla observes and has consciousness, the show merely gestures toward that consciousness in a way that centers on her efforts to support Betty rather than on Carla herself. Carla thus signifies *Mad Men's* self-conscious awareness of the fact that racism existed in the 1960s. By not showing her before and after work, or during private and intimate moments,

the show has two effects: first, it produces a historically realist representation of the irrelevance of her personal life to white people in the 1960s; second, it unnecessarily and objectionably produces the irrelevance of her personal life to television viewers now.

*Mad Men's* historical realism and the implicit claim that the show is true to the historical record enables persuasive commentary on race relations. This mode of addressing race distinguishes it within television's history of racial representation, marking it as distinctly postracial. As Robin Givhan of the *Washington Post* writes, "You don't get the feeling that the show, in its willingness to relegate black characters to elevator operators and lunch cart attendants, is attempting to self-consciously ridicule this historic truth but merely to represent it accurately." If we were to follow Givhan's logic to the extreme, we would need to assume that every presence or absence of race was planned: the invisibility of black characters' homes, the lack of Latinos, the number of lines each speaks, and even the choice not to give actors of color much work on the series. On this view, all are self-conscious choices necessary to demonstrating awareness of the reality of racism in the 1960s. But does awareness mean we should overlook Gray's representational schema and ignore the material impact on actors of color? In the service of realism, are we to overlook the fact that the show does not represent black life and culture separately from white culture, nor anywhere as fully? Are we to overlook the particular racializations the show offers when people of color do appear onscreen?

The center of the show is, of course, Don, a privileged white man though not a positive or even especially likeable hero. Indeed, the show addresses a complex notion of racial identity through Don, who is so identified with marginalization that Michael Szalay (in this volume) likens him to a "white negro." As Don strives to come to self-knowledge through a plethora of identity struggles, his narrative is an unfulfilled bildungsroman. That Don is not what he appears to be supports the view of him as a white character signifying a stereotypical and highly problematic notion of what blackness could be conceived to be. A deserter, an identity thief, and the illegitimate child of a prostitute, he keeps secrets to maintain his upper-middle-class status.

Moreover, Don is often associated with (publicly) marginalized characters. For example, in the opening scene of the pilot ("Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," 1.1), the first face we see is that of a black waiter in a busy bar where Don is working. The scene sets up Don's character and the premise of the show. The camera breaks away from the black waiter to give us a view of the back of Don's head and his hat and coat. We see that Don is sitting alone



FIGURE 15.1. A moment of intimacy ("Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," 1.1).

writing on a napkin by candlelight. There are no recognizable words, only pen scrawls, some with letters crossed out or made illegible by copious ink. A second black waiter, this one middle-aged, approaches Don, who needs a light. His hand moves closer to Don to offer the light. Their hands even touch gently in the process, producing a moment of intimacy, at least from Don's perspective. Don looks at him and asks, "Old Gold man, huh? Lucky Strike here" (fig. 15.1). The waiter looks at him, possibly surprised or even frightened by the implications of conversing with a white customer. Don says, "Can I ask you a question? Why do you smoke Old Gold?" A middle-aged white man, taller than the waiter, comes to the table and asks, "I'm sorry, sir. Is Sam here bothering you?" and casts a stern look at Sam.<sup>8</sup> "He can be a little chatty," he says to Don, and glances at Sam from the side again. Don replies, "No, we're actually just having a conversation. Is that OK?" Don orders a drink from the white man and proceeds to ask Sam what, if anything, would make him change from Old Gold to Lucky Strike. Sam reveals that he loves to smoke; Don responds by writing, "I Love Smoking." The waiter tells Don his wife reads *Reader's Digest*, which has reported that smoking is bad for you. "Ladies love their magazines," he adds. They both laugh, engaging in a moment of heterosexual male bonding at the expense of women.

One reason the scene is so interesting is that it shows Don defending his right to have a desegregated conversation with a black server. This defense requires a post-civil rights understanding of how one responds to racism, hence an awareness lacking in the period the show wants to portray.<sup>9</sup> Don is

not merely defending his right to information but also making a point about race. The tension produced by their interracial talking overdetermines the situation in such a way as to ensure that Don's challenge of the white waiter constitutes a racial confrontation. Yet it also illustrates Don's willingness to put the black waiter's job at risk. An extradiegetic possibility is that Sam loses his job, is chided for having broken unspoken rules, or experiences some other (possibly harsher) racial violence, antagonism, or retribution for having crossed the color barrier or for embarrassing the white boss.

By taking a public stand against segregation, Don is also positioning Sam as a laborer waiting tables *and* as a laborer unknowingly helping him with his ad campaign. In essence, Don enlists Sam's intellectual labor, from which his own career will benefit. His capitalist goal is to co-opt the black man's idea for Lucky Strike; indeed, he is a cog in the wheel of the cigarette industry's efforts to persuade blacks to consume Lucky Strike cigarettes.<sup>10</sup> The scene also demonstrates Don's ability to wield power, which in this instance renders the white waiter subservient. He asks Sam's ostensible supervisor to refill his glass, enabling his own access to Sam while putting the white supervisor in his place (the way black subordinates were typically treated). In aligning himself with black people against the white establishment for a career-serving end, while nevertheless acting from a position of white, classed authority within that establishment, Don figures as a postracial man.

Each instance of his identification with marginality—falling in love with a Jewish woman, helping Peggy move out of the secretarial pool, keeping Sal's homosexuality secret, and smoking dope—marks him as what Ralina Joseph labels a “post-” (“race-, gender-, and sexuality-based discrimination”) figure (238). Yet the show does not position Don as unidimensionally pro-civil rights and progressive. Indeed, one could read all of these examples primarily in terms of Don's career interests, suggesting his indifference to politics so long as he succeeds in his job; hence his work for the conservative Nixon campaign, his quashing Betty's modeling career when he chooses not to work for McCann, and his willingness (despite misgivings) to sacrifice Mohawk Airlines in order to try for American Airlines. And while supporting Peggy professionally at notable points (including keeping her childbirth a secret), he later scolds her for striving too much.

Don's complex character, both heroic and nonheroic illuminates the profound nature of the show's white identity. His nuanced multiple roles (e.g., father and son, lover and foe, boss and subordinate, conservative and liberal) all insist on a more intricate (even sublime) reading. He is an everyman, so multifaceted as to be all-encompassing, so white and dark as to encompass

the ubiquity of racial and class identity in a figure of white masculinity. This highly developed and even overprivileged role stands in stark contrast to the characters of color, who primarily represent their race and exist to enhance Don's meaning and that of other white characters. Indeed, Don's stunning complexity relies on his ability to instrumentalize (and in some instances love and befriend) marginal characters such as Sam, Midge, and Rachel. In this way the show *includes* characters of color to get enough credit to be able to *tell the story* of white characters. As Peterson suggests, we never see any person of color outside a white-dominated environment.

I have already suggested Carla's particular importance in constituting the character of the Drapers. Don's character depends on Carla, who functions in an asymmetrical dialectic with him. If Carla has alone-time with the camera it is brief, isolated, contemplative, and passive; the purpose is to enable the spectator's rumination and to mark the show's self-consciousness, not to allow Carla action or interaction.

Yet Carla is the most developed character of color on the show thus far. If her role is limited during the show's first season, she begins to be more central beginning in the first episode of the second season. Although she never has many lines, Carla is positioned as a knowing agent within Don's family context. For instance, toward the end of “For Those Who Think Young” (2.1), Don returns home from work, kisses his son, and pours himself a drink. As he is pouring, he asks Carla if she wants a ride home. We get a shot from her point of view of him pouring the alcohol, before she courteously declines, saying that she enjoys the fresh air. Her view of Don as someone whose drinking makes him an unsafe driver is brought home through minimalist cinematography and editing. Despite the fact that “drinking and driving” as we know it today did not have the same meaning in the early 1960s, the overlay of contemporary knowledge that informs the show's historical realism recurs (as in Don's post-civil rights challenge of segregation in the pilot).

Instances like these gesture toward an awareness of Carla's deep understanding of the Drapers and perhaps of the white society beyond their domain. Carla is clearly aware of her social position, understanding not only her role as maid and nanny but also her role as black, female subordinate.<sup>11</sup> Yet, while these moments enable us to see Carla more clearly, our knowledge of her is never satisfying. The moments are teasers, flirtations with the spectator's desire for more—more knowledge about Carla's life and her perspectives, more consequences for the Drapers' behaviors, more connection to the material constraints of minority characters. Instead we get a fascinating story about Don and an exploration of the power dynamics of his white-





FIGURE 15.2. Carla smiling at Francine about having to do more work ("Souvenir," 3.8).

ness, without it being named as such.<sup>12</sup> Carla's observation of Don's drinking aids our understanding of his character, while we learn little of hers. She is not even the Sacagawea of the narrative, being neither a main character nor someone with a history. Because of Carla's work as Betty's domestic partner/laborer, Don is able to have regular affairs without dramatically upsetting his home life. Thus in season 2 Carla takes care of the house and kids so that Betty is able to sleep on the couch while she copes with the knowledge of Don's affair with Bobbie Barrett. In season 3 she makes it possible for the couple to vacation in Rome. Rather than seeing her story we are left knowing only that, like other characters of color, she understands the racism and white domination she faces.

There are lapses in the text's treatment of Carla. One example is a missed opportunity for a reaction shot by Carla during a particularly useful moment. In "Souvenir" (3.8), while Betty and Don are in Rome and Carla is caring for their three children, Francine drops by the house to deliver her son Ernie so she can attend a board meeting. Carla greets her, smiling. After Francine leaves, there is a moment when a reaction shot is possible. In response to having to take care of yet another child, the gentle smile seems insufficient. Yet the show forgoes the chance to show a different aspect of Carla (fig. 15.2).<sup>13</sup> The scene thus raises the question: Is the show representing a critical view of 1960s race relations or is it, rather, locked into a 1960s view of race relations? The authenticity of this scene would not have been compromised by this glimpse of Carla, unseen by any white person.



FIGURE 15.3. An Asian family in Pete's office ("Marriage of Figaro," 1.3).

Then too, *Mad Men's* self-consciousness about African American racism does not extend to other racialized groups. The show's inconsistent representational politics show it to be locked into a black/white/Jewish notion of race. This uneven self-reflectiveness is part of the show's postracial rhetoric, which on the one hand defers racism and on the other falls back into racist patterns of minority representation. As opposed to the problematic yet self-reflective representation of African American characters, the show unreflectively features Asians and Asian Americans for comedic effect or as sexualized oriental figures—a representation that merely continues the derogations of the past.

For example, in "Marriage of Figaro" (1.3), Pete returns to the office after his honeymoon. In the elevator, Paul, Ken, and Harry tease him about what happened *after* the wedding. On the way to his office Pete is greeted by a phalanx of secretaries who welcome him back. No sooner does Pete comment on this unusual friendliness than he opens his office door to the sound of a clucking chicken. From Pete's point of view, the camera reveals an Asian man with chopsticks eating out of a bowl, sitting atop Pete's desk (fig. 15.3). Facing Pete is an Asian woman with chopsticks, smiling and speaking quietly, ostensibly in an Asian language. To the right in the distance is an elderly Asian woman also eating with chopsticks. A chicken stands atop the desk. The Asian man says, "Close the door"; the chicken clucks, and the man exclaims more emphatically, "Close the door!" followed by some nonsensical word like "*Banha!*" Closing his office door, Pete smiles and asks his fellow office

workers, "Who put the Chinamen in my office?" The assembled company bursts out laughing. "Welcome back," says Harry, and they begin clapping. Peggy later tells Don, "They paid an Oriental family to be in Mr. Campbell's office," to which Don responds, "Someone will finally be working in there."

The scene sets up Asians, who rarely appear on the show, as comic relief. Because they are out of place, their startling appearance augments the humorous effect for Pete, his office mates, and the audience, which, through a singular composition of point of view, is encouraged to take the perspective of the white workers, not the Asian family. They are backward and primitive, with chickens clucking—the irony and humor is in their incongruity, their out-of-time and out-of-place-ness. In a modern midcentury office suite, in a story focused on the dramas of white people, the sight of Asian people eating rice with chopsticks, sitting on Pete's desk, disrupts modern normative relations—physical, temporal, spatial, and material—and thus creates humor.

In fact, the appearance of Asians in this scene would be merely humorous were it not for the powerful ways that Asians in Western media since the nineteenth century have been figured so dependably as other. As non-citizen foreigners, culturally deviant, primitive, and hostile, Asians threaten to invade Western, white space—especially the space of capitalism. The ironic and startling appearance of Asians in *Mad Men*, which simultaneously constructs them as irrelevant, is reminiscent of Mr. Yunioshi's incongruous appearance in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), a story about a social climber (Audrey Hepburn) who depends on men but nevertheless reads as an ingénue trying to find herself, and a budding young writer (George Peppard) dependent on women who first befriends and then falls in love with her. While the stories are nothing alike and *Mad Men* does not explicitly cite the film, the parallel way in which humor is evoked through the appearance of Asians or Asian Americans who seem out of place is suggestive. Like Yunioshi, the Asian family's purpose in *Mad Men* is to titillate; the roles in both cases are insignificant for the central story. The Asian family is backward, hostile, and invasive, whereas Yunioshi is bumbling, clumsy, loud, obnoxious, and sexually perverse (for example, exhibiting public excitement at the thought of taking "pictures" of Holly), offering audiences comic relief in part through a xenophobic projection of Asians and Asian Americans as peculiar and out of place within white worlds.

Two further representations of Asians and Asian Americans in *Mad Men* are decidedly orientalist, projecting the historical construction of Asian and Asian American women as erotic, sexually wanton, and available to white



FIGURE 15.4. *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife* (c. 1820) in Cooper's office: "I picked it for its sensuality" ("Out of Town," 3.1).

male suitors. In a scene in "Out of Town" (3.1), besides making those entering his office take off their shoes, Bert Cooper has a rice-paper divider standing in front of his office window, an oriental room divider, bamboo trees, oriental lamp stands, and an Asian-themed painting of a flute player.<sup>14</sup> The show's expert on all things Asian, Bert is an Asiaphile as well as an art collector.<sup>15</sup> In this scene the focus is on an erotic painting of a Japanese woman (fig. 15.4). Dating from around 1820, the work, by Hokusai, is called *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife* and is often cited as the origin of Japanese "tentacle porn." Displaying a woman in a sexual embrace with two octopi, the image is popular on the Internet. The *Mad Men* scene begins with a contemplative shot of the picture, concealing its whereabouts until the camera cuts to an admiring Lane Pryce. Cooper, drinking tea in the background, says, "I picked it for its sensuality but it also in some way reminds me of . . . our business." The camera cuts to a closer shot of the woman's upper body, as Cooper asks, "Who is the man who imagined her ecstasy?" followed by a shot of Pryce

replying, "Who, indeed?" At that moment, the viewer hears the sound of a doorknob turning. In comes Don through Cooper's door, and Cooper says, "We were just talking about you."

Asian women thus function as the object of white men's orientalist gaze and desire. They help produce the complexity of the white male characters while lacking complexity of their own. The second orientalist representation occurs in "Flight 1," when Don meets a client representing Mohawk Airlines in a Japanese restaurant to tell him that Sterling Cooper is dropping the account. The unhappy client says he is glad Don picked this place, because it reminds him of Pearl Harbor. Later, a guilty Don sits alone while we hear "Ue o muite arukō," retitled "Sukiyaki" in the United States, a song from 1961 by the Japanese crooner Kyu Sakamoto.<sup>16</sup> The camera tracks around the side of Don's face while he drinks, showing wooden slats in the foreground and background. Suddenly, Don looks up and the camera cuts to an Asian woman (Elizabeth Tsing) in a body-hugging Asian dress, with a rice-paper lantern above and behind her. She is heavily made up with mascara, red lipstick, and darkened eyebrows, as well as shiny base, and has linear cut bangs, with both sides of her hair cutting sharply into her jaw line. She comes up to him slowly and asks if she can help him. He seems stunned, as if transfixed and unable to hear her. She says in unaccented English, "Can I get you a menu?" He looks down and then up and replies, "I don't think so." She says, "I have to drop this off, but I can swing back by on my way out." His expression gradually changes into a smile. "Not tonight," he says. She smiles and leaves, and he watches her go. In an unusual moment, Don decides against sexual escapism as a response to his guilty conscience.

The credit simply calls her "Asian waitress," despite the fact that in the early 1960s she would likely be Asian American, since Asian immigration to the United States between 1924 and 1965 was severely curtailed. She is constructed as sexually available—in fact, sexually forward and assertive. The payment Don leaves, perhaps a tip (we see shots of him choosing a bill from his wad of cash), gives emphasis to the act of financial compensation (especially since she tells Don his waiter has already left). In a throwback to early twentieth-century Hollywood films about Suzy Wong, *Mad Men's* "Asian waitress" is constructed as sexually available to white men. With so few and noncomplex representations of Asians on the show, her stereotypical role here has the further effect of being iconic, of linking "Asian women" to prostitution, being available for sexual favors—available, that is, if Don were willing.<sup>17</sup>

Despite an overall ethos of sophistication about race relations—evident,

for instance, in the show's representation of Rachel Menken, a wealthy client and businesswoman who understands her racial positioning as a Jewish woman vis-à-vis white Anglo men—the show employs a postracial stance with regard to race. Within today's postracial context, representational strategies for addressing race vary from indirection, implicitness, and refocusing on whites, to rendering charges and critiques of racism anachronistic, intrusive, or no longer relevant.

I maintain that *Mad Men* implies the necessity of seeing race and racism as part of the historical past in the United States. Temporally, the show depicts race as a product of the past. The past thus functions as a container for racism, making racism's *present* disappear. Nevertheless, as I argue here, race itself is not simply a cliché or a relic on the show. It is a means by which *Mad Men* stakes a claim on what race and racism really were like in the past, seemingly unaware of the postracial effects of such a move in the present. Focusing on race and racism in the early 1960s draws attention to that era's encounter with them; while it is possible then to reflect on race and racism in the present, that kind of reflection is made more difficult by the show's explicit and insistent concern with the past. In fact, I would suggest it produces the past as an object of discourse and understanding, indirectly, perhaps inadvertently, drawing attention away from the present and thereby rendering an understanding of how race works in the postracial present and beyond (through the past on this show) much more difficult.

This sense of a postracial beyondness is produced by the text and potentially taken up by the audience. As Lipsitz writes about the relation to music, "Audiences and critics want to 'own' the pleasures and powers of popular music without embracing the commercial and industrial matrices in which they are embedded; they want to imagine that art that they have discovered through commercial cultures is somehow better than commercial culture itself, that their investment in music grants them an immunity from the embarrassing manipulation, pandering, and trivialization of culture intrinsic to a market society" (123). I think Lipsitz here provides a way to understand how *Mad Men* works as a postracial product.

Through a discourse self-conscious about cultural representation and production—positioned on a "marginal" yet also "quality" cable channel, AMC—*Mad Men* assures its audience that they have discovered something special. In this context, *Mad Men* comments on the past and is itself praised for its conception of that past. But as I have shown, *Mad Men* reports the past from the perspective of white people, as well as through the lens and bodies of white people through whom we view unfolding events. In this chapter I



suggest that the show's strategies of whiteness, which invariably center white perspectives, also structure overall attitudes about race, including the way people of color are understood.<sup>18</sup> The whiteness of the text accounts for the negated voice and lives of African Americans, the hypersexual or comic representation of Asians or Asian Americans, and the general lack of emphasis on characters of color—all of whose presence exists in order to authenticate the show's rhetoric of historical verisimilitude. The story is told from the position of its dominant white characters, including their awareness and understanding of the lives and histories of people of color. People of color occupy roles that expand our understanding of the white characters. They are figments of the white imagination. Unlike Shylock, they do not cry and bleed like people of color, but rather are made immune to such embodiment, as they are ciphers of white history's memory of them. This is how the show sacrifices meaningful narratives about people of color in favor of subordinated characters playing roles that enhance, if not define, those of the central white figures.

*Mad Men* flexes its media production muscle by highlighting its power to represent people of color, using its structural advantage vis-à-vis people of color who themselves lack the power of self-representation. The series does not account for the structural disadvantages faced by people of color or the unequal distribution of social resources, wealth, and power. *Mad Men*'s post-racial figuration of race dramatizes, emphasizes, and yet plays fast and loose with race and racism. As such, the show is both an effect of the structure of whiteness and also a contributor to the larger structuring system of race of which it is a part. Even during moments when the show could be said to offer a critique of problematic race relations, the consistent focus on white characters compromises its position. That is, its opposition can be understood as a strategic use of the representation of freedom, offering up the potential for freedom from problematic race relations in the process of negating freedom through its own structural position of racial advantage, a position people of color in comparative racial terms cannot and do not occupy.

Despite its few representations of Asians and Asian Americans and its representation of Latinos in "The Jet Set" (2.11), as well as its mention of a Native American-themed airline, the show largely operates by way of a black/white/Jewish ternary racial project.<sup>19</sup> Thus despite the particular way in which people of color appear, they are irrelevant within the context of the show, not important in and of themselves for commentary; indeed, the few representations we do get demonstrate their ultimate irrelevance to both narrative and characters.

Paradoxically, *Mad Men* negotiates its power to represent and its lack of interest in race and racism's then and there, even if interested in its own white-centric terms and usefulness in understanding contemporary representation of race and here and now, by foregrounding the fact that race and racism did occur during the time it covers. Part of what the show suggests is that racism in the early 1960s is an incontrovertible fact. Whether it is the white restaurant waiter keeping the black help in line or the construction of Jewish alterity within an Anglo-Saxon masculine world of business, racial difference did exist. It *did* matter. So if the show gets it right, represents things accurately, and tells a good story, it will include these facts, and is therefore trustworthy, can be imagined to operate rationally and counted on to represent race ethically, even as it invents that racial history. Moreover, while many of the show's critics and commentators give *Mad Men* credit for being historically accurate, true to the time, hence generating for some viewers myriad happy, nostalgic comments and feelings about the past in the present, the show's reputation as historically accurate about architecture, fashion, and personal relations also invests it with the creative license to represent race authoritatively. This is an authority we would do well to question.

## NOTES

1. One particular subgenre of this kind of narrative shows the progress from false accusation of a crime based on race to eventual acquittal, through the efforts primarily of hardworking, moral, white men. Examples include the historical *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), *A Time to Kill* (1996), and *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1999).

2. Notably, the show includes documentaries as DVD "extras" that address some of the series' missing histories. Most are directed by Cicely Gilkey, an African American documentary filmmaker; for example, season 3's DVD set (Lionsgate, 2010) includes "Medgar Evers: The Patriarch. The Activist. The Hero," and "We Shall Overcome: The March on Washington."

3. Bernie Heidkamp praises the show's ambitious representation of the "allegorical past," commenting on the appealing realism of the show: "You feel like you are peeking under someone's bed, into their medicine cabinets and their closets . . . and through their dirty laundry."

4. For a critique of the use of history and the representation of race in *Mad Men*, see also Little.

5. Gray also explores labor issues in Hollywood, a material reality that mirrors the representational one. Even in 1999, several years after Gray's book first appeared, the *Los Angeles Times* reported on the lack of people of color on television in a story called "A White, White World on TV's Fall Schedule" (G. Braxton). "Of the 26 new

comedies and dramas premiering on the major broadcast networks," the story noted, "not one feature[d] a minority in a leading role" and even secondary characters of color were sparse. "Quality" cable shows such as *Mad Men* and *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007) conspicuously lack lead characters of color. On the labor front, actors of color have either no jobs or bit parts. *Mad Men's* marginalization of characters of color also slots the actors of color who portray them in the lowest pay scale.

6. African American men largely appear as service workers: visible bodies with little or no dialogue. Black women appear as maids, service workers, and girlfriends of white men.

7. Hence, while Carla is significant in the first two episodes of season 2, she disappears for several episodes afterward. Viewers of season 2 may be led to believe the show will address race more fully only to find their enhanced interest in Carla disappointed. For such viewers, Carla's absence from several episodes is felt more powerfully than the comparable absence of a white character such as Joan.

8. Sam, of course, is the name of the most famous black servant in Hollywood cinematic history: "play it again" Sam from *Casablanca* (1942).

9. Compare to season 4's "The Chrysanthemum and the Sword" (4.5) in which Roger, a veteran of the Second World War, is hostile toward Japanese clients; his colleagues, lacking Roger's direct connection, reflect an acceptance more typical of a civil rights consciousness, seeming to regard Roger's emotional response as out of place, even archaic.

10. Compare to Pete's attempt to extract information from Hollis, halting the elevator until Hollis answers in "The Fog" (3.5); as well as the use of office secretaries for market research on lipstick in "Babylon" (1.6). The degree to which Don plans to focus on black consumers is debatable. But in "The Fog," Pete suggests targeting the "Negro market" to executives of Admiral, who reject the idea for fear of being labeled a Negro brand.

11. In "The Chrysanthemum and the Sword" Carla takes Don's daughter, Sally, to the psychiatrist's office, demonstrating her intimate relation to the family and, hence, the complexity of her character; the scene is noteworthy because of Carla's lack of dialogue, which renders it profound, yet still marginal.

12. Of course, Don is not the only white character in this position. In "Flight 1" (2.2), Joan displays racist behavior toward Paul's girlfriend Sheila, telling her that she is surprised about their relationship since when *she* dated Paul he was racist; the scene tells us more about Joan than about Sheila. Similarly, on a Freedom Ride, Paul holds forth with a vision of race neutrality as Sheila listens quietly ("The Inheritance," 2.10).

13. The upshot of this is that Sally and Francine's son have a fight. Carla tells the Drapers about it when they return from their trip. Betty is annoyed both at Carla for being the bearer of bad news and Don, who again avoids uncomfortable parenting.

14. For a discussion of this Orientalia, primarily japonisme (although the scene mixes Orientalia indiscriminately), see two postings on the popular website Mad

Men Unbuttoned: <http://madmenunbuttoned.com/post/184102355/those-cream-ceramic-lamps-in-berts-office-are/> (9 September 2009) and <http://madmenunbuttoned.com/post/195617564/this-guy-has-been-lurking-around-berts-office/> (24 September 2009).

15. Yet in "The Chrysanthemum and the Sword," when the agency's success ostensibly depends on knowing Japanese culture, his position is minimized.

16. The song has been recorded by artists such as Blue Diamonds (1963), the Fabulous Echoes (1965), Taste of Honey (1981), and Selena (1990).

17. Given Don's postracial identity as sympathizer of the marginalized and given his many sexual exploits, why he does not buck antimiscegenation like his colleague Paul is unclear. Despite Don's being the show's exemplary bridge between racial consciousness then and now, antimiscegenation in his character is preserved. Even with the added eroticism of orientalism, he denies himself and averts miscegenation, not made legal federally in the United States until *Loving v. Virginia* in 1967.

18. See Richard Dyer on "the invisibility of whiteness as a racial position in which white (which is to say dominant) discourse is of a piece with its ubiquity" (*White*, 3).

19. The show does not say whether Mohawk is a Native American-owned airline or if, like a Native American sports mascot, Mohawk has simply appropriated Native American identity. Very likely it is the latter, which thus suggests the commonplace way the show simultaneously appropriates and defers race.

## SEASON 4

- 4.1  
"Public Relations." AMC. Dir. Phil Abraham. Writ. Matthew Weiner. 25 July 2010.
- 4.2  
"Christmas Comes but Once a Year." AMC. Dir. Michael Uppendahl. Writ. Tracy McMillan and Matthew Weiner. 1 Aug. 2010.
- 4.3  
"The Good News." AMC. Dir. Jennifer Getzinger. Writ. Jonathan Abrahams and Matthew Weiner. 8 Aug. 2010.
- 4.4  
"The Rejected." AMC. Dir. John Slatery. Writ. Keith Huff and Matthew Weiner. 15 Aug. 2010.
- 4.5  
"The Chrysanthemum and the Sword." AMC. Dir. Lesli Linka Glatter. Writ. Erin Levy. 22 Aug. 2010.
- 4.6  
"Waldorf Stories." AMC. Dir. Scott Hornbacher. Writ. Brett Johnson and Matthew Weiner. 29 Aug. 2010.
- 4.7  
"The Suitcase." AMC. Dir. Jennifer Getzinger. Writ. Matthew Weiner. 5 Sept. 2010.
- 4.8  
"The Summer Man." AMC. Dir. Phil Abraham. Writ. Lisa Albert, Janet Leahy, and Matthew Weiner. 12 Sept. 2010.
- 4.9  
"The Beautiful Girls." AMC. Dir. Michael Uppendahl. Writ. Dahvi Waller and Matthew Weiner. 19 Sept. 2010.
- 4.10  
"Hands and Knees." AMC. Dir. Lynn Shelton. Writ. Jonathan Abrahams and Matthew Weiner. 26 Sept. 2010.
- 4.11  
"Chinese Wall." AMC. Dir. Phil Abraham. Writ. Erin Levy. 3 Oct. 2010.
- 4.12  
"Blowing Smoke." AMC. Dir. John Slatery. Writ. Andre Jacquemetton and Maria Jacquemetton. 10 Oct. 2010.
- 4.13  
"Tomorrowland." AMC. Dir. Matthew Weiner. Writ. Jonathan Igla and Matthew Weiner. 17 Oct. 2010.

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