

post 9/11, but not post-racial

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HEROES LOST

Heroes (NBC) and *Lost* (ABC)

An unexpected plane crash on a mysterious island and the potential detonation of New York City—the two central plot points of ABC’s *Lost* and NBC’s *Heroes*, respectively—allude to the post-9/11 consciousness of disaster, fear, terrorism, and war pervasive in contemporary American culture. With their large and diverse ensemble casts, these shows deliver a similar message: we can ensure the survival of humankind only with cooperation across racial, ethnic, and national lines.

But despite the seemingly enlightened characterizations of diversity in an era marked by heightened xenophobia and nativism, *Lost* and *Heroes* fall short of creating egalitarian, post-racial utopias, even within their fictional realities.

The slew of non-white (and non-U.S.) characters on both *Lost* and *Heroes* retain second-class citizenry compared to the white American males who enjoy the spotlight as central characters. For example, although Sayid Jarrah, an Iraqi Rambo-like character in *Lost*, has many character complexities (emotional depth and an intricate back story among them), he remains a sidekick and pawn to the show’s white men.

As an ex-Iraqi soldier, Sayid’s superior survival and military skills conceal a tormented soul that wants to shed his

past as an expert torturer. When the white alpha-males compete for leadership on the island, Sayid chooses to side with central protagonist Jack Shephard, solidifying his status as one of the good guys. However, he remains in Jack’s shadow and figures less centrally in the plots than the main white characters. Even while he becomes one of the “Oceanic Six” (the six characters that manage to escape the island), his role is merely that of a pawn for central antagonist Benjamin Linus. And although Sayid engages in multiple romantic relationships, they all end tragically and quickly, especially when compared to the all-white Jack Shephard—Kate Austen—James “Sawyer” Ford love triangle that has persisted since the first season.

Similarly, *Heroes*’ Hiro Nakamura, despite being one of the most powerful heroes and an audience favorite, seems to waste his amazing powers away at hapless buffoonery. As an uber-cool Japanese geek-hero whose ability to manipulate space and time make him

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one of the most formidable characters, Hiro has the potential to lead the series. However, despite being featured in a long, drawn-out storyline in the second season, he remains a sidekick who enables the white protagonist’s plot and provides general comedic relief to the show’s usual dramatic tone.

Like Sayid, Hiro has no luck in love, losing his two potential love interests as soon as he reveals his true feelings. And his childlike wonder throughout the

entire series, while endearing, plays into the long-standing stereotype of the emasculated and infantile Asian man requiring the paternalistic aid of white men. In the third season, Hiro literally reverts back to his 10-year-old self, unable to “save the world” despite numerous opportunities. Rather than emerging as the ultimate hero, he remains a bumbling clown, often using his powers to correct his previous errors. Even Ando Masahashi, Hiro’s Japanese sidekick, acquires an ability whose sole manifestation is to enhance other (notably white) characters’ powers, further solidifying the Asian stereotype as a dutiful sidekick.

Many other characters of color on *Lost* and *Heroes* fare even worse as rehashed caricatures like the noble savage (The Haitian and Usutu of *Heroes*, Mr. Eko of *Lost*) or the violent black buck/bitch of color (Benjamin “Knox” Washington and Baron Samedi of *Heroes*, Ana-Lucia Cortez of *Lost*).

In both shows, white males domi-

nate as central characters. In *Lost*, Jack emerges as the protector-protagonist of a defenseless flock of survivors. Affluent, educated, talented, decisive, and the only medical doctor among the survivors, Jack epitomizes the self-sacrificing savior. On several occasions he risks his own life to save the other survivors. We learn in the first season that Jack’s blood type is O; he’s the universal donor, willing to dangerously drain his own blood to save another. Even his faults—his bat-



Photos courtesy NBC and ABC

The multicultural casts of *Heroes* (left) and *Lost* (right).

tle with alcoholism, inability to cope with father issues, and difficulty in securing romantic pursuits (a quality that plagues all characters regardless of race, though the white relationships generally last longer)—complicate his character and thus increase audience interest. Throughout the seasons, Jack positions himself in a place of authority, achieving recognition and respect from his fellow island inhabitants.

Peter Petrelli of *Heroes* serves an identical role. Like Jack, he is a white male who comes from an affluent family with daddy issues and a savior complex. Peter is all-powerful (absorbing the powers of those he comes into contact with), and even when he loses his powers briefly, he remains the principal hope for saving the world. His heroic endeavors include saving “the cheerleader,” Claire Bennet, a young, white blonde revealed as Peter’s niece in a later episode. In so doing Peter saves New York City from nuclear detonation and destroys a deadly virus that would otherwise kill the entire human race.

Even more complex than these protagonists are their (also white male) antagonist counterparts, whose arcs allow them to shuffle between villain and hero. As the leader of the “Others,” *Lost*’s Benjamin defends the island from

invaders by any means necessary, including lying, kidnapping, and killing. His true character remains an enigma and contributes to the show’s mysterious atmosphere. *Heroes*’ main antagonist, Gabriel Gray/Sylar, also keeps the audience guessing at his nature—is he an evil maniacal killer or a misunderstood repentant sinner? His murderous, power-hungry tendencies are matched only by his desperate desire to find his true parents and become “normal.”

White characters’ multifaceted traits are often developed over several seasons while few characters of color achieve such depth. Furthermore, the number of interesting white characters surpasses characters of color, who often serve as tokens of their specific nationality, race, or ethnicity.

On *Lost*, the multiplicity of white characters includes a sassy, southern beefcake (Sawyer), a neurotic mystic-scout (John Locke), and a sexy female fugitive (Kate). Similarly, *Heroes* has a laundry list of white characters, like a villain-hunter with no superpowers but his wits (Noah Bennet), a man destined to be president of the United States who can also fly (Nathan Petrelli), and a physically invincible cheerleader (Claire). Moreover, nearly all the white characters on *Heroes* are related either by blood, marriage, or

adoption, further marginalizing the characters of color who serve as supporting cast to the Petrelli family.

Women are less developed compared to men, often serving as targets of romantic interest rather than strong characters of their own accord. Though Kate (*Lost*) and Claire (*Heroes*) have character complexities, they serve primarily as objects to pursue, love, and protect. With few exceptions, women of color are even more limited, serving as exotic seductresses either of the tigress (Anastasia of *Lost*) or the helpless victim variety (Maya Herrera of *Heroes*).

Cultural critiques aside, we remain fans of both shows. Science fiction television is one of the few genres that, more often than not, dares to imagine a multicultural landscape—one of the earliest mavericks being *Star Trek*. Such shows inspire us to dream of a more integrated world than the one we inhabit, even if white men remain at its center.

As Stuart Hall and other cultural theorists remind us, popular media can inspire audiences to develop their own, more oppositional, interpretations, even if those messages aren’t portrayed directly. Hence, we watch with bated breath for scenes with Uhura and Sulu, imagining them, rather than Captain

Kirk, commanding the USS Enterprise. Or if we're really imaginative, Spock, with his human/Vulcan mixed heritage, morphs into an icon of multiracial and multicultural possibilities. More recent science-fiction television has ventured where no man (or woman) of color has gone before, featuring an African American male commander (*Star Trek Deep Space Nine*), a Latino male admiral (*Battlestar Galactica*), and a white female lead (*The Sarah Connor Chronicles*).

Given network television's dearth of people of color—with only slight increases in recent years—*Lost* and *Heroes* entice us with their large, diverse casts. And once in a while, these shows manage to surprise and delight. Both have dared to air segments of dialogue in foreign languages with English subtitles, something television executives once believed would cause American audiences to tune out.

Although their leadership seems to come from white males, people of color still play an integral role in furthering these shows' plot lines and central themes. Especially in the case of *Lost*, they've tried to showcase each of the non-white character's back stories. *Lost*'s lovable and loyal Hurley Reyes manages to escape traditional racial/ethnic stereotypes. Though his back story reveals his Latino heritage (the quintessentially Chicano comic Cheech Marin plays his father), little to no attention is paid to his ethnicity. While Hurley's physically large size initially makes him the "funny fat guy," he grows in complexity as the craziest (or perhaps sanest?) character on the island. Hurley often serves as a peacemaker and neutral go-between for other feuding characters, making him an unlikely hero on the show.

Dr. Suresh (*Heroes*), an Indian researcher/professor, though not as fleshed out as Hurley, also diverges from the traditional Indian stereotype as the "brains" of the show. And notably, unlike Apu, the South Asian stock character featured on *The Simpsons*, he speaks with a British rather than exaggerated

"Indian" accent. Suresh's technical expertise reflects a growing awareness of India's global influence in science and telecommunications.

In addition to pushing the limits of traditional stereotypes, both shows have featured people of color in romantic and familial relationships, developments traditionally reserved solely for white characters. Relationships worthy of note include husband and wife Jin-Soo Kwon and Sun-Hwa Kwon on *Lost* and the interracial familial relationships between

devote more attention to their white, male central characters. In the midst of an uncertain future for U.S. economic, military, and political power in the global arena, both shows perpetuate the myth that white Americans remain in control of the world's destiny.

With the passing of the Bush legacy, however, shows like *Lost* and *Heroes* may change focus; Carlton Cuse, the executive producer of *Lost*, explained in a November issue of *Entertainment Weekly* that while the dark tones of the

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D.L. Hawkins, Niki Sanders, and Micah Sanders on *Heroes*.

Though Jin and Sun (two Korean characters) begin as stereotypes (overbearing, uncommunicative patriarchal husband and beautiful victimized wife), their relationship develops as the seasons progress. As the two come to understand more about one another, they begin to face physical and relational obstacles that draw them closer together. Jin softens and becomes more understanding toward his wife's needs while Sun asserts her own desires and becomes an equal partner in her marriage.

In *Heroes*, D.L. (an African American male) starts off as a stereotypical deadbeat dad in prison, but he eventually demonstrates his devotion and loyalty to his partner (Niki, a white female) and child (Micah, a biracial male). A similar parental relationship between an African American man and his son on *Lost* (Michael Dawson and Walt Lloyd) deviates from traditional stereotypes with an initially reluctant father who ends up making huge sacrifices to rescue his son and leave the island.

Though the shows' writers demonstrate their ability to create complex, well-rounded characters of color, they still

first three seasons were shadowed by a country at war and fearful of terrorism, the final two seasons will take a happy turn, influenced by the Obama Administration's promise of hope. Furthermore, a November 2008 article in *The New York Times* predicts Barack Obama's win will open doors for actors of color in leading dramatic roles.

If the United States can elect an African American president, television executives may take more chances on people of color in leading roles. Or, we may find we've arrived at a point in history where real life is more post-racial than the utopian imaginings of our science fictions.

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