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## Can 'Westworld' Give Us New Ways of Talking About Slavery?

*In its first four episodes, HBO's latest Sunday-night extravaganza takes its postcolonialism seriously.*

*By David Perry*



Westworld. (Photo: HBO)

*Westworld*, the new drama from HBO, might be television's first instance of offering a robot revolution story with an explicitly postcolonial bent. While every narrative of robot revolution is really about slavery and hierarchy, something that's been true since the word "robot" was invented in 1920, *Westworld*—if it lives up to the promise of the first four episodes—could offer

something new. Even while trapped inside the literally pre-programmed loops of their controllers, the robots seem to be developing awareness of the conditions of their bondage, learning to express themselves inside a programmed reality, and developing a new identity. But the pathway toward that self-awareness, and maybe even a path to liberation, will require dying again, and again, and again. Their language has literally been programmed by their masters, who have placed them into a fantasy borderland where the wealthy of the Western world can come to play.

Does that mean the robots will emerge as the great subaltern protagonists of contemporary televised sci-fi? If they do, will it still be good television?

*Westworld* is the newest show from HBO, premiering in the *Game of Thrones* slot of 9 p.m. eastern time on Sunday nights, a sure sign that the network has high hopes of the show capturing a big audience. It's loosely based on a 1973 Michael Crichton movie (he wrote and directed, then later turned it into a novel) about a theme park where the robot attractions turn on the guests. The uprising happens thanks to both corporate greed and the impossibility of keeping ever-more complex systems under control, themes that Crichton would return to in *Jurassic Park*. The movie is OK. Yul Brynner plays an interesting Terminator-like gunslinger who implacably hunts the humans, but that's about the only detail worth noting. There's no high concept.

The new show, on the other hand, might be almost too entangled in its high concepts, offering a series that incorporates and combines themes from *Inception*, *Blade Runner*, and *Deadwood*. In the pilot, there's a bit too much going on; we're introduced to both Guests (humans) and Hosts (robots), but also to the puppet-masters behind the scenes with their petty squabbles. The gore is pronounced. But over the next few episodes, things start to develop: We get an idea of which robots are moving toward consciousness (no spoilers!) and the mechanisms of their liberation. The stories recycle and become familiar, then deviate either by plan or accident. Robots becoming self-aware retain the memories of their former lives, but also then must live with the trauma of rape and murder, rather than blissfully forgetting each day. Whatever happens, it's not going to be a simple robot revolution in which the machines become aware and start slaughtering humans (as in *Battlestar Galactica* or the *Terminator* series).

*The American West was colonized space. It now looks like an HBO sci-fi show, of all things, is repurposing that myth to tell a postcolonial tale of robot rebellion.*

The word “robot,” which *Westworld* doesn’t use, was coined when Karel Čapek made up the word from the Old Slavonic word *rabota*, a kind of serf forced to do labor. Čapek’s play, *Rossum’s Universal Robots*, which opened in 1920, ends with the robots killing all but one human and taking over the world; then two of the machines fall in love and head off to make more beautiful robots together. Ever since, we’ve seen writers using robots to drive tales of revolution and self-awareness. Gerry Canavan, an assistant professor of Literature at Marquette University and an expert on science fiction, tells me that, generally speaking, robot stories “are a pretty astounding act of Sigmund Freud-style repression of the memory of slavery: We imagine a class of beings who look and act like us but aren’t human, so they can be made to work without citizenship or legal personhood—then it turns out they *are* persons after all and are either liberated or (more commonly in the fantasy) violently revolt.”

The specific confines of *Westworld*, though, seem to enable new modes of storytelling in this longer tradition. We learn nothing about the world outside, except for hints dropped by the Guests and the employees of the park. The technology is clearly more advanced from the present day, but there’s no clue whether we’re just a few years or distant decades into the future. Most of the action takes place either in the subterranean backstage areas or in a theme park that offers a fantasy version of the Old American West. And it’s in that latter setting that *Westworld* is heading toward a more significant storyline, because the history of the American West is specifically colonial.

Gregory Hampton, an associate professor of literature at Howard University and author of *Imagining Slaves and Robots in Literature, Film, and Popular Culture: Reinventing Yesterday’s Slave With Tomorrow’s Robot*, says that the fictional nature of sci-fi can help push us to think about power and oppression, both in history and today.

“It’s not just the robot thing but aliens as well,” he says. “The alien has always been the metaphor for other marginalized identities attached to a body. An easier way to approach things. To get a broader audience that maybe doesn’t want to deal with race up front.”

*Westworld* doesn't really engage directly with racial questions. Most of the Guests are white. The Hosts are somewhat randomly racialized, and there's no reason to think that the black (Thandie Newton), Brazilian (Rodrigo Santoro), or white (Evan Rachel Wood) robots will have different experiences as they stumble toward consciousness. In the theme park setting, though, each character takes on a distinct role: Newton plays a brothel madam, Santoro plays an outlaw (supposedly part indigenous, part Mexican), and Wood a wholesome rancher's daughter and artist. There's also Jeffrey Wright, who plays the black head of programming for the park. If, as seems possible, he takes on an emancipatory role, the racial dynamics may yet prove significant.

So far, we haven't seen enough of the robot awareness to really know how that story is going to evolve. What we have seen is the tourists, and they are awful. Initially the Guests, like the robots, are a pretty diverse group. But over time they wash out into predominantly white and male. We fixate on several different white men, most of whom delight in the slaughter. William (Jimmi Simpson), falls in love with a "native" girl and winds up renouncing violence as a result. Moreover, time and time again, we encounter a robot on the cusp of some new stage of awareness, only to see a random white male guest will just start killing hosts for fun, whooping and hollering in joy. The tagline for the park is "live without limits."

Citing the work of Jamaica Kincaid, Hampton tells me that this idea of a lawless vacation spot has a history in postcolonial literature too. Tourists in postcolonial literature, Hampton says, treat "the island or the imperialized nation [as] sort of a toilet, [doing] all the stuff you couldn't do in Europe you can do on vacation in the Caribbean." Hampton joked that the park's tagline could be, "Let Westworld be your toilet." He adds that these narratives evoke the damage that colonialism exercises on both colonizer and colonized, master and slave.

Of course, along the way, there's a lot of violence, whether depicted or merely implied off-screen. HBO has frustrated critics, including me, for the ways in which its hit show *Game of Thrones* so casually uses violence and sexual assault for cheap shock, while introducing random nudity for titillation. Comparatively, once I got past the *Westworld* pilot, I found the violence less and less cheap. The robots become more real, their suffering conveys more affect to the viewer, and I came to root for them to break the cycle. Naked bodies rarely appear in ways calculated not to arouse, but such is the case here: Every robot backstage is stripped naked, intended to remind the workers at the resort that these humanlike named entities are just things.

When we do get a sexy foursome scene—sometime in the third episode—the bodies have already been desexualized and all that is left is disgust.

Postcolonial theory—like all theory—can seem to erect barriers between the typical reader and the professionals of the literary world. But postcolonial literature, whether produced in high or low cultural genres (if we even have to accept that binary distinction, which we don't), means simply stories that say something true about imperialism, subjugation, and related themes. The American West was colonized space. American Western literature has mostly presented it as heroic frontier, but that's always been a myth. For decades, artists and scholars alike have been pushing back against that myth. It's too soon to tell whether they'll succeed, but it looks like an HBO sci-fi show, of all things, is trying to repurpose that myth to tell a postcolonial narrative of robot rebellion.

Can the network pull it off? Stay tuned.



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