Renegotiating White Male Hegemony in Contemporary Period Fiction: An Analysis of the Television Serials *Copper* and *Hell on Wheels*

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Abstract:
Starting with the observation that the results of Hollywood's recently renewed interest in the subject of the American Civil War and Slavery in the Old South allow for being read as explorations of questions of masculinity, in particular in relation with issues of race (including whiteness), I ask whether the same applies to two recent television drama series set in the historical period in question, namely AMC's *Hell on Wheels* (2011 – present) and BBC America's *Copper* (2012 – 2013). Considering media statements about these shows that give the impression that they could be regarded as counter-hegemonic approaches to the dramatization of American history, the question arises how both of them ended up with a white male main character. Given the centrality that "narratives of paternally charged revenge" (Hamad) assume in the design of either character, an inquiry into the forms and functions of fatherhood is chosen as a starting point for an exploration of this question. The following analysis shows that apart from serving as a diegetic device that accounts for their respective motivations, drawing the main characters as bereaved fathers also sets the stage for authoritarian celebrations of the need for a patriarchal protector that imply conceptualizing motherhood as inevitably needful and dependent at best, or even as the primary cause for fathers' experiences of loss and alienation from their children at worst. In a second step, the attention is turned towards the portrayal of race relations in the two shows, based on the observation that in either case, the white male main character is complemented with a Black male side-kick, a constellation that bears a certain resemblance to the setup typical for the biracial buddy movie as analysed by Ames. While these relationships allow to be read as critical explorations of the subject of racism at the surface level, a more thorough inquiry into their structures and dynamics indicates that they primarily cater to the emotional needs of a white male audience, up to the point of offering a redemption of sorts from the historical guilt of slavery.

Stabilizing Hegemony by Incorporating Criticism?

1 The two network television serials *Hell on Wheels* (AMC, 2011 – present) and *Copper* (BBC America, 2012 – 2013) might at first glance have nothing more in common than their historical setting in immediate temporal proximity to the American Civil War. Yet a look at the publicity that both shows received might suggest otherwise. BBC America General Manager Perry Simon promoted *Copper* as a show that would be "capturing the early American multicultural experience in provocative, ground-breaking fashion" (qtd. in Fienberg) and likewise *Hell on Wheels* was criticized for giving the impression that its "actors sometimes are made to symbolize very modern obsessions, e.g. with race and gender" (Dewolf Smith). Could it be, then, that these shows represent an intersectional approach of the dramatization of American history, that they might, in other

words, present an attempt at "decentering the center" (Narayan & Harding), at undermining the hegemonic position of white masculinity? It might come as a bit of a surprise that this is precisely not the case, but that both series resort to a rather conventional setup in featuring a white male main protagonist - with astoundingly similar character designs.In fact, as I would like to argue, a comparative analysis of both shows that takes this similarity as a starting point indicates that they primarily cater to the emotional needs of a white male audience, up to the point of offering a redemption of sorts from the historical guilt of slavery.

2 Both protagonists are introduced as Civil War veterans who lost their family while they were at the front and in either case this loss supplies the backdrop for the "long arc [that] hangs over every episode" (Metcalf 64) of at least the first season. Furthermore, both the former Confederate soldier Cullen Bohannon in *Hell on Wheels* and the former Union soldier Kevin Corcoran in *Copper* are complemented with a minor character whose identity as a Black man is a defining factor of their relationship. It is probably safe to say that the relative prominence of these latter characters – Elam Ferguson in *Hell on Wheels* and Matthew Freeman in *Copper* – has inspired statements about the two shows such as those quoted above. As a matter of fact, it is not to be denied that the subject of racism is critically explored through the portrayal of these relationships, e.g. when Ferguson points out to Bohannon that even strong emotional bonds between slave and slave-owner cannot undo the fundamental injustice of slavery ("Revelations") or when Freeman makes Corcoran aware of the racist bias guiding one of his investigations ("In the Hands of an Angry God"). Yet, for all this apparently critical engagement with power structures, the fact remains that in either case, we somehow mysteriously ended up with a white man occupying centee stage. Now, how did that happen? Could it be, for instance, that these apparently critical glances at American history operate in a way very similar to "popular culture's latest attempts to come to terms with feminism by appropriating it", a pattern that Modleski has observed in her analysis of *Top Gu*n already 25 years ago (63)?

Postfeminist Fatherhood in the Civil War Era?

3 Given the striking similarity between Bohannon and Corcoran – both are family fathers who lost their families while fighting in the Civil War – an obvious point to further this analysis is to look at the way in which their being fathers is made relevant in either series, based on Hamad's observation that "[f]atherhood has become the dominant paradigm of masculinity across the spectrum of U.S. mainstream cinema" (1) and her

subsequent conclusion that “postfeminist fatherhood is the new hegemonic masculinity” (ibid.). For all its acuteness with regard to the present, Hamad’s pointed formulation runs the risk of obfuscating the fact that fatherhood as a social institution has always been a central element of hegemonic masculinity in American society, notwithstanding the manifold transformations that it has undergone since colonial times (Griswold 1-9; Rotundo 2-6), and that, by virtue of its ideological equation with breadwinning for the better part of the last two centuries it has served to legitimize male dominance (Pleck 86-90). Nevertheless, her observation does have the merit of drawing attention towards two important discursive novelties.

4 On the one hand, Hamad rightly foregrounds that over the last fifteen years it has become next to impossible for a male Hollywood hero to escape being cast in paternal terms, if not as a father in the literal sense of the word, then at least figuratively (15-17). On the other hand, and more importantly perhaps, she also casts light on the historically specific form that the ideal of fatherhood has taken on in a discursive formation that is shaped to a large extent by “the cultural hegemony of postfeminism” (5). At large, this historical situation is distinguished by the attempts of patriarchy to stabilize itself in the face of the long-term impact of second wave feminism, sometimes by mobilizing discourses that posit men as victims of feminist interventions (cf. Modleski 10; Kimmel 217-223), sometimes in less obvious ways. Thus, what Hamad observed in her survey of recent period drama films (29-47) is a marked tendency towards dualistic configurations of fatherhood that blend “cultural nostalgia for pre-second wave feminist gender norms” (29) with an adherence to postfeminist demands for “sensitive, emotionally articulate fathers” (ibid.). This discursive strategy aptly illustrates the persistence as well as the flexibility of patriarchal ideology in that it ensures the survival of outdated models of masculinity by making partial and highly selective concessions to emancipatory gender ideals.

5 This “dualistic construction of historically located masculinity as germane to the setting and symptomatic of postfeminism” (Hamad 31) can also be traced in the design of both Bohannon and Corcoran, especially in the way they interact with their respective surrogate children they encounter along the way. Kevin Corcoran’s relationship with Annie Reilly, for instance, is not only characterized by him acting as her patriarchal protector (“Surviving Death”; “Husbands and Fathers”; “The Hudson River School”; “A Morning Song”) but also features instances of him displaying a softer, more domestic side, in that he is shown putting her in the bathtub, carefully cleaning her up and affectionately tucking her in afterwards, on a day that saw her escaping a traumatic situation (“The Hudson River

School"), thus offering her a kind of emotional support that is much more in correspondence "with contemporary norms of sensitive fatherhood" (Hamad31) than with the high degree of alienation that must be assumed to have been characteristic of father-daughter relationships in nineteenth-century urban America (Griswold 16f.). In a similar vein, Bohannon gets an opportunity to display his softer side upon meeting the orphaned Mormon boy Ezra Dutson, with whom he quickly develops an astonishingly good rapport: after gradually gaining the boy's trust by bonding activities such as playing cards ("Cholera"), passing on wilderness lore and making him his confidant in warning him not to trust Thomas Durant too much as the three of them set out on a mission to get some of their workers back, Bohannon turns out to be the one with whom Ezra speaks his first words after the traumatic experience of losing his parents ("It happened in Boston"). Yet, despite these apparent efforts of letting both Bohannon and Corcoran conform with the ideals of postfeminist fatherhood to a certain extent, the primary mode of inflecting their masculinity as fatherhood is through the mobilization of a "paternalized revenge narrative" (Hamad 31).

Mobilizing Paternal Revenge Narratives

6 In *Hell on Wheels,* the very first scene of the series' pilot sees Cullen Bohannon shooting one of the Union soldiers who killed his wife and son, branding the series from its very beginning as a staging ground for what Hamad – borrowing a term coined by the critic Anthony Oliver Scott – refers to as a vigilante fatherhood narrative that follows the pattern of "paternal payback" (63). A bereaved father's quest for vengeance upon those responsible for his loss is established as the main character's primary motivation, an effect that receives further reinforcement from the tag-line of the first season's trailer: "In 1865, a soldier's search for vengeance brought him here." Notably, however, the fact that Bohannon is presented as a "righteously aggrieved father" (Hamad 30) can certainly serve to explain why he made the journey to this remote outpost of civilization in the very first place, yet it does not account for the fact that he becomes one of the most central figures of the community, a centrality that is expressed and underlined by his impressive career with the Union Pacific Railroad. After being hired as little more than a common laborer ("Pilot"), he is made foreman of the entire workforce ("Immoral Mathematics"), head of railroad security ("Pomp, Pride and Circumstance") and chief engineer ("Big Bad Wolf"). What this implies can be illustrated by borrowing from the terminology of Wright's structuralist analysis of classical Western movies. Allowing for the derivations that the

format of the television serial as opposed to the movie necessitates, *Hell on Wheels* presents itself as a blend of the classical plot (48f.) and the vengeance variation (69). In the terms of these plot models, Bohannon's fatherhood tells us why he "enters a social group" (41) in the first place, yet it does not account for the "exceptional ability" (42) which in turn motivates the social group to award him "a special status" (43), a status that seems to correspond rather well with Connell's and Messerschmidt's conception of hegemonic masculinity as "the currently most honored way of being a man" (832).

7 In *Copper*, on the other hand, it takes slightly longer until Kevin Corcoran's masculinity is articulated as bereaved fatherhood. In fact, this is not the case until halfway through the first episode ("Surviving Death") when his perceived duty to see to the burial of a recently murdered child takes him to the cemetery that also contains his own daughter's grave. Significantly, however, the child that Corcoran and his colleagues have come to bury there is the twin sister of Annie Reilly, his surrogate daughter whose acquaintance he already makes in the episode's opening scene. Interestingly, the presence of this surrogate daughter makes it possible to let Kevin Corcoran act as the protagonist of two narrative scenarios that, in her survey of recent Hollywood films, Hamad has identified as cognate, yet normally mutually exclusive manifestations of vigilante postfeminist fatherhood (63-69): By virtue of this configuration he can not only appear as the "righteously aggrieved father" (30) seeking to "enact paternally charged revenge" (ibid.) on those who killed his daughter, but it also enables him to repeatedly act as a "sovereign rescuer father" (65) in search-and-rescue narratives, with Annie taking the role of the kidnapped daughter ("Surviving Death"; "Arsenic and Old Cake"; "The Hudson River School"; "A Morning Song"). Similar to the function that the paternal revenge narrative assumes in *Hell on Wheels*, Corcoran's aggrieved fatherhood and the narratives through which it is articulated help to provide a certain degree of diegetic plausibility. Thus, they allow to account for the stubbornness with which he investigates seemingly hopeless cases even after his colleagues and superiors have told him otherwise, be it the murder of Kate Reilly ("Surviving Death"; "Husbands and Fathers"), or his wife's mysterious disappearance ("Surviving Death"; "Husbands and Fathers"; "The Empty Locket"; "La Tempête"; "Better Times Are Coming").

Marginalizing Motherhood

8 In fact, I would like to argue that he does not regard finding his wife Ellen as an end in itself, but rather as a means to solve the case of his daughter's death. This is

indicated by a similar suspicion that is voiced by his partner detective Francis Maguire ("La Tempête") and the way he treats his wife after finally having found her, heavily sedated in a psychiatric hospital reserved for poor women ("Better Times Are Coming"; "A Day to Give Thanks"). His behavior in this latter instance is especially telling: Despite the heavy withdrawal symptoms that she is suffering from, he treats her like he would treat a suspect in an investigation, unrelentingly questioning her as soon as she shows the slightest signs of coming to her senses ("A Day to Give Thanks").

9 The final revelation of the mystery then does not contribute to solving this conflict, either. On the contrary, it rather adds further tension to their relationship, as it turns out that it was Ellen herself who accidentally killed their daughter, after the latter had walked in on her and Francis Maguire having extramarital sex ("A Day to Give Thanks").[1]

10 The tragic resolution then comes in the form of Ellen's suicide, after she had unsuccessfully tried to make up with Kevin for several episodes ("The Hope Too Bright to Last"). Overtly, this desperate act seems to have been caused by Ellen having gotten the impression that Kevin had made another woman pregnant ("To One Shortly to Die"), yet the ground for it had already been prepared by his inability and unwillingness –to forgive her ("A Day to Give Thanks"; "Home, Sweet Home"; "Aileen Aroon"; "I Defy Thee to Forget").

11 Reduced to a more abstract pattern, this plot-line presents a brutalized version of the "marginalization of motherhood in popular cinema" as it has been described by Hamad (17-19): instead of merely rendering her largely irrelevant to the story, here the mother is made responsible for the father's loss of his child. Subsequently she is punished for having caused this loss by having acted as a (sexually) autonomous subject independent of her husband. Despite the fact that she feels compelled to inflict the punishment on herself, it is

[1]Interestingly, Ellen's repressed memory of this event is presented to have blended with recollections of an earlier traumatic – and apparently guilt-laden – experience, namely an abortion she had after she got pregnant from Francis Maguire. Her strongest association with this experience is a sense of having heard the fetus cry during the abortion, even though she expresses full awareness for the impossibility of this impression. In the scene that shows her recovering both memories and confessing them to Kevin, she describes having pulled Maggie towards her in order to console her, after the latter had started crying because her mother was committing adultery with Maguire. However, Ellen reveals that she was not able to stop Maggie from crying and that instead, the girl's sobbing reactivated the earlier trauma of the above-mentioned abortion, thus inducing a state resembling an anxiety attack, as is hinted at by the strong perceptional disorders she describes. In this state, she tries to push the noise away from her, not realizing any more that what she merely perceives as noise is in fact her daughter, and inadvertently makes Maggie hit the door-frame with the back of her head ("A Day to Give Thanks"). This arrangement ties Maggie's death to Ellen's unfaithfulness in a twofold way: on an immediate level, being caught in the act with Maguire sets the stage for Maggie's death, whereas a former consequence of Ellen's affair, namely the abortion, provides a plausible explanation for the push that ultimately killed the girl. Notably, this arrangement containing a very strong association of abortion with murder, brings to mind the political positions of the so-called 'pro-life movement'.

clear that she would not have gone to such desperate measures if it were not for the persistence of Kevin's grudge against her. To put this bluntly, the pattern partly resembles a socio-cultural phenomenon germane to the postfeminist present that has also gained currency as a standard trope of anti-feminist backlash politics: the legal dispute over custody arrangements and financial child support after divorce that allegedly tends to cut off fathers from their children, while simultaneously compelling them to divert unreasonably high amounts of their incomes into their ex-wives' pockets. Despite the fact that demographic reality does not coincide with this trope to an extent that would justify regarding it as a mass phenomenon, it has nevertheless decisively shaped the public debate about child-care arrangements and the pertinent jurisdiction, which is largely due to the political efforts of so-called "fathers' rights" groups (Griswold 260-265; Kimmel 265f.), an activism that more often than not is fueled by these men's "hostility towards the courts, social workers, and *most of all their ex-wives*" (Griswold 261, italics added). Against this backdrop, Ellen's suicide, ultimately attributable to Kevin's behavior towards her, gives the impression of an aggrieved "fathers' rights" activist's revenge fantasy, mediating the misogynous aggression that is effectively directed at contemporary women through a narrative arrangement in an historical setting that causally links a wife's unfaithfulness to the death of the 'legitimate" child and her subsequently self-inflicted punishment.

12 This impression is supported by two further peculiarities: on the one hand, Ellen's death finally paves the way for the happy reunion and lasting reconciliation of Kevin with the fraternally signified Francis Maguire, i.e. the man with whom his wife had an affair in his absence ("Ashes Denote That Fire Was"), thus giving homosocial bonds between men symbolic prevalence over relationships across gender lines, which again is very much in line with ideologies of male supremacy both old and new (Connell 209f.; Kimmel 293f.; Rotundo 194-221). On the other hand, the pattern of a woman both coded as a mother and a spouse bringing harm to a child by acting autonomously – i.e. without depending on Kevin – had already made its appearance in the series once before Kevin learned that Ellen was responsible for their daughter's death. Annie, Kevin's aforementioned surrogate daughter, had been given into Elizabeth Haverford's care ("In the Hands of an Angry God"), a wealthy and beautiful upper-class widow who also becomes Kevin's love-interest for a few episodes ("In the Hands of an Angry God"; "The Empty Locket"; "La Tempête"; "Arsenic and Old Cake"; "The Hudson River School"), yet she finds it increasingly difficult to deal with the girl's erratic behavior and finally comes to the conclusion that she is not capable of providing the firm education that the bad influences Annie had been

exposed to seem to make necessary. Consequently, she locates the man who identifies himself as Annie's actual father, a farmer from Upstate New York, and hands her over to him ("Arsenic and Old Cake"), without knowing that this man had bought Annie and her sister Kate from their biological mother in order to turn them into sex-slaves, before they managed to escape from his farm and ran off to New York City, as Kevin and his colleagues had found out earlier on ("Husbands and Fathers").

13 Now, instead of being slowly driven to commit suicide like Ellen, Elizabeth receives her punishment from Kevin in a much more immediate manner: after he learns that Annie was not sent to California, as Elizabeth falsely made him believe ("Arsenic and Old Cake"), he rushes to the Haverford mansion in order to confront her. As she receives him in her drawing room, he enacts his "paternally charged revenge" (Hamad 30) on her in a twofold way. First, he violently destroys a nude painting that had been described to bear "an uncanny resemblance" to her earlier on and that had played a significant role in catalyzing their romantic relationship to each other ("In the Hands of an Angry God"), by slicing through the canvas with a knife he seemingly produced out of nowhere. Then he turns back on her, holding the aforesaid knife to her throat, threatening to cut "right across [her] voicebox", emphasizing that this way nobody would hear her scream ("The Hudson River School"). Apparently, the common denominator of both these actions seems to be that they allow to be read as death threats, even though the destruction of the painting that either portrays Elizabeth or at least someone looking very much like her is overtly rationalized by having Kevin choose between two paintings based on their market value, thus settling for the nude because it is the more expensive one, whereby the class differences between Kevin and Elizabeth are also made relevant at the surface level. Yet the threat to cut Elizabeth's throat in a way that would also render her mute might also be taken to be indicative of a male anxiety of the possibility of female subjectivity (cf. Theweleit 121-158; 217-227), symbolized by the capacity to express such subjectivity, i.e. the voice. The fact that it was Elizabeth acting as an autonomous subject, i.e. her subjectivity in action, that produced the occasion for this conflict in the very first place in that she decided to give Annie away without asking Kevin beforehand – who would have been able to tell her that Mr. Reilly was not actually Annie's father and should not be trusted – seems to lend this interpretation further support.

14 Yet, whether or not the conflicts between Kevin and the two women can be regarded as expressions of or appeals to male anxiety over female subjectivity, the impression remains that in both cases the paternal revenge narrative intertwines with the

marginalization of motherhood in a rather disturbing way. Whereas in *Hell on Wheels* the paternal revenge narrative simply places the mother, i.e. Cullen Bohannon's dead wife, among those to be avenged by the hero, thus comfortably eliminating her from the actual action, which is also very much in line with the pertinent observations made by Hamad (18f.), the mother/wife – or her maternally signified equivalent – turns into the object upon which revenge has to be enacted in *Copper*. Regardless of the implications that this may or may not have on matters of subjectivity, both Ellen and Elizabeth bring this fate upon themselves by acting autonomously from Kevin.

15 A narrative that parallels this pattern to a certain extent can also be encountered in the last two seasons of *Hell on Wheels*, yet instead of turning herself into the object of revenge, the woman in question turns herself into a damsel in distress by acting independently from the hero, i.e. she receives her punishment in a much less immediate way. At the end of the third season, Bohannon marries a young Mormon woman ("Get Behind The Mule") whom he impregnated earlier on ("Eminent Domain"), yet due to the fact that he was not able to reclaim his old position as chief engineer upon returning to Hell on Wheels, he sees himself forced to accept a job that hardly pays enough to secure decent living conditions for him and his new wife Naomi, let alone their child ("Chicken Hill"). As it becomes evident over the course of the following episodes that this arrangement renders him unable to adequately perform his paternally charged roles as provider and protector ("Life's a Mystery") as well as it makes it impossible for him to be a caring companion for his socially isolated wife ("Reckoning"), she then decides to go back to the Mormon colony Fort Smith where her family sought refuge after they were driven from their land by the railroad company ("Under Color of Law"). Naomi's decision to leave Cullen ultimately sets the stage for a search-and-rescue narrative which in turn provides the long arc (cf. Metcalf 64-67) that frames the first half of the as yet unfinished fifth season of the show ("Chinatown"; "False Prophets"): upon arriving at Fort Smith after quitting his job with the Union Pacific, Bohannon discovers that the settlement had fallen prey to a catastrophic event that killed many of the inhabitants, yet he neither finds his wife nor his son among the unburied dead bodies. His search for them then leads him further west to Salt Lake City where he finds evidence that lets him believe that they are still alive, but does not offer any clues with regard to their whereabouts. This situation then inspires his decision to join the Union Pacific's historical rival, the Central Pacific Railroad, as the latter's vice president promises him to mobilize the company's vast resources in order to locate Bohannon's family ("Further West").

16 Naomi's distress is thus presented as being occasioned by her decision to leave Cullen and thus allows for being read as the narrative punishment that she is dealt with as a consequence of her autonomous actions (cf. Modleski 63), in a way similar to the fates that Ellen Corcoran and Elizabeth Haverford bring upon themselves in *Copper*. For Cullen himself, on the other hand, Naomi's distress presents the perfect opportunity to redeem himself of his inadequacies as a husband and as a father that he exhibited earlier on (cf. Hamad 58f.). In a way, it even seems as if he could not quite realize his full potential as long as his wife and son are still around him, for while Naomi and William were with him, his career with the railroad did not seem to be going anywhere. Yet as soon as they are gone, he is made chief of railroad police ("Under the Color of Law") and his decision to join the Central Pacific later on even makes him a shareholder in that company ("Further West"), equaling an improvement not only to his immediately prior position with the Union Pacific, but also to but also to his season 3 employment as the latter company's chief engineer.

. The implication of this is somewhat paradoxical: only when his family is taken away from him, he can adequately perform as a father and a husband, be it by avenging his first wife and son in the first season, or by embarking on a quest to search and rescue Naomi and William.

17 In retrospect, then, letting Cullen Bohannon have another family, letting him become a father again seems to have had the primary purpose of giving him a reason to join a new social group, very much like the murder of his first wife and son provided him with a plausible motive to come out west in the very first place. In that it presents the independent actions of Naomi as potentially harmful for herself and their son, the use of this motivational device also implies a marginalization of motherhood and thus helps to account for the centrality of a male character by way of establishing the need for a patriarchal protector. In a way, this need for a patriarchal protector was already implicit in Bohannon's original background story, insofar as it was his absence from his farm in Meridian, Mississippi that rendered his family defenseless against the marauding Union troops. In other words, this answers the question why the story revolves around a male main character. Similar reasoning can be applied to the maternally signified women in *Copper*, therefore it would seem equally possible to apply this explanation to Kevin Corcoran.

18 The impression that was gained earlier that inflecting the main protagonists' masculinities in terms of fatherhood merely serves as a motivational device in either series

thus needs to be revised: precisely through making their fatherhood relevant by way of mobilizing narratives that celebrate the need for a patriarchal protector, a marginalization of maternally inflected femininity is achieved that helps to account for the fact that either series revolves around a male protagonist. But still, neither the fact that the narrative setups are designed to require a patriarchal protector nor the main characters' exceptionally strong motivations that are articulated as a result of their fatherhood sufficiently explains what it is that endows both Corcoran and Bohannon with the "exceptional ability" (Wright 42) that leads their respective societies to award them the "special status" (ibid.: 43) that is part and parcel of both their stories.

19 With regard to *Hell on Wheels* and *Copper*, then, Hamad's claim that "postfeminist fatherhood is the new 'hegemonic masculinity'" (1) seems to require a significant modification, inasmuch as the analysis so far has shown that the hegemonic masculinity embodied by Kevin Corcoran and Cullen Bohannon could not possibly have been constructed *without* drawing them as fathers, yet their fatherhood in itself is not what grants them hegemonic status. A second striking similarity of both characters, namely that for both of them their relationship with a prominently figuring minor character who happens to be a Black man – Elam Ferguson in *Hell on Wheels* and Matthew Freeman in *Copper* – is important in a number of ways. An inquiry into the dynamics and functions of these relationships might help to account for the centrality that both Bohannon and Corcoran achieve in their respective settings in a manner that the analysis of the implications of their signification in terms of fatherhood does not, especially in the face of the stabilizing effect that the emergence of the sub-genre of the biracial buddy film since the 1980s has been shown to have on white male hegemony. Critical readings of this sub-genre have attributed this effect to the fact that "the African-American character is typically the sidekick to the white hero [who] offers his skills and bravery for the preservation of mainstream (white) cultural values" (Gates 74), raising the question whether this pattern also applies to Elam Ferguson and Matthew Freeman.

Appropriating Ex-Slaves' Labor?

20 The development of the relationship between Matthew Freeman and Kevin Corcoran does not follow the pattern typical for the buddy movie as we are not made to witness how "their initial lack of understanding of one another is eventually transformed into friendship and mutual respect" (Gates 73f.). Their bonding had already taken place in

the battlefield where they fought side by side and thus lies already in the story's past when the series begins ("Surviving Death"). Yet, the function that Freeman fulfills for Corcoran can certainly be argued to correspond with Gates' observation on how the biracial buddy film contributes to the stabilization of white male hegemony: in many of his investigations, Corcoran relies heavily on Freeman's support, whose skills as a physician extend well into the realm of forensic pathology, thus giving Corcoran a scientific edge over his fellow detectives.

21 For instance, if it had not been for Matthew's thorough examination of Kate Reilly's dead body, revealing both the murder weapon and the fact that the suspect in custody who had already been bribed into taking the blame for the child's death could not possibly have been the one who dealt the fatal blow, Kevin would not have been able to solve the case, especially in the face of the unwillingness of his superior officer to spend too much time on this investigation ("Surviving Death"; "Husbands and Fathers"). Furthermore, Matthew's analyses provide decisive leads in cases that appear to threaten public safety in Five Points, be it by identifying a chemical substance in the vomit of what appeared to be the victims of a serial killer ("Home, Sweet Home"; "Aileen Aroon"), by establishing the innocence of a murder suspect in a case that might otherwise have led to a major riot in the neighborhood ("In the Hands of an Angry God") or by helping Kevin to figure out that his very own ward boss, General Brendan Donovan, must have had a hand in the demise of a man whose death would enable him to buy large parts of the neighborhood ("Think Gently of the Erring"; "The Fine Ould Irish Gintleman" [sic]; "Good Heart and Willing Hand").

22 Notably, this division of labor that lets Freeman serve as Corcoran's analytical faculty whereas Corcoran himself is strongly associated with the capacity and willingness to use brute force bears a certain resemblance to the character setup that Ames has shown to be characteristic of the biracial buddy film of the 1980s and early 1990s in that here as much as there "the white man is clearly the savage equipped for survival, while the black man has become a highly civilized figure who has lost his touch with his savage masculinity" (53), a configuration that Ames has shown to constitute a reversal of the older stereotypical pattern of "the association of the black man with the physical (and unthinking) realm" (59). By making Matthew a medical doctor, one might argue, this reversal is almost taken to the furthest point possible, and in fact he is the character most strongly associated with the "thinking realm" in the entire series.

23 The upshot of this, i.e. the emasculation that is imagined to result from this

supposed alienation from one's own physicality, is underlined by drawing Matthew as a man whose decisions are to a large extend governed by the imperatives of domestic life as is aptly illustrated by the fact that he is shown to give in to his wife's wishes to move out of Five Points in the very first episode ("Surviving Death"). Even his 'emancipation' from this heteronomy, marked by his decision to take over the practice of a retiring doctor in their old neighborhood ("Home, Sweet Home"), is cast in terms of domestic conflict to such an extent that it contributes to the framing of family life as a form of imprisonment for the masculine subject, notwithstanding that its resolution offers an apparent reconciliation of the demands of the public and the private sphere. Notably, this reconciliation is achieved by letting his wife come to happily accept it as her duty to support her husband in any way she can ("Aileen Aroon"). Towards Kevin, who in contrast to his scientifically trained friend has lots of casual sex with changing partners ("Surviving Death"; "Husbands and Fathers"; "Arsenic and Old Cake"; "A Morning Song"; "Beautiful Dreamer"), Matthew even acts as an advocate of domesticity by trying to raise awareness in him for Ellen's emotional needs ("A Day to Give Thanks"; "Aileen Aroon"), thus reproducing the juxtaposition of the respectable, yet emasculated Black man with the tough, streetwise white savage who has perfectly adapted himself to the dangerous urban jungle, the juxtaposition that would normally provide the point of departure for the central plot of male bonding in the biracial buddy film (Ames 54f., 58).

24 With regard to the aforementioned division of labor between Corcoran and Freeman it seems significant that, at least initially, Kevin takes all the credit for the remarkable results that it enables him to come up with ("Surviving Death") and even later on he does not disclose more than that "there is a doctor, who helps [him] with cases from time to time" ("Aileen Aroon"). Thus, Kevin's success as an investigator rests to a large extent on the appropriation of a Black man's *mental* labor and on keeping this circumstance secret at least towards his superiors. Through his relationship with the wealthy Robert Morehouse who has Kevin taking the credit for an amputation that Matthew carried out on him when the three of them were in the field together, this constellation even earns him an extraordinary reputation among New York's upper class ("Surviving Death").

25 Yet this mode of appropriation is very consciously introduced as a concession to "the diegetic requirements of the historical backdrop" (Hamad 31) by letting Matthew himself advise Kevin not to let it be known that it is a Black man who regularly performs autopsies for him, because he plausibly suspects that such knowledge would inevitably

lead to the mobilization of racist bias, which in turn would make it impossible for Corcoran to work with Freeman's findings ("Surviving Death"). This is where *Copper* differs significantly from the movies analyzed by Ames: it is precisely not the "denial of history" that amounts to the "powerful appeal of the interethnic bond" (59) between Matthew and Kevin, but rather its very explicit reflection.

26 To an even higher degree, this seems also to be the case in *Hell on Wheels*, given that in Cullen Bohannon the recently freed slave Elam Ferguson not only encounters a former slaveholder, but also sees this former slaveholder put in charge of him, precisely because the racist foreman Daniel Johnson assumes that, as a Southerner, Bohannon would know how to keep Black workers in line ("Pilot"). Given this initial conflict, the development of their relationship more closely conforms to the pattern of the buddy movie "in depicting the humorous banter and developing rapport" (Ames 58) of the two men, even up to the point of including a scene where Bohannon symbolically enables Ferguson to reclaim his manhood by teaching him how to shoot ("Revelations"; cf. Ames 53). In contrast to Matthew, though, Elam's initial emasculation does not originate in the constraints of domestic life, but is instead presented as a direct result of the hostile racism that he encounters everywhere in the camp: because he is Black, he is turned down at the brothel ("A New Birth of Freedom"), not included in meetings of the so-called "walking bosses", despite the fact that he is in charge of the freed-men's crew ("Bread and Circuses"), and almost lynched as he is caught secretly having sex with the prostitute who initially would not serve him ("Pride, Pomp and Circumstance"; "Revelations").Bohannon's heavy reliance on his Black companion's help in both establishing and maintaining his centrality in the camp, on the other hand, strongly mirrors Corcoran's dependence on Freeman. Without Ferguson breaking his chains, for instance, Bohannon could not have escaped custody in order to ask Durant to be made foreman ("Immoral Mathematics"). The implied irony of a former slave freeing a former slaveholder is echoed later on when Cullen calls upon Elam to back him up on an expedition into Cheyenne territory, because he feels threatened by the Union soldiers he is supposed to accompany, given his past with the Confederate army ("Derailed").

27 Despite the fact that Bohannon very consciously tricks Ferguson into inadvertently giving the impression of being his personal servant in order to complete the performance by virtue of which he manages to be made chief engineer ("Big Bad Wolf"), Ferguson nevertheless develops a loyalty towards him that ultimately turns out to be his ruin: his desperate quest to rescue Bohannon out of Mormon captivity all by himself sets a

complex chain of events into motion that first lets him lose his mind and then his life ("Get Behind the Mule"; "Bear Man"; "Elam Ferguson"). Yet his willingness to risk his life for Cullen is made plausible as the result of a certain reciprocity in their relationship: after all, Cullen had put a halt to a very urgent camp move in order to accompany Elam on his search for his kidnapped daughter, thereby risking the loss of not only vast amounts of company goods and money, but also of his position as chief engineer ("Searchers"; "One Less Mule"). Ostensibly, then, it appears as if theirs was less a relation of unilateral exploitation, but rather one that operates as something that at least approximates a mutual exchange of equivalents, in contrast to Corcoran's one-sided appropriation of Freeman's skills and knowledge in *Copper*.

28 At a closer look, however, it is possible to see their relation to be structured by one of the semantic operations through which white men historically have and presently still do depend on gendered and racialized others for the purpose of constructing their own subject position as unified, impenetrable and supposedly legitimately superior to its others as they have been outlined by DiPiero's psychoanalytically informed inquiry into different historical manifestations of the intersecting discourses of gender and race in Western culture (2002). One such operation that DiPiero has traced in contemporary American fiction is the insertion of an "African American or Latino conscripted to tell the white man who or what the latter is, and to know more about his identity than he himself apparently does" (7; cf. 208-227) into stories that feature a white male protagonist. In a number of situations, it is precisely this function that Elam fulfills for Cullen, e.g. by repeatedly telling him what is expected of him as the Union Pacific's new foreman ("Jamais Je Ne T'oublierai") or by pointing out to him the implication of being in the inferior position when Cullen is on the verge of picking a fight with a Yankee officer, i.e. that "sometimes you got to bite your tongue and just take it" ("Derailed"). It seems noteworthy, that in this latter instance, it is the recently freed slave that helps the recently defeated former slave-owner to come to terms with the results of his defeat, ironically by passing on a coping strategy – and a strategy for survival for that matter – that appears to be firmly rooted in his own experience of slavery.

29 The probably most interesting "manifestation of white masculinity receiving confirmation of its identity from projected others" (DiPiero 207) in *Hell on Wheels* occurs shortly after Bohannon was taken captive and before Ferguson decides to rescue him. Upon returning to the construction camp from the gun battle that ended with Bohannon's surrender to the raiders, Ferguson sees himself faced with the challenge to tell the workers

that the boss they truly respect has been kidnapped, but that they cannot go after him until they have not laid the last remaining miles of railroad to Cheyenne, Wyoming, because otherwise the extremely unpopular capitalist Thomas Durant would be reinstated as the man running things at the construction camp. Now, in order to convince the workers to spend their night laying rails, he steps up in front of the gathered crowd and makes a highly emotional speech, that praises Bohannon as a man of principles who had earned the right to lead them, because he had always treated them fairly and was not afraid of getting his hands dirty himself, and insinuates that Bohannon himself would want them to finish their work first. He also juxtaposes him with Durant, whom he characterizes as "a man that cheated, lied, and stole and disrespected every last one of us" ("Fathers and Sins"), to the effect of letting Bohannon appear as nothing less, as I would like to argue, as the embodiment of "the currently most honored way of being a man" (Connell & Messerschmidt 832), i.e. of hegemonic masculinity.

30 Significantly, the subject of racism also makes its appearance in Ferguson's monologue: "Bohannon called me a n*****[2]… but he ain't never treat me like one." This remark seems to imply not only a fundamental difference between racist behavior and racist language, but also that it is not a problem to employ the latter as long as one abstains from the former, an impression that is endowed with all the more force, given that these words are coming from a Black character. In the actual scene, the remark makes the appearance of being addressed to the Black workers in the crowd, as the cutaway shot immediately following it shows us a Black man raising his head at Ferguson's words ("Fathers and Sins"). Yet the emotional need to which these words correspond is more likely to be found in the audience in front of the television screens at home, most likely among white viewers. After all, hearing a Black character say that a former slave-owner was not racist even though he did sometimes use racist language must be a rather comforting, even consoling experience for those "Angry White Men" who see themselves tricked out of their privilege by affirmative action (cf. Kimmel 238-242). In fact, what is brought to mind here are recent debates that discard attempts at avoiding racist language as mere 'political correctness'. Given that only a few scenes earlier, Bohannon had confessed to Ferguson that he never did actually free his slaves before the Civil War, as he had told him at an earlier stage of their friendship ("Revelations"), Ferguson's remark could indeed be argued to constitute a white fantasy of redemption from the guilt of having profited

[2] The N-word will not be reproduced in this paper.

from slavery, as well as still benefiting from institutionalized and other forms of contemporary racism. Through this remark, uttered by one of its projected others, the white male subject redeems itself of the very real consequences that its projections have on those on whom they are projected.

Conclusion

31 In the light of these findings, it would be wrong to regard *Copper* and *Hell on Wheels* as pop-cultural attempts to come to terms with criticisms by appropriating them, as had been the question raised initially due to the apparent incongruity between descriptions of these shows as being obsessed with issues of race and gender and the fact that in both cases the main character happened to be a white man. They certainly exhibit an incorporation of demands for a more involved, affectionate fatherhood very much akin to what Hamad has traced in recent historical drama films (29-47), yet the mode through which both Bohannon's and Corcoran's fatherhood was made relevant in either series has in fact very little to do with feminist critiques of the domestic division of labor, especially child-rearing, but instead amounts to nothing less than an authoritarian celebration of the need for a patriarchal protector, thus drawing motherhood as inevitably needful and dependent at best, or even as the primary cause for male experiences of loss and alienation at worst.

32 A similar case could be made with regard to the findings pertaining to the portrayal of race relations. *Copper* certainly introduces the fact that Corcoran's success is too a large extent based on Freeman's skills in a very conscious manner, thus probably allowing for being read as a critique of conditions that made and continue to make Black people's contributions and achievements near to invisible, yet at the cost of reproducing precisely the structure that it appears to critically engage with. *Hell on Wheels*, on the other hand, despite featuring bitter and sometimes painful exchanges on the subject of slavery between Bohannon and Ferguson and trying to let their relationship develop into one of mutual respect and reciprocity, even articulates an apologetic view on racist language in that it offers the dangerous and misleading distinction between the harmless realm of verbal abuse and actual, not verbally mediated racist behavior. Thus, instead of mediating a defense against criticisms of white male hegemony by incorporating them, they are rather negotiated in a manner that amounts to an outright repudiation. The subversive potential that was implicit in advertising *Copper* as a show that would be "capturing the early American multicultural experience in provocative, ground-breaking fashion" (qtd. in

Fienberg) and was hinted at by a review of *Hell on Wheels* that argued its "actors sometimes are made to symbolize very modern obsessions, e.g. with race and gender" (Dewolf Smith) can, in the light of these findings, not be said to have been realized.

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