

**“Alien Commies from the Future!”
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Season Seven of
*Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.***

Lewis Call

Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. (2013–2020) brings some welcome and needed diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) to the Whedonverses. Scholars have rightly critiqued Joss Whedon’s previous shows, especially *Buffy*, for the relative lack of racial and ethnic diversity among their creators and casts and for their general inattention to DEI issues.¹ Yet *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (hereafter *AoS*) is substantially different from Whedon’s other shows. Whedon created the show with his brother, Jed Whedon, and Jed’s spouse, Asian American writer and producer Maurissa Tancharoen. Whedon, Whedon, and Tancharoen created the Chinese American character Melinda Qiaolian May; May is played by Ming-Na Wen, who was born in Macau to Chinese parents and moved to the United States at the age of four. The show’s creators added a Chinese mother (Jiaying, played by Nepalese-Australian actor Dichen Lachman) to the backstory of Marvel Comics character Daisy “Quake” Johnson (played on *AoS* by Chinese American actor Chloe Bennet, néé Chloe Wang), thus transforming a traditionally

Lewis Call is Professor of History at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. He writes about gender and sexuality in the Whedonverses, most recently in *Sexualities in the Works of Joss Whedon* (McFarland 2020). He was a featured speaker at the 7th Biennial Conference of the Whedon Studies Association at Kingston University, London, in 2016. He has won the Mr. Pointy award twice. In 2021, he received the Richard K. Simon award for Outstanding Career Achievement in Scholarship from Cal Poly's College of Liberal Arts. He lives in San Luis Obispo with his wife Michelle and their child Jo.

white character into a mixed race Chinese American. After co-creating the show and writing and directing the pilot episode, Joss Whedon stepped aside to work on *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), leaving Jed Whedon and Maurissa Tancharoen to run the show, with some help from Jeffrey Bell. Tancharoen and Jed Whedon continued to expand and enhance the show's diversity, adding the African American Alphonso "Mack" Mackenzie (played by African American actor Henry Simmons) and the Colombian Elena "Yo-Yo" Rodriguez (played by Mexican actor Natalia Cordova-Buckley) as series regulars in season three. Unlike characters of color in much of American genre television, these characters are not tokens or sidekicks. They are central to the show's narrative.

Yet scholars and fans alike have critiqued the show's representations of race and gender, especially in the early seasons. Leah Lenk and Denise Lynch point out that the Season One episode ironically titled "Yes Men" perpetuates rape myths by refusing to recognize the hegemonically masculine Ward (Brett Dalton) as a victim of sexual violence when the mind-controlling Asgardian Lorelei (Elena Satine) rapes him (paragraphs 14-15 and 29-30). Bronwen Calvert argues that although the first four seasons of *AoS* feature several of the strong female characters that are common in the Whedonverses, these characters are typically presented as damaged (e.g. Daisy and May) and/or villainous (e.g. Jiaying and season four's sinister AI, AIDA) (14). Calvert astutely notes that through season four, "while differently embodied 'others' might aspire 'to be the shield' and join the team of heroes, that role is strictly delimited and reserved" (25). Specifically, it is reserved for white cisgender heterosexuals who embody conventional Western notions of gender and beauty. For the first two seasons, the team is almost entirely white. Since Chloe

Bennet “unambiguously passes for white” (Baroza), Ming-Na Wen’s Melinda May initially appears to be the team’s only person of color, which leaves the show open to charges of tokenism. And even when characters of color are added in the later seasons, these characters are often represented in problematically stereotypical fashion. A. L. Baroza argues on *Nerds of Color* that while Maurissa Tancharoen may have had noble “intentions for diversity in casting” when she and Jed Whedon added characters like Mack and Elena, *AoS* features anti-POC tropes which suggest that the show’s creators may have a race problem they are not even aware of. For example, Mack is initially presented as a villain. He is a member of a renegade S.H.I.E.L.D. faction composed mainly of people of color, which fights against Coulson’s majority white faction (Baroza).

However, the show does make considerable representational progress in its last three seasons, especially in Season Seven. By the end of the series, the show’s characters of color occupy positions of authority and influence within S.H.I.E.L.D.: Mack has replaced Coulson as the agency’s Director, May is a brilliant strategist and a professor at the agency’s Coulson Academy, and Daisy and Elena are powerful meta-humans (known as Inhumans) who are considered to be among the agency’s best agents. The show’s seventh and final season makes a particularly strong case for the benefits of DEI, with respect to both the diegetic Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and the world of the show’s audience. *AoS* achieves this via a time travel narrative. In Season Seven, the racially and ethnically diverse S.H.I.E.L.D. team travels through the twentieth century in pursuit of hostile cybernetic aliens known as Chronocombs. As they move through time, the agents encounter and critique the various forms of structural and

cultural racism that characterize the twentieth century U.S. The show pays particular attention to key moments in the history of U.S. race relations, notably the 1930s New Deal era, the 1950s Cold War period, and the 1970s, an era influenced by the limited progress brought about by the civil rights movement. *AoS*'s characters of color critique racist ideas and institutions diegetically, as they interact with twentieth century American racists and discuss their encounters with racism amongst themselves.

As they move through the decades, the agents end up embodying the racial stereotypes of the periods they visit; more interestingly, they embody the twentieth century's filmic racial tropes as well. Their status as time travelling people of color and anti-racist whites from the twenty-first century allows them to subvert these tropes even as they embody them, and this may well be the show's most radical representational move. Jeffrey A. Brown has observed that the relevant character tropes for action heroes of color include the 1970s Blaxploitation hero, the Asian Dragon Lady, and the Latina spitfire of classic Westerns and Mexploitation movies (*Beyond Bombshells* 78, 95, 103-104). Mack evokes the hypermasculine Blaxploitation heroes, while rejecting the sexism and misogyny which always haunted them. Elena brings to mind the sharp-tongued, scatterbrained Latina spitfire popularized by Lupe Vélez in the 1940s, while jettisoning the childishness, incompetence, and oversexualization of that trope. May evokes the cold and cruel Dragon Lady of early twentieth century Hollywood films, and the equally (though often differently) cold woman warriors of Hong Kong's kung fu cinema. Yet the hyperempathy she develops in Season Seven gives her a rich emotional awareness and sensitivity that these tropes lack. Finally, Daisy's status as a half-Chinese mixed race woman who can pass for white puts

her at risk of being stereotyped as a member of an Asian model minority whose commitment to cultural assimilation erases her Chinese heritage. But Season Seven's time travel narrative brings Daisy closer to her Chinese heritage, by giving her the chance to develop a new relationship with her Chinese mother Jiaying, who died at the end of Season Two in the original timeline.

Since a critical approach that consists solely of critiquing “negative” stereotypes would be of limited usefulness, I take a more constructionist approach. Cynthia Liu argues that the “dismantling stereotypes” school of criticism is “unproductive,” since it is based on the untenable assumption that “the primary task of filmic images – perhaps the sole task – is to reproduce the world faithfully” (26). A more interesting and, I believe, more fruitful approach is to ask what kinds of worlds pop culture's filmic images allow us to imagine. I am certainly interested in the racial stereotypes that appear in *AoS*. I am even more interested in the strategies that the show uses to subvert those stereotypes; these strategies are important and, by the standards of American network television, fairly radical. And I am most interested in the ways that *AoS* uses the subversion of stereotypes to open up a new representational space, in which it becomes possible to construct nuanced, relatable, three-dimensional characters of color. While these characters of color do not necessarily correspond to real-world people of color, they point the way to a world more diverse, equitable, and inclusive than our own. Most importantly, they show how people of color and their white allies might create such a world.

“At the Heart of the Show, a Family”: Biological and Chosen Families in Hollywood and in *AoS*

Maurissa Tancharoen has been quite open about the significance DEI holds for her and her family, and she has been very specific about the factors that motivated her to make the cast and crew of *AoS* as diverse and inclusive as possible. Tancharoen, who is of Thai descent (“Exclusive”), has long been concerned about the dearth of Asian and Asian American actors and characters in American entertainment. In the 2008 *Commentary!* on *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, she famously sang that “Nobody’s Asian in the Movies.” But as Hélène Frohard-Dourlent points out, while this song “explicitly addresses issues of racism and racialization in the entertainment industry” (284), it “ultimately fails to address the issue of white privilege and disallows a deeper critical reflection on the workings of systemic racism” (285). In 2008, Tancharoen, who was then a fairly inexperienced creator, could *comment* on Hollywood racism, but she was not yet in a position to do much about it. That is no longer the case. After *Dr. Horrible*, Tancharoen became an important Whedonversal creator. As Ananya Mukherjea observes, Tancharoen was “integrated into Joss Whedon’s repertoire of writers, actors, and producers who work on multiple Whedon productions” (paragraph 11). On *Dollhouse*, Tancharoen challenged stereotypes of Asian women both offscreen (as a writer) and, as Mukherjea argues, onscreen, through her portrayal of the Active Kilo (paragraph 12).

Since then, Tancharoen has become an influential, independent creator in her own right. From 2013 to 2020, she was an Asian American woman running a major network television show, which she recognizes as “a very rare thing” (Cheng). She emphasizes that *AoS* was, quite literally, a family

production. Her father, Tommy Tancharoen, served as Transportation Coordinator for the entire series (Vineyard). Kevin Tancharoen (Maurissa's brother) directed sixteen episodes of the series, more than any other director. Benny Sue Whedon, the young daughter of Maurissa Tancharoen and Jed Whedon, was often present during production (Vineyard).

In an important sense, *AoS* was created by the Thai-American Tancharoen family. And this certainly influenced the approach that Maurissa Tancharoen took to DEI, in casting and hiring decisions, and in the creation of storylines. She says that “we are all very proud of the fact that we have a show that does feature women of colour, people of colour” (Popp 24). She was driven to tell the stories of these people of color because she was “focused on generating content that will speak to [her] daughter's life and will speak to other children like her who are biracial or who are in the minority and who will have to navigate the crazy world and being a young woman in it” (Popp 24). The story of Daisy Johnson, a biracial Chinese American woman, is especially relevant here. Like Daisy, Benny Sue Whedon has an Asian mother and a white father. But while Daisy's father Cal was a supervillain who killed Daisy's mother, Jed Whedon is an anti-racist who actively works to promote DEI. Tancharoen emphasizes that her husband is an “advocate [. . .] for diversity and presenting the world in which we actually live” (Popp 24). This has been a priority for Tancharoen and Whedon throughout their tenure on *AoS*. “When we first pitched the show,” Tancharoen recalls, “we all wanted it to reflect the world that we live in and what it aspires to be a world full of diversity” (Vineyard).

Tancharoen says that “at the heart of the show” is a family of people who “are *about* one another,” and that this narrative emphasis on a family whose main agenda is to take care of one

another represents the show's "inherent value system" (Popp 26). The members of the S.H.I.E.L.D. team are a "created" (Popp 26) or chosen family, which means that *AoS* shares a central thematic concern with other shows that Joss Whedon has created (Abbott, Calvert, and Jowett 425-426). The crucial difference is that *AoS* offers its audience a vision of a multiracial, multiethnic chosen family whose diversity is one of its primary strengths. But Heather Porter and Erin Giannini offer the insightful observation that S.H.I.E.L.D.'s military structure creates fundamental inequalities among the team members; thus "it is only when they are outside the structure of S.H.I.E.L.D. that the group becomes a better fit for the chosen family trope" (65). Season Seven facilitates this by sending the core team into the past. Isolated from S.H.I.E.L.D.'s twenty-first century military structure, the team members are able to develop a more egalitarian, authentic, and sustainable chosen family dynamic.

Yet even when the team travels through the past, the persistent privilege of the white agents limits the egalitarian potential of that dynamic. Former S.H.I.E.L.D. Director Phil Coulson (Clark Gregg) recognizes Mack's authority as Director without resentment or reservation. But Coulson, who studied history in college, also serves as the voice of a white liberal historiography which emphasizes historical progress in science, technology, and race relations. Coulson's well-meaning but naïve white liberalism prefers to address structural racism through gradual reform rather than revolutionary change, and Season Seven shows this approach to be ineffective. Deke Shaw (Jeff Ward) provides an important alternative to Coulson's white liberal historiography. Deke is from a future two generations beyond the team's home time of 2020. He is the grandson of Jemma Simmons (Elizabeth Henstridge) and

Leopold Fitz (Iain De Caestecker). This permits Deke to comment on twentieth century racism from a position that is further from that racist culture than is the early twenty-first century. Maurissa Tanchoren confirms that this was a deliberate narrative choice on the part of the writers: Deke, “being a man out of time, [can] comment on how absurd the racial and social injustice is” and “learn [. . .] about white privilege” (Vineyard). Viewers of color can surely relate to the experiences of Mack, Elena, May, and Daisy as they navigate America’s twentieth century and challenge that century’s endemic racism. White viewers can see their own privilege reflected in Coulson. And perhaps they can take inspiration from Deke. His experience of the future gives him the ability to view structural racism as a relic of America’s barbaric past, and while it may be unrealistically utopian to imagine such a future, this at least allows the audience to hope that racism is neither eternal nor immutable.

“Trafficking in Stereotypes”: The Racial Tropes that *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* Invokes and Subverts

Mack is the distant descendent of the hypermasculine, hypersexual, hyperviolent antiheroes of 1970s Blaxploitation films like *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (Melvin Van Peebles 1971) and *Shaft* (Gordon Parks 1971). Indeed, the character’s name is a direct reference to the genre and its problematic representations of gender and sexuality: “Mack” is African American slang for a pimp, and *The Mack* was a 1973 Blaxploitation film (dir. Michael Campus). The antiheroes of Blaxploitation performed a violent masculinity “inspired by black nationalism” (McMillen 454) and used that masculinity to fight against white authority. But theirs was also a regressive,

misogynistic masculinity. As Rob Lendrum argues, Blaxploitation drew on the Black Power movement's "image of the violent, phallogentric, hypermasculine 'Black Buck,'" and in doing so, asserted patriarchy (362-363). Unfortunately, representations of black masculinity did not improve when the Blaxploitation hero migrated into the comic book medium; indeed, in some ways, they got worse. To their credit, urban black superheroes of the 1970s like DC's Black Lightning and Marvel's Luke Cage defended their black communities (Lendrum 368). But 1970s comics were published under the imprimatur of the Comics Code Authority, which precluded representations of sexuality. Thus, as Samuel McMillen argues, Luke Cage retained the "narrow emotional capacity" of a Blaxploitation hero, but since he lacked that hero's aggressive sexuality, Luke's emotions were limited to "anger and rage," and his masculinity was defined narrowly as that of the violent brute (460).

Blaxploitation heroes and their comic book counterparts often exhibited what Richard Majors and Janet Billson call "cool pose," a persona that features an emotionless front and a tough, promiscuous, manipulative masculinity that can prevent authentic relationships with women (8, 34, 43). Black men who strike a cool pose are more likely to volunteer for special military units (Majors and Billson 18) like S.H.I.E.L.D., as Mack does. But Mack departs from cool pose to pursue an honest, authentic, monogamous relationship with Elena. Unlike his Blaxploitation forebears, Mack clearly respects his partner and treats her as an equal. This is especially important since they are also co-workers, and in Season Seven he is her commanding officer. A traditional Blaxploitation hero could never have navigated the ethical and emotional complexities of

a relationship that is simultaneously personal and professional, but Mack can.

In the 1990s, American comics began to develop a gentler, more nuanced version of the black male hero, one which explicitly rejected the misogyny of Blaxploitation. In the words of Milestone Comics's black superhero Static, "that 'Mack' thing is so '70s" (quoted in Brown, *Black Superheroes* 183). The black Milestone heroes emphasized brains over brawn (Brown, *Black Superheroes* 183). S.H.I.E.L.D.'s quiet, thoughtful Mack is closer to this model of heroism than to the brash, macho heroism of John Shaft (Richard Roundtree) or Luke Cage. Sadly, late twentieth century film offered fewer representational options for the black male hero, and most of these were mired in stereotypes. Black men could be (often sacrificial) sidekicks or "helpers" of white heroes, they could be "buddies" in the "protective custody" of whites, and they could occasionally star as the main action hero (Purse 116). But as Lisa Purse argues, "the multiple protagonist, multi-ethnic film format has provided a further space for African Americans" (116). *AoS*, which includes Chinese American, Latin American, and African American protagonists, provides such a space. As Purse claims, this "increased racial mix," which became more prominent in the early twenty-first century, "permits traditionally marginalised or stereotyped people of colour to be depicted in a more 'rounded,' more fully psychologised way" (125). These are the kinds of depictions that *AoS* offers.

Mack is not the first black man to run S.H.I.E.L.D.; Samuel L. Jackson's Director Nick Fury offers an important prototype for the cool pose that Henry Simmons strikes as Director Mackenzie. As Brown argues, Jackson "brings to the role his signature style, anger and cool attitude that is unapologetically rooted in his racial identity" (*Modern Superhero*

129). Brown convincingly claims that Jackson's "confident performance" of Fury as a "capable leader" precludes charges of tokenism (129). Yet Brown also notes that Fury provided only an isolated example of diversity; the quantity of diversity in the MCU was still lacking until Netflix's *Luke Cage* (2016-2018) and *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler 2018). *Luke Cage* and *Black Panther* feature majority black creators, casts, and characters. As McMillen argues, the *Luke Cage* series offers "a black masculinity that is intellectually and emotionally capable" (455). Mack is much closer to this Luke Cage (Mike Coulter) than he is to the comic book version, as his intellectually effective leadership of S.H.I.E.L.D. and his emotionally capable relationship with Elena indicate. Mack completes the evolution of the black male action hero away from his two-dimensional, misogynistic roots in Blaxploitation, embodying a black masculinity that is cool, strong, and confident, but also thoughtful, emotionally nuanced, and respectful towards women.

Elena simultaneously evokes and challenges the feisty, foolish, sexy Latin American spitfire trope. Brown insightfully observes that while there is "no specific history of strong Latina heroines in film," the hot-tempered, outspoken, dangerously sexual spitfire is most relevant to the discussion of Latina action heroes (*Beyond Bombshells* 103-104). In the 1940s, Lupe Vélez's ambivalent performance of the spitfire offered a positive image of "female strength and independence," but also fell victim to a "fetishized and racialized sexual exoticism" (*Beyond Bombshells* 105). Charles Ramirez Berg sees Vélez's ditzy spitfire as a classic example of the common Latina stereotype that he calls the "female clown" (73-75). For Berg, the female clown's sexuality is neutralized via her representation as promiscuous, criminal, and/or silly (73). Like the classic spitfire, Elena is quite assertive.

Natalia Cordova-Buckley plays into this aspect of the spitfire trope; the actor describes herself as “very outspoken and opinionated” (Tracy). Yet Elena is the antithesis of the frivolous, immature female clown. She is a serious, hardworking, competent agent who contributes significantly to the success of her team’s missions. She is passionate, but by Season Seven she has learned to modulate the expression of her emotions (without repressing them) in the service of her mission. And while she experiences and acts upon sexual desire (for Mack), she cannot be reduced to that desire. Elena is sexual but not overly sexualized. By rendering her as a three-dimensional character whose sexuality is only one part of a complex personality, *AoS* prevents her from embodying the most retrograde aspects of the spitfire stereotype.

Victoria Sturtevant notes that Lupe Vélez performed a nationally specific *Mexican* spitfire, which was threatening to white American culture because of Mexico’s proximity to “the United States’ most fetishized, culturally and legally problematic border” (21). But as Brown points out, the spitfire stereotype has more recently been generalized to “all Latina identities, regardless of cultural or national origins,” which reflects and contributes to a “homogenizing Latinidad” (*Beyond Bombshells* 107). Elena certainly represents this generic Latinidad. The character was Puerto Rican in Marvel comics, was re-imagined as Colombian on *AoS*, and is played by a Mexican actor. But her fictional background as “a tough, street-wise Colombian woman” battling corrupt members of the Colombian national police force (“Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.’ Recruits Natalia Cordova-Buckley”) facilitates her “association with ‘urban’ street smarts” (Beltrán 193), a key feature of the Latina action hero who is the spitfire’s descendant.

The classic spitfire began to morph into a Latina action hero in the Mexploitation films, a genre of Mexican B-movies in which masked wrestlers battled aliens, vampires, and werewolves (Brown, *Beyond Bombshells* 104). Dedicated viewers of *Angel* will recall that this series explicitly referenced the Mexploitation genre in “The Cautionary Tale of Numero Cinco” (*Angel* 5.6). But as Mary Beltrán notes, the physically capable Latina action hero is really a newer trend, which has mainly developed since the late 1990s (187). Beltrán argues that the contemporary Latina action hero is often framed as a “tomboy” who lacks “traditionally feminine qualities or romantic interest in the opposite sex” (195). Similarly, Karen Tolchin identifies the ambiguous figure of the Macho Latina, a “tough girl” who “may inadvertently reinforce the very false binary oppositions she seeks to obliterate” (196). But Natalia Cordova-Buckley explicitly rejects what she calls the “machismo” of the “highly patriarchal [Mexican] culture” in which she was raised (Tracy), and this shows in her portrayal of Elena. Elena’s gender presentation is not especially feminine, but it is not particularly masculine either. Certainly Elena is less masculine than other Latina action heroes, such as the 1986 *Aliens’* Private Vasquez (played by non-Latina actor Jenette Goldstein). Elena presents as somewhat non-binary, which precludes her co-option into the Macho Latina stereotype.

Elena has a romantic interest in men, or at least one man, Mack. Her commitment to an emotionally stable, monogamous relationship with Mack saves her from the spitfire stereotypes of promiscuity and excessive sexuality, and from the stereotype of the sexually uninterested Latina tomboy. Beltrán makes the important point that femininity and physicality are not intrinsically opposed for the Latina action hero, as they are for her Anglo counterpart: the Latina hero can be powerful *and*

sexy (198). However, by downplaying her sexiness while emphasizing Mack's attraction to her, *AoS* is able to construct her as a more realistic and well-rounded character, while avoiding the hypersexualization that is always a risk for Hollywood's Latina characters (Beltrán 198). Beltrán also argues that the aggressive physicality of Latina heroes is often excused or justified by their presumed social context (197) — in this case, Elena's origins on the mean streets of Bogotá. But with the important exception of her decision to kill Ruby (Dove Cameron) in Season Five, Elena generally treats physical violence as a last resort. This suggests that as an agent of S.H.I.E.L.D., she has transcended the violent environment from which she came, along with the stereotype of the violent, aggressive Latina which that background connotes.

Melinda May evokes and complicates the cruel Dragon Lady, a figure who (along with the passive, submissive Lotus Blossom) has been a staple of Hollywood's representations of Asian women since the 1930s (Tajima 309). The Dragon Lady features a sophisticated intellect allied to a base cunning, and an unsentimental perspective on love (Caputi and Sagle 102). May has always been portrayed as cunning, and she was quite unsentimental until Season Seven. As the feminized version of the "yellow peril" stereotype personified in Sax Rohmer's *Fu Manchu*, the Dragon Lady is deceitful and conniving (Ono and Pham location 1880). Though it is rare for May to be deceitful, it is equally rare for her to be entirely forthcoming. She frequently keeps secrets from her teammates, and she often resists frank and open discussions. The Dragon Lady uses violence willingly and sometimes eagerly, which can make her a misogynistic figure (Arons 28). May is certainly the most enthusiastic fighter on the team; she never hesitates to deploy her martial artistry in the service of S.H.I.E.L.D. But since

S.H.I.E.L.D. are the good guys in the show's narrative framework, May's violence is sanctioned.

Most importantly, the Dragon Lady has an excessive and dangerous sexuality, which she frequently uses to entrap white men (Shimizu 59). Celine Parreñas Shimizu argues that it is too simple to dismiss the hypersexual Dragon Lady as a purely negative stereotype, for the trope also marks the rise of Asian women as "agents of pleasure and power" in their own right, and widens the subjectivities available to them (63-66). The problem is that the conventional Dragon Lady deploys her fearsome sexual power with coldness and cruelty, remaining detached and distant from her white male victims. Her emotional range is limited in favor of her hypersexuality (Shimizu 60-61). For the first six seasons of *AoS*, May could plausibly be read as an emotionally distant Dragon Lady. Yet she eventually develops a mature, loving, mutually beneficial relationship with white agent Phil Coulson. In Season Seven, she develops hyperempathy, and becomes the polar opposite of the cold Dragon Lady: a compassionate, caring woman who not only perceives the emotions of those around her, but actually experiences those emotions herself, and even integrates them into her own psyche.

The other important point of reference for May is the female warrior of Hong Kong's kung fu cinema. Wendy Arons points out that China has a long tradition of female martial artistry, and the violent woman warrior is an accepted convention of the kung fu film genre (31). May's teammates sometimes accept this image of her, as when Coulson and Daisy discuss how May went "full ninja assassin" on their Chronocom ally Enoch (7.3). While the violence of the cruel and sexy Dragon Lady is "framed as deviant and always punished," the violence of the kung fu heroine "usually conforms to generic

conventions for heroes, and is both socially acceptable (within the film's narrative) and visually pleasurable (for the spectator)" (Arons 31). This certainly applies to May, whose frequent team-saving martial artistry is diegetically celebrated, and whose numerous carefully choreographed fight scenes offer significant scopophilic pleasure for the audience. But this scopophilia signals a danger in the representation of the martial arts heroine. Such heroines are often hypersexualized, which "mutes the impact of their display of violence by reminding the viewer of their (primary) status as sex objects" (Arons 41). *AoS* manages to avoid this representational pitfall. In her many martial arts fight scenes, May is always fully clothed. She does not wear the skintight costumes characteristic of hypersexualized superheroines. And she sets the terms of her fights. Her assertion of a powerful martial agency ensures that she will remain an active subject, not a passive object.

A close relative of the kung fu film is the Hong Kong gunplay film. May, who skillfully wields a wide variety of weapons both real and science fictional, would be at home in the "girls with guns" subgenre, "a popular cycle of the Hong Kong gunplay film featuring sexy but tough action women proficient with weaponry and martial arts" (Funnell 70). "Girls with guns" films often focus on groups of women "employed as members of an elite crime fighting organization" (Funnell 71), such as S.H.I.E.L.D. These films emphasize the "bonds of sisterhood" that form among these elite agents (Funnell 71), bonds that May shares with Daisy, Elena, and Jemma. Lisa Funnell argues that Western versions of the Hong Kong action heroine, such as Lucy Liu's Alex Munday in the *Charlie's Angels* films or Carrie Anne Moss as Trinity in the *Matrix* films, disavow the Asian roots of their characters in favor of a dominant whiteness (72). This charge cannot be made against

May, who retains and uses her Chinese heritage, notably when she employs Qi Gong to help Elena in *Afterlife*.

Daisy's status as a mixed race Chinese American woman is central to her character. She is the daughter of a Chinese mother (Jiaying) and a white father (Calvin Johnson / Zabo, played by Kyle MacLachlan). As LeiLani Nishime argues, since Asians tend to have less clearly demarcated racial boundaries than other groups, racially mixed Asians can be harder to see (277). This makes it possible for Daisy to pass as white. While multiraciality can potentially challenge hegemonic notions of race in a useful way (Nishime 276), mixed race people like Daisy often find it hard to develop and maintain stable identities, and it can be difficult for them to fit into any of the cultures or communities that inform their backgrounds. In the U.S., mixed race people are often viewed as "fragmented beings" (Mengel 100). As Laurie Mengel observes, their multiraciality "precludes Whiteness, yet simultaneously prohibits full inclusion within the perimeters of some monoracial groups of colour" (101).

Daisy is not only half Chinese; she is also Inhuman, which adds another dimension to her multiraciality. Samira Shirish Nadkarni argues quite convincingly that *AoS* forces Daisy to choose between an Inhuman culture that is led by an Asian woman (Jiaying) and is "strongly conflated with racist Orientalist stereotypes and communism," and the "American white male-led S.H.I.E.L.D." (230). As Nadkarni demonstrates, Jiaying oscillates between the two major stereotypes of an Asian woman: she is a silent victim (or Lotus Blossom) in Season One, and a devious, sexually manipulative Dragon Lady in Season Two (228). The stereotypical characterization of Jiaying makes it easy (perhaps too easy) for Daisy to turn her back on her Chinese (and Inhuman) cultural heritage and assimilate into white American culture as an agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. Indeed, the

show consistently rewards her for doing so (Nadkarni 229). It is thus quite plausible to read the early seasons of *AoS* as a rather heavy-handed argument that a mixed race Chinese Inhuman-American woman can and should abandon her heritage and try to assimilate into a white culture which is unlikely to accept her fully.

Asian Americans like Daisy are often subjected to the pressures and constraints of the model minority stereotype. This stereotype originated in the 1960s, was redeployed in the 1980s, and remains influential today. It attributes to Asian Americans the cultural values necessary for success in the U.S., including respect for authority and a commitment to hard work (Osajima 166). This stereotype allows the U.S. to present itself as a meritocratic land of opportunity (Osajima 167). Daisy works hard as an agent of S.H.I.E.L.D., and she respects her superiors (Coulson, then Mack), though she often disagrees with them. And *AoS* does present S.H.I.E.L.D. as a meritocracy; Daisy advances to positions of greater authority throughout the series. But although model minority appears, on the surface, to be a “positive” stereotype, it is actually harmful to the Asian American community. It presents the U.S. as a “colorblind” society, which conceals “the operation of racial power” and denies the existence of institutional racism (Kawai 113-114). This is why *AoS* Season Seven’s time travel narrative is so important: it shows the explicit institutional racism of a twentieth century America that was certainly *not* colorblind. Model minority promotes the sub-stereotype that Asian Americans, though hardworking, are passive and introverted, and thus “unsuited for positions of leadership” (Kibria 139). This “glass ceiling” effect is especially strong with respect to Asian women, whose race and gender are both associated with passivity and docility (Kibria 141). Daisy strongly resists this aspect of model minority,

for she is never docile; she is consistently active in her work with (and before) S.H.I.E.L.D. She eventually takes on a leadership role and also mentors white male agent Deke Shaw.

The most problematic aspect of model minority, for the purpose of analyzing Daisy's role in S.H.I.E.L.D., is its origins in American Cold War politics. As Robert G. Lee argues, "the Cold War construction of Asian America as a model minority that could become ethnically assimilated" was a "critically important narrative of ethnic liberalism" (145). Model minority presented Asian Americans as a racial minority whose biological difference could be overcome via ethnic assimilation, which allowed Cold War liberals to present the U.S. as a "democratic state where [some] people of color could enjoy equal rights and upward mobility" (Lee 145-146). The problem with this, as Claire Jean Kim has shown, is that historically, white American society has ordered racial groups not just on one axis but on two. Asian Americans have been viewed as inferior to whites but superior to blacks, while on the insider/outsider axis, Asian Americans have been seen as irredeemably foreign compared to whites *and* blacks (Kim 108). As Mia Tuan argues, Asian Americans confront an "assumption of foreignness": white Americans tend to view them as foreign no matter how long they or their families have been in the U.S., rendering them "forever foreigners" (18). This puts Asian Americans in a vicious double bind. Model minority requires them to assimilate into American society and overcome the (allegedly minimal) institutional barriers to their success through hard work, yet their status as forever foreigners means that they may never achieve full assimilation. And even if they do, their allegiance to American society will always be suspect because of their immutable status as alien racial Others.

AoS introduces Daisy in Season One as “Skye,” a member of the socialist hacktivist collective Rising Tide (which strongly resembles the real-world Anonymous group, Nadkarni 229). From the beginning, the show implies that Skye’s loyalties lie with international socialism, not with the U.S. She eventually discovers her origins and meets her mother Jiaying, who has created Afterlife, a kind of utopian haven for Inhumans. Afterlife is coded as a communist society (Nadkarni 225). As a Chinese woman who heads a revolutionary movement that is prepared to advance its agenda by any means necessary (including violence), Jiaying can plausibly be read as Maoist. The implication is clear: if Daisy sides with Jiaying/Afterlife, that will confirm her status as forever foreigner. Instead, as Nadkarni argues, Daisy chooses “assimilation into S.H.I.E.L.D. and Coulson’s pseudo-family platoon, as well as a submissiveness to the American imperial ideology it promotes” (228). Nadkarni’s argument is very convincing with respect to the first two seasons of *AoS*, which form the basis of her analysis. *That* S.H.I.E.L.D. is indeed a white male-led agency of U.S. hegemony (Nadkarni 220).²

I argue, however, that Season Seven permits an effective resolution to Daisy’s double bind. The time travel device allows Daisy to interact with Jiaying at an earlier point in history, the 1980s. This emphasizes what Parker and Song call the “transectional nature of identity formation” (16). Transection “refers not simply to the spatial dimension of the intersection of social relations, but also to the temporal dimension” (Parker and Song 16). Transection considers historical experiences of “migration, enslavement or displacement” (Parker and Song 16), and it is especially important for understanding the identity formation of mixed race people like Daisy. Season Seven gives Daisy a transectional perspective on her mixed race heritage, by

allowing her to have relationships with her mother Jiaying and with her half-sister Kora (played by Asian Canadian actor Dianne Doan), who died without ever meeting Daisy in Daisy's default timeline. Kora shows Daisy the dangers of excessive cultural assimilation. Kora appears to be a fully assimilated Chinese American; she speaks American English without a noticeable accent, and dresses in Western clothes. Kora violently rejects the Chinese Inhumanism of Jiaying's Afterlife. Motivated, perhaps, by a desire to escape from her troubled relationship with her mother, Kora turns her back on her cultural heritage and joins forces with white supervillain Nathaniel Malick (Thomas E. Sullivan). Yet Kora eventually renounces Malick and joins her sister as an agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. As Daisy continues to integrate her identity into S.H.I.E.L.D.'s multiracial, multiethnic culture at the end of the series, her sister's experience may remind Daisy that this integration does not require a repudiation of Chinese culture. If Daisy can learn from her sister's experience, then she might be able to do as May has done, and become part of a multiethnic culture while developing and maintaining a connection to her Chinese heritage.

“You Guys Are My Family”: The S.H.I.E.L.D. Team as Multiracial, Multiethnic Chosen Family

The agents enter America's twentieth century in 1931, in an episode whose title anticipates that era's impending political changes: “The New Deal” (7.1). Coulson has been freshly resurrected as a Life Model Decoy. The show immediately establishes his respect for, and deference towards, S.H.I.E.L.D.'s black Director. “So what's next, boss?” he asks Mack (10:16). The agents don period garb and head into 1931

New York City in search of Chronocom. Coulson was a history major in college (3.8), and he marvels at the ways in which 1931 differs from 2020. “These people have never seen a TV,” he remarks. Mack, however, is much more interested in the era’s racist culture. He draws hostile looks from white New Yorkers, and finishes Coulson’s thought: “Or a black man in a fine suit, apparently” (11:50–54). This efficiently establishes the economic and cultural racism of 1931 America, and Mack’s awareness of that racism. When Ernest Koenig (Patton Oswalt) refers to Mack as Coulson’s “shadow,” Mack responds with an incredulous “say what?” (26:17–18). Mack’s outrage at the racist undertones of Koenig’s remark is perfectly reasonable, but his language is out of character. Mack usually speaks standard American English, and rarely uses African American vernacular. His recourse to a phrase characteristic of 1970s jive foreshadows the team’s visit to that era, and positions Mack as a potential Blaxploitation hero who actively resists white racism. The agents attend a fancy party in honor of Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt. A white waiter refers to Mack as “you lazy. . .” “You lazy what?” Mack demands. “Go on, finish it.” Intimidated by the presence of a large and unexpectedly assertive black man, the waiter apologizes (28:33–38). The agents meet FDR. Later, Mack praises Roosevelt effusively, crediting the Democrat with “taking on discrimination in the workplace,” and declaring that he was “way ahead of his time” (32:47–50). Here the show uses its time travel device to provide its audience with a brief lesson in the history of U.S. race relations. This will be a common narrative strategy in Season Seven. While his encounter with the racist waiter associated Mack with the radical Black Power politics of Blaxploitation, his laudatory remarks about FDR align him with the more

reformist approach to civil rights embodied by organizations like the NAACP.

“Know Your Onions” (7.2) demonstrates that while white privilege is omnipresent in 1930s America, white women only enjoy an attenuated form of that privilege. Koenig refers to Jemma Simmons as a “dame.” She coolly asserts her professional credentials, replying “I’m a doctor, not a dame” (4:41–43). Undeterred, Koenig continues to use the sexist language characteristic of his period: “I like the way this bird sings.” Simmons reasserts her professional qualifications, this time invoking her specific scientific discipline: “I’m a biochemist, not a bird” (14:14–19). This exchange highlights the progress that white women have made since the 1930s, including their greater access to higher education, and their increased (though by no means equal) presence in traditionally male-dominated fields in the physical sciences.

The team’s next stop is 1955, where they become the “Alien Commies from the Future!” who provide the titles of the episode (7.3) and this article. Here *AoS* provides a thorough and nuanced account of 1950s structural and cultural racism. A white waitress glares at Mack and Elena as they hold hands, which suggests that mixed race relationships are frowned upon in 1955 Nevada, even when neither partner is white. But later, the waitress deploys the same disapproving glare at a rude white customer. Here the show avoids an unconvincing caricature of the 50s, in which every social interaction is overdetermined by racism. As in the first episode, Coulson is a white liberal historian enamored with the American past. “We’re at the precipice of the Space Race,” he declares. “It’s a golden age of innovation.” His mixed race teammate is not convinced. “Is it?” Daisy wonders, looking up at the Whites Only and Colored Only restroom signs (8:54–9:03). Once again Coulson, the

white historian, focuses on the historical progress of science and technology, while his teammate of color focuses instead on the fraught history of U.S. race relations. This scene suggests that the scientific and technological progress that Coulson so admires is being held up by structural racism, an argument also made in *Hidden Figures* (Theodore Melfi 2016), a film loosely based on Margot Lee Shetterly's non-fiction book of the same name, which describes the experiences of real-life African American women who worked at NASA in the 1960s. In that film, the white savior character Al Harrison (Kevin Costner) literally smashes the Colored restroom sign, to prevent segregation from impeding NASA's efforts to win the space race. "Well, we still have a long way to go," Coulson admits (9:04). This kind of understatement, typical of white liberalism, connotes the slow pace of a desegregation effort which the U.S. Supreme Court had ordered to be undertaken with "all deliberate speed" one year before this episode takes place, in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

The team captures and interrogates a white male U.S. military official, Gerald Sharpe (Michael Gaston). This gives the show a perfect opportunity to make its racial politics explicit. "I'm a loyal American!" Sharpe declares defiantly. "Did you really think I'd break for bush league Commie scum like you?" Elena, a Colombian woman whose nation suffered from decades of U.S. military intervention during the Cold War and the U.S. "War on Drugs," replies "that arrogance is putting lives at risk." Sharpe's response is both racist and sexist: "is that so, *Mamacita?*" When Elena reveals her anger by making fists, Sharpe immediately classifies her as a hot-tempered spitfire. "Oh ho ho! ¡*Caliente!* [hot!]" Turning to Mack, Sharpe says that it's a "good thing your boy is here to keep you in line." As usual, Mack rejects this twentieth century racist language: "Did he just

call me ‘boy’?” (14:45 15:16). Naturally, Sharpe is equally (though differently) racist towards May. “He called me an Oriental,” she marvels. “I had to pull her away,” Elena adds (23:18 20). Here the show defies both the stereotype of the impulsive Latina spitfire and that of the cool, controlled Dragon Lady, by reversing the narrative roles these stereotypes have assigned to Elena and May. Since Coulson is away, the team decides to let Deke, their other white man, interrogate Sharpe. “I have zero S.H.I.E.L.D. training,” Deke protests. “What makes you think he’s gonna give me the time of day?” Episode director Nina Lopez-Corrado frames a shot of the full spectrum of perceived threats to the 1950s American white man, arranged from shortest to tallest: an Asian woman (May), a Latina (Elena), and a black man (Mack). Mack sighs. “Don’t make us say it” (23:51 57). Interestingly, although Mack consistently calls out the racist discourse of twentieth century white Americans, he is still reluctant to name white privilege. Luckily Deke, who comes from an era considerably further in the future than Mack’s 2020, has no such reluctance. “Stupid white privilege!” he fumes (24:22). Sharpe does not disappoint. “It’s nice to finally meet the man in charge,” he tells Deke. “Gosh, you just go right to that, huh?” Deke replies (27:11 18). Deke is still amazed at the twentieth century’s racist practice of assigning positions of authority exclusively to white men. But even a white man is not completely immune to the effects of 1950s structural racism. Since Deke is working with people of color, he is guilty by association. Sharpe denounces him as a “Stalinite” (27:55).

Meanwhile, Coulson and Simmons have infiltrated the Area 51 base, where they are busy hunting for Chronocombs. Simmons has assumed the identity of Peggy Carter, who broke the glass ceiling and paved the way for women like Simmons by becoming the first woman to serve as an agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s

predecessor organization, the S.S.R. Simmons inspects a row of nearly identical scientists, which includes five white men (four of whom wear white lab coats), plus one token white woman (also in a lab coat). Simmons is understandably frustrated by the lack of diversity in the American military/scientific complex. Textually, the source of her frustration is the difficulty of spotting Chronocombs in this homogenous group. “If the Chronocombs had infiltrated, they would all look exactly like this,” she complains to Coulson. Subtextually, Simmons recognizes how structural racism holds back people of color and impedes scientific and technological progress. Coulson accuses her of trafficking in stereotypes; the white male liberal still doesn’t get it. But this creates an opening which permits Simmons to comment explicitly on the structural racism of mid twentieth-century American higher education, while implying that this is still an issue in the early twenty-first century. Simmons goes directly from symptom to cause: “Perhaps, but until a more diverse population goes into STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics] fields, I’m afraid any one of them could easily be mistaken for a Chronocomb” (15:40–58). The show also acknowledges that the white, British, middle class Simmons is herself part of this homogenous scientific community; she discusses Heisenberg with one of the scientists, in German. Nonetheless, she is able to use her white privilege to challenge that community’s lack of diversity, and the structural racism which has caused that lack.

Episode Four, “Out of the Past,” is filmed in black and white, ostensibly because it is told from Coulson’s point of view, and a malfunction in his LMD circuits has bled the color from his world. The black and white cinematography gives the episode a film noir feel, which makes it easier for the agents to notice and comment upon the racism and sexism that were

common in the film noir genre, and in the real-life mid twentieth century America which that genre represented. Deke asks if women were allowed to drive in the 50s. Elena is shocked by his question, so Deke tries to explain: “I’m sorry, I don’t know. I mean, we were just in the 30s and they were really stylish, but it was so sexist and racist. But the 50s, though are still pretty sexist and racist.” The “man out of time” has trouble perceiving the gradations of prejudice that exist in the different decades of the twentieth century. This again emphasizes the slow pace of change, particularly with respect to racial and gender equity. “It always gets better,” Elena assures him. “Just never fast enough” (7:46–8:02). Elena is the right person to make this critique of gradualism: this twenty-first century Latina is naturally frustrated by the pace of progress. When Elena suggests that the agents might try to change things while they’re in the 50s, Deke invokes the butterfly effect, warning Elena that they could lose control of the timeline if they try to change the past. This fear has a conservative impact on the team’s behavior, for it forces them to privilege the default timeline. The MCU would continue to explore this theme with the 2021 series *Loki*’s “sacred timeline,” but already in *AoS*, Mack explicitly refers to the past as “sacred” (7.7, 4:49).

“We’re the Agents of Status Quo,” Elena concludes (7.4, 8:18). And the status, as Tancharoen and the Whedons’s Dr. Horrible reminds us, is not quo. The ethics of time travel (as S.H.I.E.L.D. understands them) require the team to leave history’s structural racism and sexism in place. Since they understand the timeline as a narrative, this means that they are not only agents of a status quo history, but also of a status quo *historiography*: their commitment to the default timeline precludes historical revisionism. Both the past and the stories they tell about it must remain static. This includes the stories

that exist only in their minds, such as the internal monologue that Coulson narrates in voice-over in this film noir episode. Here we see the limits of Coulson's white liberal historiography. While the *content* of the historical narratives that he creates may be liberal, those narratives are static and unchanging, which makes them *historiographically* conservative. In voice-over, Coulson notes that "a great writer once said, 'the past is never dead. It's not even past.'" That great writer was William Faulkner, whose version of "the past" included "the fundamental lie of racism" and the institutions that lie supported (Horton). To the extent that Coulson accepts the past and narratives about it as written in stone rather than something that people might one day transcend, as Faulkner hoped (Horton) Coulson is indeed an agent of (white) status quo. The agents's historiographic positions are consistently coded by race. The half-Chinese Daisy thinks that "writing some new history" is "cool" (32:53). She is open to a revisionist historiography that might pay more attention to the history of American racism. May uses her hyperempathy to restore color to Coulson's film noir world, which moves her away from the Dragon Lady stereotype and implies that she would be willing to view the mid twentieth century through a more contemporary historiographic lens. By the end of the episode, Deke's colleagues of color have convinced him to abandon the conservative historiography. "Just got a look at the status quo," he says. "Not a fan." When Elena suggests that they might change it, Deke jumps at the chance: "I'm in" (38:48 39:00).

The team spends episodes five and six in the 1970s; *AoS* uses this setting to perform a light-hearted satire of that decade's earnest but frustratingly modest anti-discrimination efforts. The agents meet General Rick Stoner (Patrick Warburton), an implausibly progressive 1970s straight white

man. May assumes the unlikely identity of “Agent Chastity McBride, Deputy [S.H.I.E.L.D.] H.R. Liaison.” Stoner is clearly attracted to May, but he is careful to behave properly around her. When May compliments him on his “professional decorum,” he replies, “Thank you, Agent McBride. I’ve attended a number of seminars” (7.5, 14:13). These “seminars” represent S.H.I.E.L.D.’s institutional response to second wave feminism, embodied in the 1970s by the National Organization for Women and the struggle to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment. Gone are the days when a room full of male agents expected Peggy Carter to fetch them coffee. Stoner does not subject May to racial stereotypes, nor does he fetishize her as an exotic racial Other. Indeed, he does not seem to take notice of her race at all. Perhaps S.H.I.E.L.D., like many real-world U.S. government agencies of the 1970s, has responded to the civil rights movement and the federal legislation that it inspired, although that response may not extend beyond encouraging managers to take H.R. training seminars. *AoS* gently mocks Stoner’s rigid, “by the book” professionalism by contrasting it with the counterculture with which it was contemporary. “You’d think someone named Stoner would be a little more fun,” Coulson comments (7.6, 11:22). But in the end, the show allows Stoner to express his attraction to May while remaining safely within the bounds of institutional professionalism and retaining his respectful attitude towards women co-workers. “I’d like to buy you a beverage of your choice, if that is a welcome gesture,” he says to May (33:10).

Surprisingly, the show does not take the opportunity to let Mack perform the Blaxploitation hero in that trope’s native environment, the 1970s. This would have been the obvious representational move, but it also would have been a dangerous one, as it would have complicated the show’s efforts to

reimagine the Blaxploitation hero without the misogyny and gratuitous violence which originally informed that trope. The one gesture towards Blaxploitation is the title sequence of “A Trout in the Milk” (7.5), which features 70s action show theme music with plenty of wa-wa pedal, and shows Mack wielding his trademark shotgun axe. In the context of this 70s-style title sequence, Mack and his outrageous, over-the-top weapon read like a satire of violent Blaxploitation heroes like John Shaft (Richard Roundtree, who also starred in a short-lived *Shaft* television series, 1973-1974).³ After that, the team jumps to 1982, where Mack performs that era’s black TV action hero, evoking *The A-Team*’s B. A. “Bad Attitude” Baracus (Mr. T). Despite his nickname, B.A. was considerably more mellow than the classic Blaxploitation heroes of the 70s, and thus closer to Mack’s version of the black male action hero. The remainder of the *AoS* “A-Team” (which is really more of a B-Team) consists of the members of the Deke Squad, the pop band / alternate S.H.I.E.L.D. team that Deke recruits while he and Mack are stranded in 1982 (and while Mack mourns his parents, who have been killed and replaced by Chronicom duplicates). As Deke introduces his Squad in voice over, the name of each member appears on screen in the same military-style Stencil font that introduced the members of the A-Team in that show’s title sequence. The Deke Squad consists of white woman Roxy Glass, two Asian-American brothers known as “the Chang Gang,” the lesbian Olga Pachinko, and the white male Cricket. When Mack returns from his *de facto* bereavement leave, Deke immediately turns command of the Squad over to him. The Deke Squad, then, is an 80s TV action team with far more racial, gender, and sexual diversity than the A-Team, a group of straight men whose only member of color was B.A., and whose commander was a white man.

In 1983, Elena and May travel to Afterlife to seek help for Elena, who has lost her super-speed power (7.8). May positions herself as Chinese by speaking Mandarin to Jiaying. Jiaying asks May, also in Mandarin, “are you also one of us?” Here “one of us” denotes an Inhuman, but since two Asian actors are having this conversation in Mandarin, it connotes Chinese. May takes the question at face value: “No. Just my friend here” (11:02–08). Jiaying tries to help Elena, and she draws heavily on her Chinese cultural heritage to do so. She uses traditional Chinese medicine, performing acupuncture to “break down any poison” in Elena’s body (12:58). Jiaying works hard to include May in Elena’s treatment program, which emphasizes the show’s commitment to Chinese culture and heritage, while challenging the quasi-racial barrier between humans and Inhumans. “I’m not Inhuman,” May protests. “What you can do is still remarkable,” Jiaying replies (18:06–10). What May “can do” is strongly coded as Chinese: it is Qi Gong energy and breathing exercises. Qi Gong is associated with tai chi, a softer and more internal form of the martial arts practice which has defined May as a kung fu action hero for the past seven seasons. Performing peaceful, spiritual Qi Gong reduces May’s resemblance to the violent heroine of the kung fu film. May and Elena sit face to face in lotus position, eyes closed. “Now breathe in,” says Jiaying (19:11). When this does not work, May suggests physical contact. Elena responds with a bit of homophobia, which is surprising, but also not unusual in her Latin American culture: “Please tell me we’re not gonna screw” (19:55). In fact they are going to spar, and these two women action heroes of color are perfectly comfortable with that. Elena eventually overcomes her mental block and regains her power.

The final story arc of the season (and the series) centers on Daisy; *AoS* concludes by asking and answering some hard

questions about Daisy's multiracial identity, her allegiances, and her status within the various communities that are available to her. At the end of the series, Daisy reconciles the Chinese American culture of her biological family (represented by her sister Kora) with the multiracial multiculturalism of her chosen family (the S.H.I.E.L.D. team). Thus the show concludes by articulating an important argument that it is possible for a mixed race person to participate in a community specific to their own ethnic heritage while also participating in a broad and inclusive multiethnic community. Kora is initially aligned with supervillain Nathaniel Malick, and at first it appears that she will stand with him against the S.H.I.E.L.D. team. When Coulson denounces Malick's so-called "anarchy" as "evil," Kora replies, "justice isn't always pretty, Agent Coulson" (7.10, 23:30 - 36). Kora surprises Daisy by claiming that she wants to become an agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. (7.11). But Kora is an Inhuman who is at least half Chinese (we do not know who her father is, but 1983 is too early for it to be Cal), and she has already shown that she sympathizes with the supervillain. Her allegiances are suspect, and Daisy has trouble believing that she truly wants to assimilate into the S.H.I.E.L.D. culture.

Kora tries to convince Daisy of her sincerity by making a eugenic argument based on their biological relationship. "I've always wanted a sibling," Kora tells her. "We have the same blood" (7:43 - 49). *Buffy* made a similar argument about the importance of sisterly blood relations at the end of Season Five, when Buffy was able to use her blood to close the portal that Dawn's blood had opened. But *Buffy* also acknowledged the incoherence of a eugenic philosophy that privileges blood relations over cultural ties. When Willow reminds the Scoobies that Buffy and Dawn "share the same blood" (even though Dawn was created by monks), Anya, the character most likely to

speak uncomfortable truths, replies “yeah, I never got that” (“Potential” 7.12, 16:48). “We can do anything,” Kora assures Daisy. Daisy is dubious: “Like a sister superhero squad?” The Chronocom leader, Sibyl, sees all possible futures. Kora tells Daisy “Sibyl said, there is no future where Daisy Johnson lets her sister fight alone.” Despite her skepticism, Daisy seems to accept this. “She was right,” Daisy declares, and releases Kora from her handcuffs (7.11, 8:52–9:10).

It soon becomes clear, however, that Daisy is more loyal to her chosen family than to her biological family. Malick kidnaps Jemma. “The thing is, I already have a sister to save,” Daisy tells Sousa (Enver Gjokaj). “Her name is Jemma Simmons” (12:27–32). Although they share no cultural heritage, Daisy regards the white, British, human Jemma as her sister. Indeed, Daisy regards all of her teammates as her siblings, with Coulson serving as surrogate father. “Mack you guys are my family,” Daisy says. “I don’t know who I am without you guys” (21:50–22:02). So her colleagues are not only her family; they are also the source of her identity. Daisy regards membership in her S.H.I.E.L.D. family as the solution to the problem of fragmented identity that often confronts mixed race people.

The team’s other Chinese woman, May, also plays a key role in the reconciliation of cultural heritage with chosen family. May’s hyperempathy helps her relate to Daisy, Kora, and the difficult choices they face. “Your mother died protecting Daisy from him [Malick],” May tells Kora (35:03). Subtextually, one Chinese woman is telling another how her Chinese mother tried to protect her sister from a white imperialist. When the Chronocoms wipe out all the S.H.I.E.L.D. bases, May can feel the agents dying. She is like Obi Wan Kenobi feeling a “disturbance in the Force,” but unlike George Lucas’s 1977 *Star Wars*, *AoS* acknowledges the Chinese roots of its metaphysics.

May recognizes how much she has changed since Season One. “How did I become this me?” she wonders (7.12, 16:13). Coulson likes this May, as well he should: May’s hyperempathy is now powerful enough to sever any connection between her character and the Dragon Lady stereotype. When May flies the team to safety in the final episode (7.13), Mack credits her with “some serious flying.” May takes a moment, in the middle of an apocalypse, to reflect “that used to be all I did” (18:11–15). She remembers being “The Cavalry,” a one-dimensional combat pilot / kung fu warrior. But she has become so much more. The show is right to credit itself with transforming May into a complete, well-rounded person. And it is very fitting that May, who has grown and changed as much as anyone on the team, is the one who saves the world. She does this by sharing her hyperempathy with the generally emotionless Chronocoms; once they can feel the pain their assault on humanity is causing, they call off their attack. The *AoS* series finale is structurally similar to the finale of *Buffy*, in which Buffy saved the world by sharing her power with all the potential Slayers (“Chosen” 7.22). But Buffy was a blonde, white California girl with little if any understanding of racial or ethnic difference, while it is a Chinese woman who saves this more diverse and inclusive world. The image of May *saving the world with empathy* is beautiful, radical, and, for a 2020 U.S. television audience watching this episode less than three months after the murder of George Floyd, absolutely necessary.

The final episode of *AoS* is entitled “What We’re Fighting For.” This title alludes to Frank Capra’s World War Two “Why We Fight” propaganda films, to the *Angel* episode of the same title (5.13), and to a troubling conversation in *Age of Ultron*, in which Tony Stark tries to justify his militaristic actions (McSweeney 193). In the 1940s, when Capra made his films, anti-

racism was ostensibly one of the reasons why Americans fought (Lee 149). But this rang hollow for the African Americans who had to fight in segregated military units, the Japanese Americans who were imprisoned solely on the basis of their race, the Chinese Americans who faced racial violence because white Americans confused them with Japanese Americans, and the Latin American *bracero* guest workers who were paid extremely low wages when they were paid at all. Thankfully, things look a little different in 2020. “What We’re Fighting For” is fundamentally different from “Why We Fight.” Daisy was prepared to give her life to save both her chosen family (her team) and her biological family (Kora). But Kora uses her Inhuman power to save her sister. “This is what we’re fighting for,” Coulson tells Daisy. Daisy understands, and agrees. “Family,” she replies (28:58–29:02). A year later, the episode’s denouement reveals that this family includes Kora, who is exploring deep space with Daisy and Sousa; Mack, who remains Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. and stands Fury-like on the deck of a Helicarrier; Elena, who has become the agency’s best agent; and May, who now shares her wisdom with new recruits as a professor at S.H.I.E.L.D.’s Coulson Academy. These “alien commies from the future” have made their world more diverse, equitable, and inclusive. The conclusion of *AoS* invites the show’s audience to do the same in the real world.

¹ Whedon’s most famous show, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, is frequently charged with being unable to imagine the heroic Slayer as anything other than a thin, blonde, middle class white woman. Kent Ono was one of the first scholars to

observe that *Buffy* systematically marginalized, villainized, and demonized people of color, that characters of color have a very short life expectancy on the show, and that Buffy herself is frequently racist towards characters of color such as Kendra (“To Be a Vampire”). Lynne Edwards argues that *Buffy*’s black Slayers all evoke stereotypical media tropes of race (“The black chick”; see also her 2002 essay “Slaying in Black and White”). Patricia Pender maintains that the introduction of a transnational Slayer army in Season Seven does not solve these representational problems, and indeed adds troubling Orientalist tropes. Jessica Hautsch argues that Orientalist stereotypes and whitewashing of Asian characters continue in *Buffy* Season Eight comics.

² As Terence McSweeney points out, despite S.H.I.E.L.D.’s supposedly global purview, it is basically a U.S. intelligence agency. The “H” stands for “Homeland” in the latest version of the S.H.I.E.L.D. acronym, most of the agency’s agents are American, most of their bases are in the U.S., and the Director appears to report to the U.S. President rather than to a global governance body (McSweeney 210).

³ Samuel L. Jackson, whose portrayal of black S.H.I.E.L.D. Director Nick Fury informs Henry Simmons’s performance of Mack, also played the title character in John Singleton’s 2000 reboot of the classic Blaxploitation film *Shaft*.

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