To Boldly Go: Using Science Fiction to Open the Door to Brave Racial Conversation in White Spaces

Abstract: Science fiction and speculative fiction, as domains of white geek culture, can help provide a safe, and therefore productive, environment for white people to begin to explore themes of racism and racial justice. These initial explorations can help participants acculturate to using the language and thought patterns of anti-racist work. These conversations can then serve as scaffolding experiences upon which the religious educator can build to help faithful learners then examine themes and concerns of racial justice in the bible, and finally in their personal lives.

Introduction:

Geek culture is on the rise, and along with it, engagement with science fiction. This provides a unique opportunity for religious educators who want to begin conversations about race in their teaching contexts. For some white people, perhaps the only time they may have been challenged to think critically about race is through the genre of science fiction, which is known for examining the human condition through the lens of the speculative, allowing producers and actors to explore questions surrounding issues like race with frankness that would otherwise be censored. The fantastical nature of the genre makes these controversial questions safer and more approachable. I suggest that religious educators who are committed to addressing difficult conversations about race with primarily-white congregations can use science fiction as a bridge in their congregation to help facilitate these conversations, using the theory of play in education to both take seriously the opening that science fiction as a genre gives, and help make conversations around race more approachable in these contexts. Through the act of naming and centering the white experience in science fiction, a relatively safe environment, educators can then encourage their learners to do this same work in engagement with the theological text, and then the learner’s own lives.

A word of context:

Throughout this paper, I will be writing as a white clergywoman in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and doctoral student speaking about a possible approach to religious education for majority-white mainline protestant spaces. The particular approach I suggest – using geek culture as a possible opening within religious education for an emancipatory pedagogy - also centers itself in a primarily white space, and as such, has some inherent limitations. While there may be aspects of this approach that are more broadly applicable, for the scope of this paper, these are the contexts and spaces which I am imagining and for which I am formulating this approach.

Play as a teaching approach:
Play is often relegated to something that children do. Per Brene Brown, it is “apparently purposeless”\(^1\) a type of fooling around, something we do “because it’s fun and because we want to.”\(^2\) Similarly, Courtney Goto in her text *The Grace of Playing*, explores the history of play, especially as it relates to the church, and notes that play is often dismissed as meaningless. She observes that “Historically, a person’s work is the criterion by which to judge success, while playing is considered time off from work – understood either as “a [mere] reward for past work, a temptation to idleness, or a pause that refreshes.””\(^3\) In the context of the church, play has been relegated to the Sunday School wing, that when adults play it raises fears about “messing with that is holy.”\(^4\)

But Brown and Goto\(^5\) argue fiercely that to define and regulate play as such is a critical loss. Both argue that the art of play must be reclaimed: for Brown, it is a matter of attending to our inner needs and desires, that play allows us to confront and manage the difficulties we face in everyday life\(^6\) – such as the high-stakes racial conversation happening in the U.S. context today. Without play, in Brown’s world, we fall prey to the North American cultural forces that promote overwork, overconsumption and over-stress.

While Brown approaches play from a whole-life perspective, Goto addresses the role of play specifically in ecclesial structures. While she provides a thorough description of the history and sociology of a theology of play, her basic claim is that “Churches have much to offer if they intentionally provide opportunities for playing, where the faithful might have creative encounters with mystery and one another.”\(^7\) For Goto, play is a way into revelatory experiences of the Divine.

For the purposes of this paper, two of her particularly important concepts of play are the communal nature of play, and acting ‘as if’. For Goto, in terms of play in the church, the role of play is particularly important when it is communal. She argues “While playing alone can be absorbing, transporting and fulfilling, playing together multiplies possibilities as creative ideas, resources and energies collide, compete, resonate, or are amplified. Playing together can extend a sense of agency in players as they participate in, construct, and are shaped by possibilities.”\(^8\)

While the domain of science fiction starts with “what if,” in play, the concern is instead “as if.” Acting as if, according to Goto, means “setting aside enough disbelief, appearances or literal ways of thinking to shift temporarily into another way of engaging reality and one another.”\(^9\) This is one of the easily observed elements of play, particularity between children. From my own history, there was a particular cube-shaped jungle gym on the playground of the elementary school which I attended. While I cannot remember ever explicitly being told, all of my grade (and I think the majority of the school) behaved “as if” the ground under this playground element was lava, and interacted with the element with that shared understanding. Similarly, children, in their play, will often behave ‘as if’ mundane objects have additional properties or identities –‘as if’ this box were a spacecraft, ‘as if’ this stick were a wand, or a

\(^1\) Brown, 100
\(^2\) ibid
\(^3\) Goto, 10
\(^4\) ibid
\(^5\) Goto builds on a number of other theologians work, most notably Jürgen Moltmann’s *Theology of Play*
\(^6\) Brown, 101
\(^7\) Goto, 12
\(^8\) Goto 18
\(^9\) Goto, 16
lightsaber or a gun. “As if” allows those who play to enter a speculative world, a world of exploring other possibilities, a world of what could or might be made from the broken world we live in.

Why Sci-Fi?

I suggested in the introduction that science fiction (inclusive of speculative fiction) may be an introductory forum for exploring themes of racism. This is, after all, the domain of sci-fi – a genre which has been termed “the literature of ideas” that asks “what if?”10 More precisely, Robert A. Heinlein defined the genre as “realistic speculation about possible future events, based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present.”11 Through the lens of science fiction, authors have looked at the world around them, and asked ‘what if?’ and used this as a forum to explore questions of religion, of personhood, of race, of class, either through utopias or dystopias, or somewhere in-between.

As a specific example of how sci-fi works as a lens for ‘what ifs’ in this way, Star Trek: The Next Generation has particularly clear examples of this ‘what if’ examination of societal issues. Within the first two seasons, TNG had addressed gender roles and norms through the episode “Angel 1” where the crew encounters an entirely matriarchal society; the ethics of capital punishment in the episode “Justice”; and the nature and qualities of personhood in “The Measure of a Man.”12 In each of these cases, issues and concerns facing the current world were used to create an alien culture or situation that could ask what would happen if these concerns were taken to the extreme. It is particularly worth noting that in each of these case, the crew was examining the question through an external culture, and at no point in time was the issue or concern explored directly through the lens of the crew of the Enterprise-D. Sci-fi provided a format to examine these issues through an alien culture, while leaving the crew (representative of the dominant human culture) as blameless. This made these highly controversial issues safer to confront and examine, as they were being looked at not only through the distance of sci-fi to begin with, but also located within the culture of an alien race. Star Trek: Deep Space 9 took it a step further, and moved the discussion into the primary crew; through the character of Captain Benjamin Sisko and the plot device of time travel, DS9 looked at human history and race in a way that TNG never dared.

While TNG and DS9 are both significantly dated at this point, science fiction as a genre is not, and is a particularly useful lens for this endeavor in this time and place for two reasons: it is geeky, and it is playful.

As to the first, geek culture has been gaining traction over the last decade, moving from the shadows into mainstream acceptance. There is greater interest around geek culture, and its subdomains of sci-fi fandoms than there has been in a long time, and because of that, there is energy around these conversations. In the old adage of “Preach with the bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other,” geek culture is the newspaper, the new media, a conversation partner for the Christian educator as much as the newspaper used to be. This is the new culture in which we operate. In her text Engaging Technology in Theological Education, Mary Hess argues that theological education cannot afford to ignore digital spaces as a place of meaning making.13

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10 http://www.writing-world.com/sf/sf.shtml
12 http://memory-alpha.wikia.com/wiki/Portal:Main
13 Hess, Technology
I would argue that theological education cannot afford to ignore geek culture any longer, either, as it is a site of both meaning making and exploration for certain generations. Geek culture is also a specifically useful lens for the white mainline protestant church, because mainstream geek culture is generally a white-dominated space, as confirmed by my wanderings around Chicago’s biggest geek convention, C2E2 this spring. Yet through sci-fi, stories about race can be more approachable; they provide a distance while still being grounded in the real world.

The second aspect that makes sci-fi a particularly useful lens to use is that it is playful. It is fun. It is engaging - which all ties in with Courtney Goto’s analysis of play as a useful pedagogical tool in Christian education. While play has been dismissed as a reason to incorporate something in education, Goto makes a compelling argument for why it should be reconsidered.

**Constructing a Pedagogy of Play**

From this, one can begin to construct a possible approach to Christian education in white mainline protestant churches that addresses the bondage of racism through the play of engaging with science fiction that asks “what if” about race.

The play approach is particularly important, to avoid the common response to racial conversation of shutting down or defensiveness. Stuart Brown, in his text on the concept and neurobiological effect of play argues that, "In play, most of the times we are able to try out things without threatening our physical or emotional well-being. We are safe precisely because we are just playing."14 This safety, imparted through play, can be freeing. If the conversation begins at the level of play, we can create a safe and productive space to begin to discuss topics which would otherwise be unapproachable. Approaching the topic of racism through play, particularly the lens of science fiction, allows us to cross boundaries that would otherwise be stumbling blocks.

Teaching about race, particularly in white religious education environments can be fraught with opportunities for ‘failure’ – groups hijacking the discussion, a devolution of the discussion into a session of ‘not all white people’, and even loss of members from the faith community. Successes, such that they are, may be difficult to come by as the educator learns how to effectively broach the topic with any particular group or dynamic. Talking about race is an inherently transgressive activity, crossing boundaries of ‘politeness’ and social distance. There is significant risk of failure. However, bell hooks’ model of transgressive teaching can be particularly informative here, as she makes it clear that transgressive pedagogy is not just about allowing the participant or learner to experiment and make mistakes – the instructor, or teacher, should also be prepared to fail as well – and that, in this model of teaching, is okay.

hooks also addresses experience as a way of knowing. In order to have an effective pedagogy, the Christian educator must first have students acknowledge their experience of the world as it is now. hooks quotes Henry Giroux and his view on the experience that students bring into the classroom, when he argues that “you can’t deny that students have experiences and you can’t deny that these experiences are relevant to the learning process even though you might say these experiences are limited, raw, unfruitful or whatever. Students have memories, families, religions, feelings, languages and cultures that give them a distinctive voice. *We can critically engage that experience and we can move beyond it. But we can’t deny it.*”15 In order to critically

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14 Brown, S., 34
15 hooks, 88
engage the experience of white protestant Christian Education students, instructors must first acknowledge that these experiences exist.

In this sense, the theological educator can act as permission giver, allowing students to acknowledge, perhaps for the first time, that their experience of whiteness is a real thing that affects their ability to process the world in meaningful ways. Daniel Hill, author of *White Awake*, reflects on the first time he was invited to reflect on this reality. He was attending the wedding of one of his friends who was of South Asian/Indian descent, and Hill complemented the groom on the wedding and the ways in which the groom had brought his culture into the celebration. Then Hill, an U.S. citizen of European descent, made the comment that he wished he had a culture. In the opening chapter of his book, Hill reports his friend’s response: “He [the friend] suddenly got very serious, placed his hands on my shoulder, and looked me straight in the eye. ‘Daniel you may be white, but don’t let that lull you into thinking you have no culture. White culture is very real. In fact, when white culture comes into contact with other cultures, it almost always wins. So it would be a really good idea for you to learn about your culture.’”

Hill, in the rest of his books reflects on this moment as a ‘permission-giving’ moment. It was through the invitation (or perhaps challenge) of his friend that he began to take seriously his exploration of race. Religious educators can function in the same role – in fact, I would go so far as to argue that white Christian educators must function in the same role – to give white people permission to examine Whiteness and White culture as a very real thing. bell hooks argues that this is an imperative of a transgressive pedagogy – that teachers bear the responsibility to ensure that issues of race are addressed even when the class/teaching context is predominantly white.

In this pedagogical model, the theological educator also acts as permission-giver for play. Above I outlined the arguments that have been used against play. In introducing a pedagogy of play in a religious context, the religious educator may find themselves up against even scripture, as 1 Corinthians 13 seems, at a simple level to speak out against play as a theological practice, saying "When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, reason like a child, think like a child. But now that I have become a[n adult], I’ve put an end to childish things." However, if the religious educator as a person of some authority, gives permission, or legitimizes, this playful approach as a valid approach, then participants are more likely to be willing to engage in these activities and ways of learning.

The overall goal with this approach to religious education is that a group can practice playing with the as ifs and what-ifs in the safe environment of a fictional universe provided through a sci-fi fandom or universe. Through this playful approach, participants gain competency, vocabulary and experience discussing and thinking about racial issues. This ‘safe’ experience then gives permission for these students to take this same approach that they used in the ‘safe’ environment of science fiction and apply it to the very real situation of faith and their lived experiences surrounding race. Through this approach, white students unaccustomed to talking about race can be scaffolded through, beginning in the relative safety of play in the science fiction environment and then moving to the real world.

**Case Study: Firefly as a means to legitimate protest against structural oppression**

As noted earlier in the paper, science fiction has been used in the past to examine societal approaches to race. However, within the contexts of these shows, it is often the experience of people of color that is being discussed or examined. I am going to suggest that a particular

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10 Hill, 4
17 1 Cor 13:11
science fiction show, *Firefly*, can be used as a stepping stone to examine the concept of whiteness and the role that white people can play in protest against unjust societal structures.

*Firefly* is a Joss Whedon\(^{18}\) show that ran for one season in 2002-03, and was described as an “American space Western drama television series.”\(^{19}\) Existing in a speculative future where the United States and China are the only remaining political superpowers, and humanity has achieved space travel, the show traces the adventures of the crew of the *Serenity* – a small cargo ship that navigates through these new political waters, while facing age-old questions of human existence. As Whedon put it, “nothing will change in the future: technology will advance, but we will still have the same political, moral, and ethical problems as today.”\(^{20}\) The show centers around this crew-for-hire and highlights their conflict with the central government, the Alliance. The Alliance has all the characteristics of a stereotypical big government: centralized power among the elite, military force, and a cheerful wish to silence all those who would critique it.\(^{21}\)

Four characters in this show are of particular interest: The captain of Serenity, Malcolm Reynolds; the pilot, Wash; the doctor, Simon Tam, and the mercenary, Jayne – all portrayed by white men. These four characters can be used to highlight four distinct white male archetypes, and their different approaches to institutional structures and oppression.

Captain Malcolm Reynolds is the highly relatable white guy. He’s personable, confident, and carries the comfortable assumption that he should be in charge. However, in an unusual twist on the average white guy trope, Reynolds fought against the Alliance as a ‘Browncoat’ – a rebellious force that protested against the Alliance in a war that ended a fictional five years before the timeline in the series. Reynolds embodies the heroism of rebellion, albeit an unsuccessful one, as the Browncoats lost.

Wash, the pilot, is the archetype of oblivious white maleness. Wash is the overgrown puppy, assuming all is well and essentially fair in the world, and is constantly surprised when it turns out not to be so. He did not participate in the Browncoat rebellion, and generally tries to avoid the Alliance in a live and let live system.

Simon, the doctor, is the privileged, educated white man who has previously benefitted from power and status in the Alliance hierarchy and structure. He finds himself on *Firefly* in an attempt to save his sister from the structural powers of the Alliance; however, his worldview reflects his privileged perspective and assumptions.

Finally Jayne is the gunslinging redneck who turns to violence, bravado and overblown masculinity in response to every problem. His services and allegiances can be bought, his primary motive is profit, and he positions himself wherever seems advantageous at the moment. Though he hates the Alliance, he will work for them – for a price.

How does all of this apply in a religious education setting? By beginning the conversation in the world of *Firefly*, White religious educators can broach topics of power structures and establishment, relation to authority, race and power, moral imperative, and creative resistance through the lens of play. An opening conversation may begin among a group of known fans of the show regarding each of these characters and who the conversation participants relate to the most based on characteristics and worldview; from there, the conversation can progress into the relationship between each character and the systemic power structures in play. Issues of motivation – why would each of these characters, members of the dominant culture, choose to

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\(^{18}\) Legendary geek director of Buffy, Angel, and a whole host of other nerdy film/tv credits


\(^{20}\) ibid

\(^{21}\) Sound familiar?
ally themselves with the Browncoats in an act of rebellion? What is their motivation for resisting the powers that be? Fandom provides a shared experience and a safe lens through which to examine these modern issues.

The next step of conversation is looking at the *Firefly* fandom in real life. While the Browncoats are the heroes of rebellion, the term "Browncoat" has also come to apply to fans of the show who protested its premature cancelling by the FOX network. By taking the identity of Browncoats, fans then align themselves with the "Independents" as they fight against the Alliance – in this case, the FOX network that stopped airing *Firefly* after its first season.” This is an example of allying oneself again a real-life power. Discussion questions could include the motivation on the part of the Network, and what principles guide decision making in power structures today; commonalities between these power structures and the Alliance can be discussed.

Through both stages of these conversations, there are two goals. Goal one is to assist the white participants in aligning themselves with the Browncoats (independents) – after all, they are the heroes of the show, and the majority of us like to align ourselves with the heroes. Goal two is to get students comfortable using language around power structures, systemic power, and rebellion/protest, as well as identify key moral concepts, such as justice, freedom, and equality, as informed by the religious tradition. These concepts can be discussed in both terms of the show, and in explicitly religious terms appropriate to the situation. While still in the context of fandom, these ideas can be discussed as concepts once-removed without personal tie-in or challenge, and the educator can build conceptual frameworks of these systemic issues, as well as making explicit tie-ins to religious language and concepts as well.

The next step is to make the jump to examine a biblical text with these same concepts of transgression and alliance. A text which has these themes of alliance and powerful/lowly comes from none other than Luke 1:46-56 – the Magnificat. The question of alliance carries nicely from the *Firefly* example here – with whom is Mary aligned? With whom does God align God’s self? What principles and values are shared between the Browncoats and the worldview presented in the Magnificat, and how might we frame them in theological language?

The final step in the conversation is to invite participants into the what if/as if of transgressive thought by asking questions that bridge the gap from fandom to real life using the theological principles developed in discussion with the biblical text. Who are the Browncoats today? Who is the Alliance? What systems are in place in today’s world? Where do we see actions that oppose systemic injustice? Or explicitly: if we, as white people, identify emotionally with the Browncoat Malcolm Reynolds, and have created a theological argument to support his actions against the systemic injustices perpetuated by the Alliance, how then do we need to reconsider our relationship and understanding of the protestors of the Black Lives Matter movement? And here, fundamentally is where play and transgression come into focus; by taking these concepts seriously though play, then making the connection between play and real life explicit, the play takes on real meaning in the lives of those who have engaged with it.

This example is just one way that approaching racial discussions through sci-fi/geek fandoms can help bridge conversations between moral concepts and lived faith. While the example and scenario I chose above looked specifically at the role of white characters in relationship to power, the *Firefly* fandom has multiple examples and openings to discuss race, gender, class, power structures, morals, and wisdom (particularly in the ways in which wisdom, intelligence, restraint and pure, unadulterated awesomeness was embodied in black bodies in this

22 http://firefly.wikia.com/wiki/Browncoat
show in the characters of Zoe (Gina Torres) and Shepherd Book (Ron Glass). The character of Book in particular has clear religious tie ins that can bridge the gap into discussions within a Christian Education context.) In any case, the deep passion, interest and engagement in the characters and universe of Firefly, as used in a religious education setting, can help scaffold that passion from being contained to the world of play to having a real impact on people’s faith and lived experiences.

**Critiques of this approach**

This, like all approaches, has strengths and weaknesses. Some of the potential critiques that I can see in this approach is that from the beginning it centers the white experience, and can certainly be accused of over-catering to white fragility. It paints a poor picture of the white psyche that discussions about race need to take a roundabout approach through play and fandoms. This approach relies on the assumption that there are many well-meaning white Christians who are clumsily trying to do better in discussing race, but are held in bondage by their fear of approaching such a complex topic. In order to help those who could be powerful allies make the leap into discussing race, the scaffolding approach is used to bridge the gap.

A second key critique is that this approach is focused on white people talking to white people about race: by its very nature, any conversation in this context is an incomplete conversation as there are key voices missing the conversation. A counterpoint to this critique is that this approach avoids putting all the onus on POC to carry the conversation and learning surrounding race, and makes white educators take responsibility for direct education about race. The educational approach modeled in this paper is only a first step to establish basic ideas, concepts and to engage white imagination, so that in transracial conversations white people are able to more fully engage as we step into our role to be co-creators with God. As such, conversations that use this play through fandom approach must be limited in scope – there is only so far this approach can go. But it is also a helpful approach to lay groundwork that is needed to begin serious conversations about race.

Finally, a third critique of this approach is that it relies on, or is at least best suited for groups with familiarity and knowledge of a particular fandom in order to be most effective. This approach presupposes a group that is a) interested in a particular fandom, with the language and cultural knowledge to discuss it in some detail b) in a religious education setting, and interested in drawing connections to faith issues and concern and c) is willing to have meaningful conversations about race. These spaces where this approach might work are few and far between; however, when those three factors are present, this could be a particularly useful and unique approach to broach this complicated topic.

**Next Steps and future research**

Next steps to further develop this approach is a greater engagement in racial theory and approaches. The racial realities of the current U.S. culture are complex, and this paper assumed a particular context, educator and audience. Before making this a wide-scale approach, additional consultation with existent research around teaching race in predominantly white settings would be helpful to nuance and layer the argument within this paper.

After that, field-testing this approach to using geek culture and fandoms, in combination with religious education to help approach difficult topics would be useful. Seeing whether or not this approach actually works to help explore issues of race and justice through the comparatively safe lens of play, and then make the harder, transgressive connections with faith and life, and
what could be changed about this approach to better meet those learning goals would be helpful. I would be intrigued to see what groups for whom this approach is particularly well-suited think of this approach.

Finally, if this approach turns out to be somewhat effective, it would be interesting to see how the basic framework or premise could scale up or down to include different groups. This paper was focused on white religious educators teaching in white contexts through the lens of play via fandom as an approach to race. But I wonder if there is a space for a play-based fandom approach that would not be specifically limited by race of instructor/audience, and if there is space to focus more on Goto’s emphasis on community as a critical component to an approach to play.
Bibliography: