"You're Scanning my Balls?" Intimate Male Relationships in *Almost Human*

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The short-lived science fiction television program Almost Human*'s depiction of male relationships reflects how cultural expectations of males inhibit the development of intimate, heterosexual, male relationships. In the program's cyberpunk urbanscape of androids and humans, where physiological gender determinations are no longer significant, the program both explicitly and implicitly discusses current real world concerns over masculine disidentification. Using both male studies and feminist theory to analyze* Almost Human*, this essay contends that the program provides a unique depiction*

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of male-male relationships that, while impacted by cultural expectations of masculine performativity, are nonetheless supportive and compassionate.

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1. Introduction

According to contemporary male studies, the loss of intimate same-sex relationships is of significant concern for young adult males – especially those living in North America. Although research notes that these relationships do exist at a young age, they have largely dissolved over adolescence and are peculiarly absent by young adulthood. Reasons that are most often cited to inhibit the development of new friendships later in life include upbringing, distrust of others, antagonistic competitiveness, as well as homophobia. As described by male studies, which has flourished alongside feminist theories, these pressures are fueled by cultural expectations. Established by family and upheld by one's communities, men are expected to behave in a masculine fashion, or at the very least not act effeminately. With this stigma harbored by Western media, it is little wonder that many young males articulate feelings of inadequacy and consequential inability to develop strong, compassionate same sex relationships.

Although television is dominated by expectations of masculine performativity, the short-lived science fiction series *Almost Human* [USA 2013-14] suggested that intimate, heterosexual male-male relationships were not only worth exploring on basic television but that the anxieties men express towards other males could be explicitly worked through. Expanding on the familiar buddy-cop trope, the relationship between detective John Kennex [Karl Urban] and his android partner Dorian [Michael Ealy] explores intimate male heterosexual relationships for Western audiences. The bond between Kennex and Dorian which, due to being cancelled after one season, never enjoyed the opportunity to attain its potential, is significant not only because it largely ignores the thematic crutch of human-versus-android but it provides an opportunity to observe Western attitudes towards male-male relationships and confirms what male studies researches have argued

inhibit friendship development. While we certainly observe Dorian's empathic nature rubbing off on his curmudgeonly partner, this affect is acknowledged immediately in the first episode allowing for the relationship to develop into something beyond a working friendship. In *Almost Human*, Dorian and Kennex's "bromance" evokes questions of masculinity in a cyberpunk environment where the gap between subjective understanding of gender and the influence of culture have greatly diminished.

Science fiction law enforcement partnerships have been featured on television for decades led by James West and Artemus Gordon in *The Wild, Wild, West* (USA 1965-69) the far less successful comedy Holmes & Yo-Yo, and a handful of episodes that comprised the short-lived series Mann & Machine. X-Files [USA 1993-2002] agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully are one of the more well known of these partnerships: while Scully's medical background and logical approach was crucial to solving that week's case, it was often undercut but the paranormal origins of the culprit. Like *Almost Human*, the equally short-lived series Alien Nation [USA 1989-90], based off of the film by same name, also used science fiction tropes to encapsulate commentary on cultural and societal concerns of audiences. This early Fox series likewise used the relationship between a human and Other (an alien in this case) to articulate these issues. *Almost Human* similarly makes use of science fiction's ability to provide a safe space for exploration of this type of relationship in that it allows audiences – specifically male heterosexuals – to witness an intimacy between males that allays anxieties of distrust, competition, and homophobia.

In this essay, I argue that *Almost Human*'s depiction of male relationships reflects current thinking of how expectations of males are inhibiting the development of intimate, heterosexual, male relationships. In the cyberpunk urbanscape of *Almost Human*, where physiological gender determinations are no longer significant, the program both explicitly and implicitly discusses current real world concerns over masculine disidentification. Using both male studies and feminist theory to analyze the television series, this essay contends that the program depicts male-male relationships that, while impacted by cultural expectations of masculine performativity, are supportive and compassionate.

To accomplish this I will first provide a survey on current thinking on hetero-male relationships, the conflicts that contribute to their inhibition. After specifying my focus on three of the more significant expectations, I will then turn to feminist theories as they apply to science fiction and cyberculture. I'll then apply these considerations to a close reading of *Almost Human*, specifically on scenes where interactions between the two lead characters provide audiences with what Jimmy Draper and Amanda Lotz describe as the "working through" of issues associated with the masculine disidentification. Throughout the course of the analysis, I hope to not only highlight how science fiction provides a "safe" space to observe these relationships, but more importantly to illuminate their lack of representation. For the purpose of this essay, I viewed the entire single season of *Almost Human* in search of character interactions that suggested the show's attitudes towards masculine identification as well as traits that research suggests inhibit intimate male relationships. As will be described in the third, analytical section, this survey focused primarily on the pilot episode as this instance, like many, showcased the developing relationship between protagonists. Several of the show's thematic elements are instigated in the pilot episode including several of Kennex's personality traits that position him on a more traditional end of a spectrum of masculinity. Overshadowing these qualities, however, are those that allude to inadequacy. However, many of the narrative elements that are pertinent to this essay – such as the theme of Dorian's emotional instability – are threads that are carried throughout the entire season.

2. Cultural Expectations of Masculine Performativity

Alongside feminism's scrutinization of heteronormativity, masculinity has undergone its own appraisal of gender roles and expectations. Definitions of what was once considered unacceptable male behavior are no longer universal. Neither should it be assumed that one's physiology at birth would determine their subjective notions of sex and gender. This section of my essay will describe how the transition from biological essentialism towards more social-constructivist theories has also impacted understandings of masculinity and the performative expectations of boys and men. To maintain relevance towards my analysis of *Almost Human*, this essay focuses on only a few of the

expected masculine roles that are most prevalent in the program. Among these are issues of trust, homophobia, and father figure relationships.

As even the biological conception of masculine identity is debatable, to best understand the significance of the intimate male friendship, it is crucial to acknowledge how male behavior is guided, not by the phallus but by how the community considers the phallus and its possession. When we contemplate gender, we are regarding how one's identity is constructed by society based on biological functions associated with the sex distinctions that they are born with. To illustrate, I was taught as a male toddler to urinate standing up and utilize the restroom facilities that pertain to the mechanics of this function (i.e. standing up). This is in accordance with generations of traditional upbringing that were based upon my being born with a penis. Also based on my physiology and assumptions of my parents, I was taught to use the bathroom assigned to MEN and not that assigned to WOMEN (whose representative icon is handily distinguished by its angular skirt). These assumptions are reinforced by the design of the facilities and the persistent fear of walking into the wrong bathroom. My upbringing as a male child provided the foundation for my identification with maleness. As we are increasingly recognizing, however, the assumptions of gender based on biological function are problematic.

Introducing the essays collected in *What Makes a Man*, Rebecca Walker questions male inability to shirk traditional roles, attributing a slew of maladies and destructive conditions to the numerous messages that are directed at males almost from birth. Walker's summary of these directives includes "don't feel, take control, be physically strong, find your identity in money and work, do not be afraid to kill, distrust everything that you cannot see. Don't cry." Furthermore, Walker remarks how "[w]hile the women's movement has been successful in encouraging women to abandon restrictive stereotypes and to question a redefine the very foundation of their identities, men have yet to embark upon a similar mass reeducation, opting instead to – surprise! – suffer in stoic silence" (6). Walker's reflects the concerns of a parent who is concerned about the expectations slowly being embedded within her young son.

Instead of biologically derivative essentialism, Western societies regard behavior as

emanating from and shaped by the various communities one is a part of (Sussman 3). Culture therefore constructs one's gender identity yet still anticipates that people will behave according to the sexual functions one is born with. The either/or man/woman gender binary is progressively being reevaluated and one's gender identity is more often referred to as being positioned along a spectrum. Similar to feminism's struggle to usurp one's gender identification from the constraints of norming communities, male advocates have also striven to disrupt the performative expectations of culture.

Outlining his analysis of these expectations, Ian Harris provides an array of socially acceptable behaviors men say that they are expected to embody and perform throughout their lives. In his book *Messages Men Hear*, Harris ranks traits as expressed in interviews with men, to determine how men define how it is to "act like a man" (1995). Harris' quantitative analysis of male identification traits is expansive, yet confirms Walker's maternal observations of her own son. To paraphrase, the rubric includes: attaining and upholding a level of achievement, of "being the best that you can be" regardless of station; Males are expected to work exhaustively, loyally serving one's employer, while providing for the family, and remaining faithful to a spouse. Admirably performing in one's career better enables the ability to raise a family comfortably as the primary breadwinner. With enough time and aspiration, the male is expected to receive promotions and eventually have others work for him. Although there are numerous variations of these themes ("loyal partner" versus "playboy" for example), the sentiments conveyed point to some of the origins of male's difficulty in developing intimate male relationships beginning in adolescence.

As Harris describes, however, these expectations conflict with needs for creative, loving relationships. Concluding his section "Acting Like a Man," he lists several potential reasons for why men do not have relationships with other men including a poor relationship with a father figure, competitiveness with other males, as well as the fear of appearing homosexual (107). Although research has compiled a large array of factors that contribute to the disappearance of intimate male relationships, this essay focuses on the three that are the most consistently cited. As will be described in far greater detail later, these three facets are also extremely relevant to analyzing the

relationship between Dorian and Kennex in *Almost Human*.

2.1 Father-Figure

Obviously, the father is not the sole provider of support for children and the behaviors of how adults in general -- and parents especially -- shape how the child recognizes healthy relationships. As Geoffrey Grief describes, parent behavior and lifestyle affects upbringing of children in numerous ways, many of which would be considered crucial to Harris' rubric. The financial stability of the household as well as the neighborhood and school – both sources of more age-proximate relationships – are largely determined by the money-making ability of the parents. Accordingly, the father is therefore seen as responsible for these factors.

Without being rooted in an upbringing that is nurturing and creative, the young male grows up without a referential metric to establish his own relationships with other males. This need often conflicts with the father figure's need to excel in the workplace, whose constant demands require more time away from family. Influenced by the desire to outperform others, the working father feels compelled to sacrifice his children's upbringing, reinforcing the "self-made" aspect of performative maleness. Regardless of whether or not a young male is lucky enough to have been raised in a stable home with a nurturing father, the adolescent male soon comes to acknowledge this primary figure as one of the first sources of competition.

2.2 Competition and Trust

The accounts expressed by Harris' interviewees consistently refers to the expectations of being self-reliant and appearing in control of one's success. One of the consequences of these expectations is that men are compelled to engage in a persistent competition with other men. While constructive comparison to one's peers as well as self-directed improvement can certainly contribute to the betterment of one's community, these motivations compound into a stubborn drive to be better than another (whether that other be one's coworker, friend, father, ad model etc.). This competitiveness may be observed in work as well as leisure. Although the familiar narrative found in Harris' study

mentions the rivalrous workplace and the "climb to the top," it does not include playful sources of enmity such as sports or games. This nagging concern – or the incessant reinforcement that this should be a concern – undermines one of the more significant traits men say that they look for in friends: trust.

More than having common likes and beliefs, trust is consistently cited, throughout studies of men and their friendships, as being one of the most important traits. Geoffrey Grief attributes this to remnants of primal humanity when "I got your back" meant survival of the community (49). This is significant as the experience of a betrayal by one's friends is among the earliest traumas most young children experience. This is compounded by how young males are expected to "man up," behave according to expectations, and swallow their emotions.

As most scholarship on male relationships will testify, self-disclosure is not a commonly found attribute in males. Helen Reid and Gary Alan Fine cite numerous studies that highlight females' propensity for conversation when together while men are more likely to engage in activities (133). Unlike women, who are observed as being more comfortable "opening up" to other women, men are typically resistant to sharing their personal, intimate affairs with other males. Reasons for this include competition and feeling vulnerable as well as coming across as homosexual (138-41).

2.3. Homophobia

This "tough guy" performance underscores one of the other consistently pervasive male misgivings. The overlapping of personal and sexual attraction is a modern construction and expressions of male intimacy are often assumed to hint to homosexual tendencies. In his research throughout America and Europe, Stuart Miller described the fear of appearing gay to others as surprisingly common (129). Although one might think that the increasing visibility and progressive socio-political climate of LGBQT movements might allay some of these anxieties, it is believed that this has had an adverse effect on heterosexual males.

Richard Godbeer describes how families and communities of British America supported and fostered loving male friendships. In his analysis of eighteenth-century male friendships, Godbeer

highlights sensibility and sympathy as the cornerstones of these relationships (10). "According to those who wrote about sentimental friendship…," he states, "developing an intense capacity for emotion and loving empathy with the feelings of others constituted an important part of becoming a worthy and refined man" (10). A timeline of how homophobia increased in Western nations is far beyond the scope of this essay but Godbeer, Miller and others cite religion as one of the primary factors that fueled the disdain towards homosexuality.

The loss of the loving male-male relationship, and its emergence in popular culture as the "bromance," has been the subject of an increasing amount of research and scholarship. Entering the lexicon only recently, the concept of the "bromance" has garnered traces of earnest attention from researchers and scholars. In his introduction to *Reading the Bromance*, Michael DeAngelis defines the concept as "an emotionally intense bond between presumably straight males who demonstrate an openness to intimacy that they neither regard, acknowledge, avow, nor express sexually" (1). These relationships in popular media, according to DeAngelis, inhabit a culturally ambiguous space that implies a significant relationship that, while teasing the sexual potential, never satisfies this compelling audience expectation (3). Although depictions of male-male relationships have flourished in cinema and television, only recently have these representations been explored through the on-screen dialogue between characters. In this way, writers have developed a strategy which serves to demarcate the intimate heterosexual male relationship without turning away homosexual male audiences. In his contribution to *Reading the Bromance*, Ron Becker describes how shifting attitudes towards homosexuality has altered the depictions of homosocial relationships from ones that are afraid of being viewed as homosexual to ones that are effeminate (236).

Even given this truncated list of factors, we might better appreciate the difficulty Walker predicted her son would face in juggling. Limiting our frame to these three elements that contribute to the inhibition of developing male-male relationships, we can now turn to how science fiction has regarded gender. Although this will certainly not be an exhaustive survey, it will help provide a transition to my focus on *Almost Human* and the program's depiction of male intimacy. As I will demonstrate, *Almost Human* extenuates the bromance to include a subject that is comfortable with

behaving in an effeminate manner.

3. Feminist Thoughts on Science-Fiction and Cyberculture

Before delving into *Almost Human*'s examination of male roles and the program's depictions of male-male intimacy, it would be prudent to provide an overview of science fiction and the genre's approach to gender. As will be shown, much of the recent scholarship on sci-fi emanates from feminist camps and analyses of male characters in science fiction media tend to surpass rote critique of hyper masculine characters such as Robocop and the Terminator. Eager for the disembodiment and ambiguity offered by digital technologies, many feminist scholars have also provided a rich metaphor for illustrating the femininity of cyberspace working alongside masculine hardware. As I'll demonstrate in the final section of this essay, feminist theories conjoined with the thinking towards male identification work well when focused on *Almost Human*.

Science fiction allows for an exploration of issues and concerns in a setting that closely resembles that of the auidience while providing enough difference to allay unease. Of course, science fiction is replete with considerations of gender but, for the sake of brevity, this essay utilizes scholarship from the last several decades, privileging research that focuses on the cyberpunk subgenre, to which *Almost Human* arguably belongs. Before discussing how science fiction scholars have addressed depictions of gender in science fiction media, it may be worth reiterating how the genre provides commentary on contemporary social-cultural issues through fantastic metaphor and allegory. Cast in the spectacular landscapes of the imaginable future, science fiction allows for the pondering of subjunctive potentials. These potentials, for much of science fiction, emanates from current technologies whose impacts have yet to be determined.

An earnest and comprehensive discussion of gender is beyond the capacity of this essay but it would be irresponsible to revisit some of the prevailing thoughts on the intersections of gender and cyberculture. In her landmark work "A Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway most famously described the cyborg as being irreverent to culturally and ideologically established strictures such as gender (118). Deftly parsing this dense and contested text, David Bell summates the cyborg's

disruptive existence as on that is ironic in that it is rooted in a "technoscience" that was, for some time, reliable for its constructive methods (101). By discussing the cyborg as an exemplar of contested spaces and ideologies, Haraway lauded the manifestation as one that feminists might embrace. Given that Haraway's treatise on cyborgs continues to resonate, it is understandable that most of the subsequent discourse on gender in cyberculture is viewed through a feminist lens. Anne Balsamo introduces her book *Technologies of the Gendered Body* by describing how the body is a contested boundary where one's physicality is understood and evaluated according to cultural contexts (9). Already we can see how feminist critiques have had influence on attitudes towards masculinity.

In overlapping with themes prevalent in science fiction, feminist critics opened up a field of questions that our media continues to explore. As a subgenre of science fiction, cyberpunk focuses on concerns over information technology as well as its access, implementation, and influence on humanity. Eschewing the massive scope of science fiction's arena, cyberpunk focuses on a grittier periphery, exploring the "lateral futures of today's information technology...because today there is simply no difference between the SF text and world at large" (Slusser and Shippey 3). Episodes of the cult television program *Max Headroom* summarized the cyberpunk attitude adeptly in every episode's introduction reminding audiences of the pilot's subtitle "20 minutes into the future." Deeply invested in the concerns of late twentieth-century Western audiences nervous about being left behind by increasingly visible computing, much of cyberpunk's allure already seemed outdated by the turn of the century.

Signatures of the genre, cyberpunk's urban sprawl embodies the constant conflict between shimmering utopia and drug-steeped underworld. It is within this contested space that cyberpunk examines the affect this environment has on the subjective being. In his book *Terminal Identity*, Scott Bukatman connects these qualities, alongside portrayals of large-scale social marginalization, to film noir and the cinematic detective story. Why this connection is so common, Bukatman argues, is that there is a palatable desire to apply the problem-solving structures of crime narrative to the ambiguous fluidity of science fictional worlds (142). These crossovers are rarely successful in part, he notes, because of the unsatisfactory resolutions that rely, not on the protagonist's logic and

deductive powers but on a technological deus ex machina. As one of the more successful examples, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* is among the earliest and often-cited examples of this intersection. Set in a Los Angeles whose temporal space we've already overtaken, we watch Decker performing his job as detective and chasing the errant android Roy Batty who is simultaneously chasing his own answers. In the end, the detective is unsuccessful in his quest and his life is saved by the android who – fulfilling his mission – discovers the moment of his impending death.

It is important to note that, while cyberpunk may be an excellent category in which to place *Almost Human*, it is not considered a feminist fiction. Throughout the genre's short lifespan, it was dominated by white, male writers. It is little wonder that signpost cyberpunk works such as Gibson's *Neuromancer* appeal to the "console cowboy" fantasies of male audiences. Claudia Springer beautifully discusses how science fiction betrays masculine fears towards the encroaching femininity of cyberspace. Contrasting the "armored man of steel," Springer posits the 'feminized' computer with its concealed, passive, and internal workings" (104). "Feminine metaphors," she argues,

> Emphasize that microcircuitry is not physically forceful or massive. Miniaturization, concealment, and silence are its underlying principles. Moreover, computer users often experience a psychological union with their terminals that collapses ego boundaries. The intimacy and empathy that can result from fluid ego boundaries are conventionally associated with feminine subjectivity, which, compared to the male ego, is less dependent on Oedipal individuation.

Echoing Springer, Amanda Fernbach's study of masculine figures in science fiction describes hacker of cyberpunk as one that is able to "jack in," navigate and conquer the feminized digital space. For Sadie Plant, however, men are fearful of this uncontrollable space and what mysteries lie beyond the "veil" of the screen. This misogynistic fear, for Plant, takes the form of technophobia – a condition we'll observe early on in the protagonist of *Almost Human*.

4. Case Study: *Almost Human*

Almost Human follows detective John Kennex and his android partner as they remove a variety of technological threats from the streets of near-future San Francisco. Set in the near future of 2048, the television series engages much of cyberpunk's noir aesthetic, especially the positioning of a utopian facade atop an undercurrent of criminality. Without reaching too far into visions of a distant future, the city of mid-twenty first century is, according to *Almost Human*'s designers, much like cities of our own time – except with more lighting and even more advertising. Cyberspace is all the more omnipresent and always accessible by palm implants that bring up a hovering hand held screen with a flick of the wrist. Some of San Francisco's citizens, however, are still seen as relying on mobile devices similar to what is used today. The premise of the series is that crime severely threatens the halcyon of the unblemished city. Surrounding the perimeter of this glimmering paradise is a towering wall that appears to segregate the pristine sections of San Francisco from an occasionally glimpsed, shambling ghetto. The reasons for its erection is a mystery to audiences but is mentioned or makes an appearance in a few episodes. To compensate for burgeoning crime rates, the shorthanded police "recruit" androids to support human officers. These MX-43 model androids, all built with masculine physiologies, are impersonal and prioritize the benefit of the force over their human companions.

Unfortunately, this element of the series was never explained due to the cancellation of the series after its first season of thirteen episodes. Early reviews of the series seem mismatched compared to the anticipation for this project that bore the mantle of J.J. Abrams film and television company, Bad Robot Productions. Beginning its run on Fox Television in late 2013, *Almost Human* was received with reviews across the critical spectrum. Several early critics of *Almost Human* focused on series' inability to shed many tired science fiction and cop show clichés although many seem to have warmed up to the show by the end of its first season. Not long after the initial run, the series was cancelled by Fox due to the high production costs and lackluster ratings.

Early in *Almost Human*'s sole season, Christine Rosen reviewed the show for Slate declaring the "the show's creators seem to be suggesting that although we might have to rely on robots that are

stronger, more intelligent, and more rigorously rational than human beings, what we really need are robots that can remind us of what it means to be emotionally well-developed human beings." ("Our Robots, Ourselves"). Although Rosen is writing on themes of empathy that are explicitly explored early in the program's run, the article pulls back before addressing the more interesting, and often humorous, exploration of gender that are peppered throughout. Among these themes of gender is the relationship between the show's two main characters and the "bromance" that quickly develops between them.

Critical impressions of the chemistry between Kennex and Dorian continued after the show's cancellation. "It didn't help that Fox aired several episodes out of order," wrote Tim Surette for TV.com, "or that the focus of the show often strayed from the most interesting parts of the series—the relationship between Kennex and Dorian and the idea of artificial intelligence—in favor of more procedural-y stories" (April 2014). "Mismatched cops have edged towards mutual respect a million times on screen and the trope of a Pinocchio robot trying to work out what it is to be human feels almost as clichéd," wrote The Guardian television critic Graeme Virtue after the shows cancellation.

> But *Almost Human*'s twist is that Dorian demonstrates more emotional intelligence than the volatile Kennex, who aggressively alienates himself from both humans and androids. The scenes where they roll around in their police cruiser needling each other are so absorbing and entertaining – a Wi-Fi-enabled bromance – that the additional solving of future crime begins to feel more like an imposition than an imperative (May 2014).

Fans of the show continue to clamor for the revival of the series although it seems almost certain the show will not return. Audiences registering their discontent through online forums refer specifically to the development of Kennex and Dorian's relationship as one of the most enjoyable aspects of the show.

Without a lifetime of experiences to shape the male identity, Dorian appears to confirm the theory of gender performativity. Without being impeded by a tumultuous relationship with a

father figure nor a competitiveness fueled by distrust, the android is able to provide the fearlessly compassionate friendship the broken Kennex needs. Although Kennex can't understand Captain Maldonalo's assertion that "The DRN is good for you," ("Pilot"), it's understood that the android provides the compassionate support Kennex needs to recover a more profound sense of masculinity – one that is capable of trusting and securing a supportive, nurturing friendship.

After the pilot episode, however, Kennex and Dorian's fragile psychological conditions are negligible and take are given only cursory glances during the more conventional plotlines. This is only one of numerous disconnects that detract from the quality of the series. Nonetheless, what is consistently portrayed throughout *Almost Human* is the convergence of two men who have both been damaged by their environment and, more implicitly, the cultural cues that they have endured. Although many of the critiques of the show's predictability are not unfounded, the presence of Kennex and Dorian's relationship is an example of what Draper and Loz describe as television's portrayal of characters "working through" significant real-world issues (2012). By watching Kennex and Dorian struggle with the friendship, we are provided with an example of male characters eschewing the pressures placed upon them to embrace a more empathetic relationship to other males.

One of the clichés that *Almost Human* did manage to discard after the first episode was the antagonism between a human and a distinctly non-human other. For this reason and others, the following analysis of the series will focus primarily on the pilot episode but will follow key themes throughout episodes in which they are reinforced. As a reminder, these themes create a portrayal of the male-male intimate relationship that audiences found so enthralling and unique. After a brief synopsis of the pilot episode, I will highlight moments in this inaugural episode that reflect attention to both male studies towards identification and friendship as well as the hopes of gender scholarship.

When audiences first see John Kennex in the opening scene of *Almost Human*'s pilot episode, he is caught in the middle of a fierce fire fight. His ambushed squad is decimated and is pinned down with another officer beneath a ceaseless shower of bullets. Because their mandated

android escort calculates Kennex and his fellow officer's chances are survival pale in comparison to others caught in the skirmish, the android leaves the two behind. While attempting to rescue his friend, the other officer is killed and Kennex's leg is blown off. Before dissolving into a white haze of unconsciousness, Kennex glimpses the silhouettes of several figures who leave him for dead.

This follows by a vision of his girlfriend which, upon being jolted into consciousness, turns out to be a recaptured memory previously lost during his recovery from a 17-month coma. In pursuing absent memories in hopes of uncovering who betrayed his squad, it is revealed that Kennex's longtime girlfriend was actually a member of the criminal organization he had been working to capture. This immediate and traumatic breach of trust by both his android and human female partner leaves Kennex with a seemingly impenetrable cynicism towards others. Trust between males, if we recall, is one of the most significant traits men value and betrayal of this sacrosanct quality leaves lasting psychological wounds.

Kennex returns to a police force that, aside from the chief, blames him for the botched raid. He is again paired with an android partner identical to the one that left he and his partner behind nearly two years ago. The betrayal is again refreshed in Kennex's mind and he initially refuses to work with the MX-43. "A human partner was good enough for my father," he protests, "its good enough for me" ("Pilot"). Highlighting several of our own current concerns about the military, *Almost Human*'s main character is described by doctors (who recommend he remain off of the force) as suffering from an arsenal of emotional and psychological conditions stemming from this traumatic experience including PTSD, depression, as well as "psychological rejection" of his synthetic leg replacement. This judgment is overruled by Captain Maldonado who confides in Kennex that he is the only one she trusts on the force. After being informed that his reinstatement depends on working with the android, Kennex relinquishes his resolve.

On the way to their first assignment, however, the android is shoved out of the moving squad car after accusing Kennex of lying about his whereabouts the previous evening. The shortage of newer MX-43 models leaves Kennex with no option but to work with an older DRN model which, as Kennex recalls, had been discontinued after bouts of unpredictable behavior. Android technician

Rudy Lom [Mackenzie Crook], who prefers the DRN to the calculative MX-43 models, allays the detective's concerns:

> Lom: Well, the DRN series - they were based on a program called Synthetic Soul. And while he isn't crazy, as you say, there may be some bugs.
>
> Kennex: Bugs? What kind of bugs?
>
> L: Some of them had difficulty dealing with their emotive regulations. Emotional issues. The idea behind the DRNs was to be as human as possible and the truth is that it's human to have unexpected emotional responses and if, uh, being as close to human was the goal, then, I guess the DRNs weren't such a failure after all. People have breaking points, and so do DRNs.
>
> K: So you're saying he's a basket case.
>
> L: Not words I would use, or agree with.
>
> K: All right, plug it in already.

This exchange reifies that both Kennex and Dorian are emotionally flawed individuals. This is not lost on other officers who refer to the pair as "two cops from the scrap heap" ("Pilot"). While the source of Kennex's emotional damage is understood, the reasons for Dorian's "retirement" is less clear. Although we are told that the DRN line were discontinued due to instability, it is uncertain whether Dorian himself was affected by these issues. At this point in the pilot, it is understood that Dorian will be the compassionate foil to Kennex's brooding cynicism. Kennex is behaving in accordance with the expectations of our culture while Dorian, as a male android, is understood to have been considered faulty for behaving in erratic ways that might be interpreted as feminine.

Regardless of the sources of their respective conditions, both Dorian and Kennex acknowledge that they unwittingly need one another to continue working: Kennex must serve alongside an android partner and Dorian must successfully demonstrate his emotional stability to continue serving as a detective. Although this necessity serves as an awkwardly immediate progress in his attitude towards Dorian, another conflict in their relationship demonstrates Dorian's ironically

stable sense of self-identification:

> Dorian: You know what your problem is?
>
> Kennex: Always my favorite part of the day: a synthetic telling me what my problem is.
>
> D: There's that word again. Your problem is, you don't know yourself. You don't trust anyone.
>
> K: Is that my problem?
>
> D: And, man, I don't blame you. After all you've been through, if I were like you, I wouldn't know myself either.
>
> K: Okay, firstly stop saying 'man.' Secondly you're not like me.
>
> D: And I'm not like them. MX units are logic-based and rule-oriented. They have no true free will and they are designed to feel nothing. Now, I can't say that I was born, I can't say I grew in a womb or had a childhood, but I was made to feel and I do as much as you.

Dorian's assertion begins to wear down his partner's resistance. Almost immediately (perhaps due to haphazard writing), Kennex ("Connects") learns to appreciate Dorian's empathetic mannerisms and, by the second episode "Skin," the pair are demonstrating their chemistry. Once Kennex lowers his guard, the pair engage in the rapport that would become the staple of the show for audiences.

As described in the earlier section, difficulties in befriending other males begins in childhood and the relationship with a nurturing father figure and both Kennex and Dorian provide interesting positions on this aspect of masculine identity formation. Throughout the season, Kennex's mentions of his father are total only a few instances wherein he evokes his memory: we know he was a cop. Even with the scarcity of mentions, the final episode of the series reveals the impact Kennex's father had upon him ("Straw Man"). In the unwitting series finale, Kennex picks up on a case that his father had worked on. It is here revealed that his father was a disgraced cop who had been under investigation when killed while on duty. As it turns out, the elder Kennex was highly distrustful of others due to his uncovering a department wide conspiracy. Confirming the "go it alone" aspect of masculine expectations, Kennex's father is described as not bending to pressures to accept bribes. Although Kennex's bond with his father was a positive one, we recognize that even this constructive

relationship can promote the distrust that impedes intimacy with others.

Dorian, however, provides another curious disruption. In "Unbound," Dorian meets with his creator Dr. Nigel Vaughn [John Laroquette] who was bankrupted when the DRN line was decommissioned. Vaughn expectantly gushes over discovering that a DRN still serves on the force yet Dorian has little sentiment for this figure and does not express any consideration of the man as his father. Unlike Kennex who is able to restore his father's legacy, Dorian's creator is revealed to be explicitly supporting the social upheaval of San Francisco's utopia. Considering that Kennex's positive relationship with his father still provides foundation for inhibitive distrust, Dorian's lack of sentiment towards his creator signifies a disconnect that *Almost Human* suggests must be made to transcend competitive pressure from one's upbringing. Not having to live up to standards imposed by a male role model, Dorian is unhindered by conventional male expectations.

This is not to say that Dorian behaves effeminately. In fact, as the following in-car exchange in the series' second episode demonstrates, Dorian expresses common masculine concerns even while the pair behave in ways that, according to research cited in the first section, many heterosexual males would find questionable ("Skin"). A benign, almost clichéd exchange finds Dorian pondering his legacy, a concern male studies scholarship would attribute to concerns for family and passing on the family line:

> Dorian: Just looking at that bot on Rudy's table makes me think, who is going to remember me?
>
> Kennex: You're a cop. The people you help will remember you, whatever your name is.

This humanization of Dorian (why would an android be concerned about their legacy?) might be considered another of the science fiction clichés critics chastised. However, this emotional opening affirms Dorian's sentimentality yet provides curious contrast with the humorous bantering that follows:

> Dorian: I thought you wanted to meet someone.
>
> Kennex: I meet plenty of women. I don't need your help.

D: I ran a bio scan, and it looked like your testicles were at full capacity.

K: You're scanning my balls?

D: I didn't enjoy it, I just…

K: Oh, my God, this is unbelievable.

D: I can't help but notice you're backed up.

K: What is the matter with you? Don't scan my testicles ever again.

D: Copy that.

Due to fears of appearing homosexual, most males would not likely confess to paying such close attention to another man's genitalia even if it is to promote the other's romantic ventures. This disregard for expectations of masculine performativity creates a space for *Almost Human* to begin using the science fiction setting as a platform for further exploration. However, these opportunities usually serve to reinforce Dorian's maleness.

The most conflated example of this affirmation is found in the episode "Blood Brothers" which opens up with Kennex wandering into the android "locker room" to locate his partner. He is shocked by how the MX-43's are asexual and a devoid of a masculine physiology. While this makes for a humorous start to the episode, the ensuing conversation between Dorian and Kennex, which ends in Dorian displaying his possession of genitalia for his partner, further suggests the disregard the pair has towards performing particular male roles. Not only would this behavior not be considered inappropriate for many males but having the exchange occur in private denounces the taboo of behaving intimately in private.

While this example indicates the pair's lack of concern towards appearing gay, this comparison of genitalia alludes to the lack of competitiveness between Kennex and Dorian that is endemic in real world masculinity. Unlike many android-human partnerships, there is a very little animosity towards, say, the android desiring the humanity he lacks or the ensuing subversion of humanity by robotic subalterns. Curiously, the most significant single example of Dorian's that is most often repeated throughout the series is that the android is far better with children than his

partner.

An excellent demonstration of Dorian's lack of competitive impulses is seen in another car exchange in the episode "Simon Says."

> Kennex: Three years running. Man, I tell you, you walk into that gym today, you look up in the rafters and all my records are still up there. Single season passing yards: Kennex, 3,256. Most touchdowns in school history: Kennex.
>
> Dorian: Brags about himself: Kennex.
>
> K: Come on, can't I relive a few glory days?
>
> D: That's all you got left. May as well.
>
> K: Oh, I can still hear those crowds. "Kennex! Kennex!" I was fast. You should've seen me. They used to call me the White Cheetah on account of the fact that I was so fast.

At which point Dorian loses power (due to a depleting battery) or shuts himself off. Although Dorian demonstrates the superhuman speed and strength that constructs the phallic male cyborg feminist scholars describe, he does not flaunt his ability excessively. Rather than "flexing his muscle" towards Kennex to assert his superiority, Dorian (rather sarcastically) dismisses Kennex's need to rely on past performance.

If we recall, the antagonism between the father and son is matched and potentially surpassed by the masculine desire to outshine himself. In Kennex's case, it is impossible for him to outrun his former self as signified through his prosthetic leg. As he is reminded by others on the force, his leg's nagging calibration reminders and miscellaneous squeaks refresh Kennex's concern for his adequacy. Rather than confirming his partner's limitations, however, Dorian affirms Kennex's viability, even providing a solution to the irritation of synthetic maintenance.

Without competitive friction, the partners are able to develop the compassionate relationship whose loss is lamented throughout male studies research. Early in the final episode of the series, we are witness to the internal review of Dorian's performance in the field ("Straw Man"). Throughout their interviews, the humans seem considerably uncomfortable with discussing their relationship with the android: Capt. Maldonado provides curt responses to her interrogators,

Kennex compliments Dorian on his effective detective work, and Lom fumbles over the answers. Only Dorian provides the honest, stable answer that seems to satiate the review. In their exchange afterwards, Kennex teases his partner by claiming his report focused on the personal infractions that his partner had committed.

> Kennex: I told them you have no concept of personal space or boundary; that you scanned my balls…And that you like to expose yourself while riding shotgun in the cruiser.
>
> Dorian: You asked to see it.
>
> K: I didn't ask. You showed it to me.
>
> D: I apologize for scanning your balls.
>
> D: You did ask to see…
>
> K: I'm just kidding. I'm messing with you. I didn't tell 'em any of that. Should've.

In the follow up review, Dorian is informed that his review was unanimously positive and that Kennex confided that his partnership had renewed his own performance. Of course when questioned about this by his partner, Kennex again falling back on conventional male expectations, denies his compassion and empathy.

5. Conclusion

The impetus for this essay was born from the chance encounter with a friend I had not seen in nearly twenty years. As we stood and talked outside of the library entrance, our respective children's impatience growing ever more distracting, it occurred to me that I'd not had male friends such as those that were found within that small circle we shared back in high school. While identifying the numerous reasons why we all drifted apart, it is less easy to articulate why those friendships were difficult to match later in life. As I've discussed, the reasons for this may be ascribed to our attitudes towards maleness and the nature of our friendships.

Resonating with Bukatman's description of cyberpunk's uneasy alliance with crime fiction, *Almost Human*'s run on television was terminated without a satisfactory closure. Perusing the online

commentary following any article describing the circumstances that led to the show's demise, one discovers the numerous questions that linger in the minds of viewers. Aside from representing the latest loss of an audience favorite series, the cancellation of *Almost Human* removes a particular kind of relationship from television that is difficult to find elsewhere. While there is certainly no shortage of male friendships in media, the intimate relationship between heterosexual males is more difficult to discern.

Although the dearth of intimate male friendships in popular media confirms the reservations men have towards recovering these relationships, the response to *Almost Human* indicates that the rapport such as those between Kennex and Dorian are valued by audiences. While the primary reasons for the cancellation of the show may certainly be attributed to lackluster writing, tired tropes, high production costs and insufficient ratings, the elimination of the show is one less opportunity to watch the development of an intimate male relationship. As fans and critics contended, the connection between the two was one of the more credible and refreshing elements of the program.

If science fiction and fantasy genres provide safe spaces to disrupt the boundaries presented by physiology and cultural attitudes, *Almost Human* advocates a critique of Western concepts of masculinity. I do not contend that the cancellation of the show is, in part, due to the portrayal of intimate male relationships. The inconsistency (or perhaps complexity?) of Kennex and Dorian's masculine role-playing is certainly problematic. However, the program's removal from the airwaves decreases the visibility of these potential models for intimate male relationships. Another issue that I've attempted to reserve for further investigation is the portrayal of women in *Almost Human*. At the risk of neglecting what is a potentially lucrative contrast, it is worth noting that female characters in the program also buck conventions yet fail to embody the hopes of Haraway and other feminist theorists. Although Capt. Maldonado (statically played by the diminutive Lili Taylor) represents the stern authority more likely to be considerable in male identification, she still falters when confronted with being a single woman ("Blood Brothers"). The "chrome" Detective Stahl, as the genetically enhanced pristine woman, still embodies a femininity that is fantasy and emerges as Kennex's romantic interest. Perhaps these shortcomings would have subsided over subsequent

season but this is, of course, indiscernible.

So why is it important for media, whether it be science fiction or not, to continue portraying intimate male relationships? Niobe Way analyzes several life stages of males and confirms Rebecca Walker's earlier contention that men without intimate friendships are in danger. Way expands this assertion, however, to include males of all ages. "Adolescents without close friendships," she states, "are at risk of depression, suicide, dropping out, disengagement from school, early pregnancy, drug use, and gang membership" (8). As science fiction progressively includes more characters that break from the white, Anglo-male mold, we should be also be sure to provide models that promote healthy masculinity. After all, we don't all aspire to be Robocop.

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