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## From the Instructor

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When Caroline first pitched her idea for this essay in my WR 150: “The American Road” class, she did it with a chuckle. Students had been asked to present three exhibit sources to the class that could be investigated for a semester-long research project, and her other two selections seemed much more “academic”; but she found that there was a lively scholarly debate surrounding something she was passionate about. Caroline’s keen sense of audience helped her synthesize sources and select evidence, and her dedication to the revision process comes through the beautiful prose, making this essay a pleasure to read.

— Gwen Kordonowy

WR 150: The American Road

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## From the Writer

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The most common question that I received from my peers about this paper was “How did you think of that?” In the beginning, the connection between *Battlestar Galactica* and the American Road was, for me, improbable at best and wishful thinking at worst. Despite my doubts, I decided to follow my gut feeling that there was *something* there to uncover. And although what I set out to prove and what I ended up proving are so wildly different that I cannot ascribe “evolution” as the means by which this occurred, my gut feeling was right.

Beyond my initial worries, the process of crafting this paper was fraught with frustration, dead-ends, and panic, and was certainly a lesson in dedication. A major problem that I faced during this process was that of scope. I had a huge task in front of me. Just the first few things that I had to tackle were introducing my audience to the mythos and plot of *Battlestar Galactica* and the scholarship surrounding it, introducing the American Road genre, and explaining how these two ideas had anything to do with each other. Unsurprisingly, this feedback from my peers on many of my drafts expressed confusion. It took many revisions before I found a balance between these huge concepts, and that was just the beginning of my paper!

While dedication and hard work aided me on this process, what really drove me to success was passion. I love *Battlestar Galactica*, and this paper represents my desire to share that love with other people. It is my sincerest hope that the reader senses that as they read and takes a little bit of it away with them. The writing of “*Battlestar Galactica: A Vehicle of the American Road*” has been a journey, and I am thankful to have taken it.

— Caroline Jones

CAROLINE JONES

## ***BATTLESTAR GALACTICA:* A VEHICLE OF THE AMERICAN ROAD**

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*Battlestar Galactica* premiered when 9/11 was still a fresh infliction on the American soul, and with the show's vivid depictions of issues such as terrorism, racial tension, and suicide bombings, it established its allegorical nature and fostered an open and honest dialogue about these issues with its audience. While there has been a plethora of scholarly discussion surrounding *Battlestar Galactica's* 9/11 allegory, all of this discourse has been done in the context of defining *Battlestar Galactica* as being solely a science fiction narrative. *Battlestar Galactica* is more than that—it is actually a complex blend of genres, encompassing not only the science fiction genre but also the travel genre and the road genre. *Battlestar Galactica* specifically operates as an American road narrative through allegory: its “American” nature stems from its commentary on 9/11, whereas its “road” nature manifests itself in the pilgrimage that the fleet takes through uncharted space. By using this new context to reconsider *Battlestar Galactica's* 9/11 allegory, new interpretations of the narrative can be gleaned that breathe new life into the series and ensure that it continues to stay relevant years after the initial aftermath of 9/11. This method of reconsidering genre can be applied not only to *Battlestar Galactica*, but also to discussions and interpretations surrounding genre as a whole as well as the complex ways in which genres interact with each other within single narratives.

### **Previously on *Battlestar Galactica***

In its original 1970's form, *Battlestar Galactica* was a science fiction narrative that would have fit the stereotypical absurdity that some

ascribe to the genre, with its inclusion of robot dogs and unicorn planets. However, the reimagined *Battlestar Galactica* with Ronald D. Moore at the helm did away with all of this silliness by focusing on the core plot of the original: a ragtag group of humanity's last survivors on the run from a robotic threat. Moore refined these core ideas and made them applicable to a post-9/11 world; to this end, Moore explicitly states that "what happens to the people in *Galactica* is what happened to us in September, but in several orders of magnitude larger" (Moore qtd. In Bassom 12). To illustrate this point, the series begins with a nuclear holocaust against humanity, committed by that which humanity created—the robotic Cylons, who have since evolved from hulking masses of steel to having exteriors that perfectly imitate those of humans.

Following this devastating event, which leaves very few people alive, the Secretary of Education of the Twelve Colonies, Laura Roslin, is sworn in as President through the line of succession. Concurrently, the commander of the *Battlestar Galactica*, Bill Adama, finds himself at the head of the fleet's military due to the *Battlestar Galactica* being the only battlestar to survive the attack. However, the Cylons will not settle for anything less than humanity's extinction, and a desperate chase unfolds as the fleet searches for Earth, a fabled lost colony from their religious scriptures, while simultaneously attempting to fend off the Cylons.

*Battlestar Galactica's* 9/11 allegory is robust and has already been explored in great detail in scholarship. However, all of this scholarship has been done with the assumption that *Battlestar Galactica* operates solely as a science fiction narrative. In "I See the Patterns": *Battlestar Galactica* and the Things That Matter," Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall write that *Battlestar Galactica* is an example of "blending traditions and subgenres," but do not actually define those traditions and subgenres that are being blended beyond the scope of science fiction (5). This oversight is understandable because of the ease with which one can classify any spacefaring narrative as a science fiction, but rather unfortunate because of the limitations that this rigid genre classification imposes on further discourse surrounding the narrative. If *Battlestar Galactica* was instead defined as a narrative consisting of multiple interacting genres, previously analyzed components of its 9/11 allegory can be reinterpreted using this new framework.

## Establishing *Battlestar Galactica* as an American Road Narrative

This pilgrimage that Adama initiates constitutes the backbone of what defines *Battlestar Galactica* as a road narrative. In *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway*, Ronald Primeau defines the “road journey” as “an epic quest, a pilgrimage . . . that helps explain where Americans have been and where they think they might be going” (1). While *Battlestar Galactica* can certainly be viewed as an “epic quest” through space, it aligns more closely with a pilgrimage due to the religious references that Adama invokes in order to give credibility to his claim of Earth’s existence. He quotes the Sacred Scrolls, the culture’s religious texts: “Life here began out there,” and turns to the fleet’s appointed spiritual leader, the priestess Elosha, for confirmation of Earth’s existence in the Sacred Scrolls (Miniseries Part 2). At the end of the address, the camera transitions to Adama’s audience, and while Roslin looks skeptical, and indeed later voices this incredulity to Adama, the ordinary members of the crowd look excitedly to and embrace one another, cheer and clap, their faces alight with the hope that Adama has succeeded in instilling in them. Thus the fleet begins their pilgrimage to find Earth.

This newly formed pilgrimage aligns with Primeau’s definition of a road journey, but complications arise with defining *Battlestar Galactica* as a road narrative due to the fact that they are not actually travelling on the highway—Primeau strictly defines American road narratives as ones in which the character(s) “travel by car throughout the country” (1). However, Primeau later states that “deviating from standard road formats are the experimental narratives,” one of which he describes as “the futuristic” (15). As one of these “futuristic” narratives that Primeau describes, *Battlestar Galactica* has abstracted the road and transformed it into the path through uncharted space that the fleet travels. The car, the vehicle through which the pilgrimage occurs, is therefore naturally replaced by the various space-faring vehicles that the fleet possesses. The imagery of the road (Figure 1) is strewn with barren loneliness, struck with a harsh geometrical divider of steel. *Battlestar Galactica* contains similar imagery in its opening sequence: the fleet is enveloped by the steely harshness of uncharted space (Figure 2). Therefore, *Battlestar Galactica* still aligns with Primeau’s definition of a road journey even though the road is not physically present—the road is

instead replaced by uncharted space in this “futuristic” narrative (Primeau 15).



*Figure 1: Lange, Dorothea. The Road West. 1938. Silver gelatin. Photograph.*  
 Source: [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)



*Figure 2: Battlestar Galactica, Season One Opening Sequence*

An American road narrative is distinct from road narratives in general because it focuses on aspects of American life particularly, which *Battlestar Galactica* accomplishes through its allegory surrounding 9/11. *Battlestar Galactica*'s allegory raises questions about America's 9/11 experience, yet gives few answers; indeed, *Battlestar Galactica*'s goal is not to provide answers, but to “[invite] people into dialogue” (Primeau 5). For instance, in “(Re)Framing Fear: Equipment for Living in a Post-9/11 World,” Brian Ott explores the plotline of New Caprica, a planet that the fleet attempts to settle in lieu of finding Earth. The temporary peace that the fleet has found is interrupted by the Cylons who descend upon the

fledgling colony, easily take over, and establish an oppressive rule. A resistance against the Cylons emerges, with its members eventually resorting to suicide bombings in order to attempt to overthrow the vicious Cylon authority. Ott notes that the Cylon's methods of maintaining order among the colonists, which include interrogation, parallels American involvement in Iraq post-9/11. He explains that "in seeing the world through the perspective of the humans on New Caprica, viewers are challenged to see Iraq through the eyes of Iraqis" (24). *Battlestar Galactica* adheres to this provocative storytelling throughout its narrative, and it is in this way that it aligns itself with Primeau's tenets of the road narrative—it is through this dialogue with its audience regarding 9/11 that *Battlestar Galactica* attempts "to understand experiences" surrounding 9/11 (Primeau 1). *Battlestar Galactica* in its entirety is an example of a complex coalescence of genre. It can be defined not only as a science fiction narrative, but dually as an American road narrative. With this new definition established, it is now possible to revisit other previously examined components of *Battlestar Galactica*'s 9/11 allegory and derive new interpretations from them.

## Interpreting Allegory Through a New Lens

Following the 9/11 attacks, the Bush leadership adopted an "us versus them" philosophy, which Ott describes as a "prominent strategy for addressing internal dissent" (21). It is in this way that the administration buried "emergent cultural values," a term coined by Raymond Williams and which Primeau describes as those that "advocate alternative or oppositional attitudes and beliefs"—under patriotic rhetoric, the "dominant cultural values" (4). This silencing of emergent voices is explicitly represented in *Battlestar Galactica*. In "Bastille Day," Roslin approaches the prisoners of the fleet with an offer: in exchange for their physical labor, they will be offered points towards their freedom. The prisoners unanimously decline, and from the group emerges a leader, Tom Zarek, an infamous political terrorist. A hostage situation unfolds, and Zarek demands Roslin's immediate resignation as President due to what he sees as her unlawful seizure of the office. In an attempt to silence this "emerging value," Adama dispatches an armed squad to regain order on the prison ship. In this clash of dominant and emerging cultural values, a mediator appears in the form of Apollo, the commander of *Battlestar Galactica*'s pilots, who is able to

broker a compromise by promising Zarek that elections be held within the year. According to Primeau, struggles between different cultural values are frequently present in American road narratives, and in this context, interpretations of this episode have different implications to *Battlestar Galactica's* allegory. While Ott views this episode “as a stern rebuff to the Bush administration and its...arrogant refusal to change course or even entertain alternatives,” it can also be viewed as an instance in which *Battlestar Galactica* is able to “open dialogues between oppositional elements” (Ott 22, Primeau 5). Indeed, Apollo is the physical manifestation of this dialogue, and it is through this rational conversing between dominant and emergent values that a favorable compromise is reached. This does not suggest a “stern rebuff,” but rather, an optimistic evaluation of the ability of Americans to respectfully consider views that differ from their own.

Although Ott may be correct in his claim about this scene, he fails to explore the conversational elements that manifest within the episode that are only definable through the use of the road genre’s vocabulary. At the conclusion of season three, four of the final five Cylon models are revealed through the use of an adapted form of Bob Dylan’s “All Along the Watchtower.” Although the song itself has ties to the 9/11 allegory through the way in which the song is related to the tumultuous 60’s era, which Eftychia Papanikolaou explores in “Of Duduks and Dylan: Negotiating Music and the Aural Space,” it is also a crucial plot element, as only four characters aboard the *Battlestar Galactica* can hear it—four of the unknown final five Cylon models. Through their search for the origins of the song, at the time only unrecognizable musical notes, they all inexplicably converge to the same location, and begin to hum the now recognizable song. They come to the realization that they are Cylons—their reactions range from disbelief to rage, but as they eventually come to terms with this revelation, Colonel Saul Tigh, second in command of the *Battlestar Galactica*, proclaims: “My name is Saul Tigh. I am an officer in the colonial fleet. Whatever else I am . . . That’s the man I want to be” (“Crossroads Part 2”). Tigh chooses his own path even with the revelation that he has been and has created his own enemy, rather than suffer from a crisis of identity. In the same way, through the stripping of political rhetoric and the revelations of the more controversial aspects of the War on Terror, Americans might find that America has become something that they do not wish it to be. American



road narratives “reaffirm traditional values even as they challenge the status quo,” which Tigh does in the way that he continually proves his loyalty to the fleet even with the knowledge that his true identity is that of the fleet’s enemy (Primeau 8). This reinterpretation through the American road lens suggests that the true message here is that Americans can still be patriotic and pro-America (traditional values) even while they disagree with the dominant culture’s political rhetoric (challenge of the status quo).

“All of this has happened before, and all of it will happen again” is the *sina qua non* line of *Battlestar Galactica*. By interpreting this central quote of the series in the context of the road narrative, it can be seen that this line represents the culmination of *Battlestar Galactica*’s 9/11 allegory. In “Daybreak Part 3,” the fleet begins to settle down on the new Earth, the audience’s Earth, and the audience is treated to stunning views of the frontiers of the untouched planet. American road narratives often deal with frontierism, and generally portray the frontier as an ideal that has mostly been tarnished by human hands, which is exactly what *Battlestar Galactica* does: as the camera continues to pan over the seemingly unending frontier scenery, the towering of steel buildings comes into view and the text “150,000 years later” appears across the screen. It is understood that this is the present day, and in the city, two manifestations of what seem to be angel-like figures appear who have taken on the appearances of Gaius Baltar, former President of the colonies, and Six, a Cylon. They reflect on the pilgrimage of the fleet and discuss the future of the planet, to which the angel Baltar asks: “Does all of this have to happen again?” (“Daybreak Part 3”). While this line is traditionally interpreted to be referring to the advancing robotic technology in the present day, it is also densely packed with allegorical meaning. Through both the destruction of the frontier and the events of 9/11 that have already happened on Earth, most of what was experienced in the fleet’s time has already happened again. However, this line represents the hope that humanity will deviate from some of the colonists’ mistakes in order to create a better world. There is a hope expressed in the culmination of the fleet’s journey that by having accompanied the fleet and having engaged in discourse with *Battlestar Galactica*, that the audience will “ultimately [return] triumphant” from this quest, and “[bring] restorative powers back home” in order to reverse the current trend of destruction on Earth (Primeau 7). While Ott views the audience

takeaway from *Battlestar Galactica* as having applications surrounding only the 9/11 allegory, by reexamining the series finale with the added context of traditional American road themes and values, a very powerful message about the disastrous consequences of unchecked destruction of the frontier also emerges.

This paper focused solely on the reexamination of previously well-defined elements of *Battlestar Galactica*'s 9/11 allegory through the redefinition of the series as an American road narrative, but *Battlestar Galactica* discusses many more issues than just 9/11. The framework established in this paper can be extended to any number of these issues in order to further explore the complexities that genre redefinition introduces into previously well-established narrative interpretations. In "No Exit," Brother Cavil, a Cylon, expresses his frustration with his human-like form:

I want to see gamma rays! I want to hear X-rays! And I want to—I want to smell dark matter! Do you see the absurdity of what I am? I can't even express these things properly because I have to—I have to conceptualize complex ideas in this stupid limiting spoken language! But I know I want to reach out with something other than these prehensile paws! And feel the wind of a supernova flowing over me! I'm a machine! And I can know much more! I can experience so much more. But I'm trapped in this absurd body! And why? Because my five creators thought that God wanted it that way!

Much like Brother Cavil, *Battlestar Galactica* has been trapped. It has been trapped in an unwavering, rigid genre definition, but by reevaluating this and freeing the narrative, new layers of meaning are revealed that enhance the show's interaction with the audience. Now, many years removed from 9/11, *Battlestar Galactica* remains relevant because of its central message interwoven within these layers: the road to a brighter future begins with hope.

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CAROLINE JONES is a rising junior majoring in Computer Engineering at Boston University. She currently resides in Los Angeles, where she was born and raised, and hopes to pursue writing as a hobby. She would like to thank Professor Kordonowy for her invaluable guidance and insight. She would also like to thank her friends and peers for their earnest feedback and support. This paper is dedicated to the author’s mother, Arlene Glucksman, for always believing in her.