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Racialization from the Eyes of Edward Elric

Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood's complex plot explores a diverse selection of challenging social issues, and protagonist, Edward Elric, acts as a moral compass throughout his encounters with these issues. Several people affected by his country's policies on race confront Edward throughout the series, and he seems to handle each situation with a progressive attitude not parallel to that of his country's government. But, to me, he takes an ignorant and passive stance on an issue that so critically affects his peers that he should be passionately defending—simply on his peers' behalf. In what follows, I argue that Edward Elric is not the moral hero the series implies him to be; truly, his naiveté prevents him from ever offering an adequate commentary on the racial component of the anime series.

Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood is the anime adaptation of a popular shonen manga series written by Hiromu Arakawa, entitled *Fullmetal Alchemist*. Written by Hiroshi Ōnogi and directed by Yasuhiro Irie. *FMA:B* originally aired in April 2009; it ran weekly until its series finale in July 2010. The anime takes place in a world where “there exist alchemists, people who study and perform the art of alchemical transmutation—to manipulate objects and transform one object into another. They are bounded by the basic law of alchemy: in order to gain something you have to sacrifice something of the same value” (MyAnimeList). In an alchemical accident that took place when they tried to bring their mother back to life, the main character, Edward

Elric, and his brother, Alphonse, are both seriously injured—Alphonse’s body is destroyed, so Edward attaches his soul to a suit of armor, at the cost of his own limbs. After Eric receives prosthetic limbs, he and his brother begin their pursuit of the Philosopher’s Stone, “a fabled relic which grants the ability to perform alchemy in impossible ways” (FUNimation Productions, Ltd.). Along their journey—which began when each boy became “a ‘State Alchemist’, one who uses his/her alchemy for the military”—the brothers discover a government conspiracy surrounding the Philosopher’s Stone, and realize their quest far extends their search for it (IMDb).

Racial tensions throughout Amestris add an interesting element to *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood*’s already complicated plot. For years, the Amestrian government enacted policies that actively oppressed the Ishvalen people. The show depicts Amestrians as light-haired and light-eyed peoples; their eyes are usually wide and depict a sort of innocence. The Ishvalens, on the other hand, are tan-skinned and have red eyes, making them easily distinguishable from Amestrians. Ishvalens are also often visually depicted as disabled, bearing visible scarring or heavy bandages, or walking with limps and using canes. One prominent Ishvalen character is even named Scar, because the scars across his face are such a blatant feature of his identity. After a seven-year long civil war in Ishval, known as the Ishval Civil War (or the Ishvalen War of Extermination), “Amestrian Führer King Bradley issued Order 3066, sending State Alchemists in to the front lines to act as human weapons” (Fullmetal Alchemist Wiki). After Order 3066 was put into effect, Amestrian soldiers occupied Ishval and Ishvalen refugees dispersed themselves throughout the country; this only elevated the tension between Ishvalens and Amestrians.

The racialization of each character plays a crucial role in Edward Elric’s position as the “moral compass” of the anime. One must consider the crucial role in which each character’s

ethnicity and personal racial identity effects the establishment of his or her perspective on the government's policies regarding Amestrians and Ishvalens. Edward's perspective in particular must be taken into account because he offers suggestions regarding the racial tensions and conflicts that surround him and his peers throughout the series. His advice seems ethical and honorable, especially in a world where his own people actively act superior to other people in their homeland. Edward readily offers his opinion without regard for the true depth of a racial conflict that he grew up on the winning side of. He, like every other Amestrian, was never discriminated against, never had to experience life as an Ishvalen. Thus, his perception of the situation is biased and incomplete. Never experiencing racism against himself or his people, Ed's perspective remains underdeveloped and naïve throughout the series. He thoughtlessly undermines the seriousness of not only the racist mood in Amestris but also the full-out genocide that the Amestrian government is committing in nearby Ishbal. His ignorance is simply a sort of privilege he earned with his Amestrian blood, something caused by pure chance and out of every child's control.

Edward proves his obliviousness of the situation in an encounter with Scar, an Ishvalen and a victim of the Ishvalen genocide. Scar, after losing his brother to state alchemists during the war, vowed to fight the genocide that so personally affected him. In order to do so, he goes after the military targets that can cause the most harm to his Ishvalen people—State Alchemists. Throughout the entire series, Scar only kills three civilians—a suffering girl-turned-chimera, whose life would never be happy, and two Amestrian doctors. These doctors, the parents of Edward's best friend, Winry, were too close to Scar when he awoke in a delirium of too much blood loss and the overwhelming grief of the loss of his brother. In "Backs in the Distance" (Season 1, Episode 9), Edward confronts Scar about Winry's parents. In context, the episode

depicts Scar as a merciless killer with no good enough reason to commit his revenge. Edward never considers Scar's own experience, instead undermining its significance by only considering Winry's. Obviously Scar was driven by grief when he killed Winry's parents, the Amestrian doctors. While their deaths are of course unfortunate and unacceptable, Edward makes it seem as if it were Scar's goal to kill these civilians, which it was not. Edward's inability to empathize with Scar can be attributed to his Amestrian privilege.

Edward's attempt to link his own experience with that of Scar proves his ignorance regarding the gravity of the racialization of Ishvalens compared to Amestrians. Both Edward and Scar are physically marked, but each for very different circumstances. Yes, both Edward's amputation and Scar's physical scarring caused by the Ishvalen genocide are linked by similar causation—alchemy. Scar was injured in the explosion that rendered the rest of his family dead. His face was badly scarred and his arm was blown off; his brother saved his life by transmuting his own arm to Scar's body (Season 2, Episode 9). Edward was also injured in an alchemical accident in which his brother was also injured. Thus, both Edward and Alphonse use prosthetics: Edward, for his arm, and Alphonse for his entire body. But the differences in the way each character's disability is represented can be viewed as a microcosm of the racialization tendencies of the Amestrians versus the Ishvalens. Edward's prosthetic instrument is medically advanced. In no way is he "handicapped" in a way that would prevent him from fully participating in society; in fact, he is a respected State Alchemist and holds a lot of power in the government. But Scar, on the other hand, is marked, and not in a way that enhances his place in Amestrian society. He, along with the rest of the Ishvalen people who are marked by the genocide, lives with obvious disabilities—disabilities that no Ishvalen doctor could mend quite as well as an Amestrian doctor could. As Julie Sadler writes, "Edward and Alphonse are instrumental, whereas the Ishvalens are

disposable en mass. The biopolitical sorting that marks some for life and some for death is revealed as both brutally effective and ultimately illegitimate. The category of valuable citizenship is always mobile according to the state's priorities, and when some are marked for death, none are truly safe" (Sadler). From this perspective, Ishvalens are ultimately marked for death: they are the victims that the Amestrian government does not consider and does not protect.

Another character in the anime, Major Miles, is a character that offers a unique perspective on the genocide against Ishvalens. Major Miles is part Ishvalen: "...Ishvalen blood flows in my veins, but my father and my grandmother were not from that region...my eyes are Ishvalen, though. My grandfather's blood runs strong." Willing to work for a government that is actively committing a successful genocide against people who share his blood, Miles hopes to change Amestris from inside the government. Obviously, Miles's mixed ethnicity is a driving force in his goals for his workplace and his lifestyle. Although his race could cause problems for him on both sides of the war, he remains committed to his work and to the Amestris government. He does his job because of his race, not despite it.

The dialogue between Edward and Major Miles in "Ice Queen" (Season 3, Episode 8) provides a suitable example of Edward's lacking perspective. Major Miles points out to Edward that "[i]t was your people who destroyed the land of my grandfather," to which Edward responds, "Ishvalen. Your people destroyed our countryside. And one of you is responsible for murdering my friend's parents." In his attempt to align the actions of one individual (Scar) with those of an entire racist government (which is continuously waging a genocide against the entire Ishvalen race), Edward disregards the long history and current state of Amestris oppression over the Ishvalens.

Outwardly admitting that he is “ignorant about some things,” Edward further displays his ignorance of the racial crisis taking place in one single sentence spoken to Major Miles:

“Besides, I think people should try to ignore their race, and just treat each other as equals” (“Ice Queen,” Season 3, Episode 8). This advice may seem wise and even progressive in comparison to the attitudes of both Amestrians and Ishvalens in conflict with one another. But by saying this, Edward is ignoring the very cause of all the tensions: race. And more explicitly, he is disregarding Major Mile’s racial identity and his commitment to the betterment of his government through the utilization of his racial identity.

Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood provides a perfect platform for important discussions on the racialization of minorities in a society where race is one of the greatest influencing factors of one’s societal status. While Edward Elric’s outtakes on racism and the genocide against Ishvalens by his own Amestrian people can be perceived as progressive and inspiring, his Amestrian privilege blinds him to the true gravity of the situation in Amestris. In not acknowledging the importance of addressing the racism his peers experience, Edward succumbs to the naiveté caused by his Amestrian privilege and only allows the racism that goes on in Amestris to continue, and ultimately, to worsen.

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