Individual black women engaged in feminist movement, writing feminist theory, have persisted in our efforts to deconstruct the category "woman" and argued that gender is not the sole determinant of woman's identity. That this effort has succeeded can be measured not only by the extent to which feminist scholars have confronted questions of race and racism but by the emerging scholarship that looks at the intertwining of race and gender. Often it is forgotten that the hope was not simply that feminist scholars and activists would focus on race and gender but that they would do so in a manner that would not reinscribe conventional oppressive hierarchies. Particularly, it was seen as crucial to building mass-based feminist movement that theory would not be written in a manner that would further erase and exclude black women and women of color, or worse yet, include us in subordinate positions. Unfortunately, much feminist scholarship dashes these hopes, largely because critics fail to interrogate the location from which they speak, often assuming, as it is now fashionable to do, that there is no need to question whether the perspective from which they write is informed by racist and sexist thinking, specifically as feminists perceive black women and women of color (hooks 77).

Alan Moore's Swamp Thing #40, "The Curse," is a product of the complex history of race relations within the feminist movement. It presented a powerful portrait of the experience of women living under patriarchy to a mostly male audience of comic book readers. This audience, most likely, had encountered few examples of explicitly feminist literature within their medium of choice when the issue came out in 1985. However, a close reading of Moore's story reveals the extent to which the "race problem" tainted the First Wave of feminism, which urged women of color to throw their weight behind the feminist cause by impeaching men of color as especially misogynist. The comic accepts the assumption held by the white women of the First Wave that Native American[1] cultures treat their women with more cruelty than do "civilized" European or American cultures. Unsurprisingly, a revisionist historical accounting of the actual practices of Native American First Nations reveals that this assumption is based in racist and sexist anthropological scholarship. Studies of gender within Native American cultures were long corrupted by both an over-reliance on the testimonies of male voices within the populations that were surveyed and by the faulty extension of Western ideas about gender to non-Western systems of thought. Unfortunately, many feminists in the First Wave used this biased science in order to push for their own political platforms, arguing that white women should be given positions of power in colonial missions and in assimilationist efforts aimed at "saving" Native American women from their own culture. As Moore's comic shows, these racist sentiments tend to echo forward in time, creating further schisms within the women's movement and leaving many activists of color at the tail end of the Second Wave when the comic was released feeling ostracized by the mostly white face of mainstream feminism.

Moore describes his storytelling efforts in "The Curse" as an exercise in solidarity with feminist thinking:

This story was about the difficulties endured by women in masculine societies, using the common taboo of menstruation as the central motif[2]. The plot concerned a young married woman moving into a new home built upon the site of an old Indian lodge and finding herself possessed by the dominating spirit that still resided there, turning her into a werewolf (Moore, Alan Moore's Writing for Comics 6-7).
Through Phoebe, the middle-class housewife who transforms into an avenging werewolf, Moore confronts the pathologization of menstruation and mobilizes an alternative feminist reading of premenstrual syndrome or P.M.S. Moore's comic implies that the negative feelings that surround women's experiences of menarche and menstruation do not come about because of some mental weakness associated with their gender but rather are a reasonable reaction to the stresses associated with living as a woman under a pervasive system of patriarchy. According to this theory, menarche and menstruation are psychologically taxing for young girls and women because they are visible markers of their second-class citizenship, symbols of their induction into a womanhood in which they will take up the same burdens that they saw taken up by their mothers and grandmothers. Menstruation thus becomes a monthly reminder of the restrictions that bind their everyday lives (Lee 33). Though Phoebe fails in her attempts to destroy the gender-based power structure that causes her such distress, her suicide at the conclusion of the comic drives home to readers the depths of despair that women can experience (Moore, "The Curse" 21).

Throughout *Swamp Thing* #40, Phoebe repeatedly confronts the symbols of her own oppression as she goes about her daily routine, and her building anger is coded by the text as a rational and righteous reaction. For example, the opening panels depict the stigma and shame that Western culture attaches to the woman's body through the menstrual taboo. As Phoebe purchases tampons at a local convenience store, she watches as "the checkout lady places the package in a paper bag, as if to protect her other groceries" (Moore, "The Curse" 1, see Figure 1). We also see an advertisement for a douche in the background of the store. The ad is rather coy, referring to nebulous concepts such as "freshness and confidence" (Moore, "The Curse" 2), implying that the female body inspires something less than confidence when it is not constantly scrubbed clean by consumer products (see Figure 2). Both panels emphasize the notion that the woman's body and the menstruating body in particular should remain hidden. Menstruation is a process so disturbing that even the products women use during "that time of the month" must be cloaked in polite, sanitary language rather than discussed openly. This theme is reinforced by the title of the issue itself, "The Curse," which is an oft-deployed euphemism for menstruation.

**Alternative content**

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Following this opening sequence, the comic presents a stunning variety of patriarchal institutions and abuses that women must negotiate on a day-to-day basis. Phoebe encounters a display of knives that are advertised as "good news for housewives" (Moore, "The Curse" 1, see Figure 3), reminding readers of the disproportional share of domestic labor that married women often shoulder. On her way home, she passes by a sex shop where images of masked, depersonalized, porn actresses stare out from the window (Moore, "The Curse" 2, see Figure 4). When she returns home, her husband, Roy, roughly grabs and shakes her when she is late preparing his dinner. He then dismisses her feelings of rage and dejection by accusing her of having a mere case of P.M.S. (Moore, "The Curse" 9, emphasis in the original, see Figure 5). This last panel references a topic of debate among feminists: the medicalization of premenstrual "syndrome." Many believe that such a label could be dangerous in that it might be wielded as a weapon against all women in order to delegitimize their thoughts and feelings by providing a gendered, biological scapegoat for genuine anger and depression. According to Jacquelyn N. Zita, P.M.S. is "unique in so far as it's a syndrome that the whole society thinks exists and that the whole society thinks afflicts most women. When the whole society is eager to ascribe anything problematic in a woman's feelings or behavior to the menstrual cycle, you've got to be extremely careful" (181). What Roy labels as a an irrational and weak response is, in reality, a warranted reaction on Phoebe's part to the building pressures and stresses that she encounters because she is a woman living in the patriarchy.

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The fact that Moore is able to mount a critique of gender relations using such a touchy topic as menstruation within the genre of the mainstream superhero comic is impressive by any standard. Swamp Thing is not an underground title. It is a mainstream release by the well-known publisher, DC Comics. Swamp Thing can be found on newsstands right next to titles like Superman and Batman. Making this accomplishment all the more astounding is the fact that, according to figures gathered by DC Comics in 1995, a full 92% of the label's readership is male (Carlson). Thus, Moore's willingness to sneak a feminist critique into the boys' club atmosphere of the corner comic book store is certainly laudable.

However, rather than simply lauding the comic as a powerful and progressive entry in its medium, we must also think critically about the discourses of race that Moore uses as a
backdrop to his argument. Moore contrasts the images of modern day American style misogyny described above with a fictionalized history of Native American menstrual taboos. Pitch black, blood red, and bruise purple panels portray the lives of Native women as dark, dirty, and dangerous (see Figures 6 and 7). During their periods, the Native women in Moore’s comic are sequestered in a Red Lodge, where they are treated like Typhoid Marys who must be quarantined for the safety of their Nation. According to this account, while in the Red Lodge, Native women “were forbidden to stand, or lie down or see the moon. Their food was passed to them on sticks beneath the silent gaze of their parchment-faced elders” (Moore, “The Curse” 1). “They ate from sticks, like lepers, and the gourds that they sipped water from were afterwards smashed and buried without trace” (Moore, “The Curse 6). The anger of these women at what Moore describes as their brutal mistreatment by Native men, is taken up by Phoebe, our white, middle-class werewolf woman. This arrangement is necessary, we are led to assume, because Native women are no longer around to avenge themselves. Their lives are visually juxtaposed against the modern-day life of Phoebe as she reads an account of the Red Lodge that was once built on the site where her home now sits. Native life is literally relegated to the history books, implying, as many comic book depictions of Indigenous people do, that Native Americans exist solely in the past, that they have, for all intents and purposes, gone extinct (Sheyahshe 94).

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Moore’s fictionalized history of the Red Lodge is a reenactment of the earliest historical records and studies conducted by male anthropologists and by white First Wave feminists regarding women of color. These arguments used a Western lens of culture and philosophy to interpret Native practices. They then used their misinterpretations of those practices to justify the conquest of Native peoples. Swamp Thing #40 mimics their methodology, framing the issue of menstruation through the traditional Western canon and then interpreting Native practices so that they fit that lens.

The comic deploys numerous visual symbols typically used by the Western canon to denote the menstruating woman, such as the full, red moon (see Figures 8 and 9), which represents both the cyclicity of the female body and the fullness and ripeness of her reproductive organs just before menstruation (Delany, Lupton, and Toth 194). Phoebe’s name also alludes to the moon; she shares it with the Greek moon goddess. Even the fetid swamp that our titular hero calls home often stood in as a symbol within the Western literary canon for the pollutedness and decay which men have often imagined menstruation to symbolize (though, of course, this symbol can also be read subversively as bursting with the power to nurture and sustain new life) (Delany, Lupton, and Toth 187).

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“The Curse” also reinforces belief in one possible explanation of the Western taboo surrounding menstruating women: early man believed menstrual blood represented the possibility that a woman's life-giving abilities might be reversible, that she might also hold within her the power to take life (Delany, Lupton, and Toth 18). These fears about menstruation can be found in medical and scientific texts as early as Natural History by Roman philosopher, Pliny the Elder, which contains a diverse list of the possible threats that are posed by menstrual blood:

Contact with it turns new wine sour, crops touched by it become barren, grafts die, seed in gardens are dried up, the fruit of trees falls off, the edge of steel and the gleam of ivory are dulled, hives of bees die, even bronze and iron are at once seized by rust, and a horrible smell fills the air; to taste it drives dogs mad and infects their bites with an incurable poison. Even that very tiny creature the ant is said to be sensitive to it and throws away grains of corn that taste of it and does not touch them again. (549)

Later writers expanded upon this meme. A 1506 treatise claimed that menstrual blood was poisonous to men who dared to have intercourse with a menstruating woman (Crawford 61), and in the eighteenth century, some doctors believed that menstrual blood had the power to castrate (Crawford 61). These notions about menstruating women are also expressly addressed in the Bible, in which the menstruating woman is regularly depicted as “polluted and polluting” (Crawford 49). In the book of Isaiah, the menstrual rag is something which should be reviled and despised (The Holy Bible King James Version Isa. 30.22), and the book of Leviticus orders menstruating women to separate themselves from their community because they are “unclean” (Lev. 15.19).

Moore evokes the image of the menstruating woman as a harbinger of death and disease by setting up his bleeding werewolf protagonist in opposition to the Swamp Thing, a character whose power comes from the life-force of the planet and who is capable of re-growing parts of himself if he is injured. Interestingly, a letter from a reader published in “The Curse” sees the Swamp Thing's powers as a reason to question his long-established male identity. The reader asks,

Although Swamp Thing is psychologically a male, can he reproduce, since he can seemingly grow things at will from his body? In the past he lost his arm, and that arm grew into an imitation of him. So, if he willed it to happen, could he reproduce a copy of himself? (Lindenmuth 25).

Although the reader does not explicitly make the assertion that, if the Swamp Thing is able to reproduce, then he must be a female, he does seem to question the notion that such an ability could belong to someone who is gendered male. For the record, the editors' refused to answer the question definitively, responding that, “given [the Swamp Thing's] highly evolved abilities, we can't say that it couldn't happen in the course of his existence” (Moore, “The Curse” 25). Thus, the character potentially can be read as an extension of Earth's life-giving force, the representative of the reproductive powers of the woman-as-mother.

Phoebe, then, is drawn in opposition to the Swamp Thing's creative power. She is a negative force of destruction and chaos. Her role as the Swamp Thing's doppelganger exists on the
level of plot, in which she initially views him as an obstacle to her revenge, as well as on the visual level. Moore takes every opportunity to set up Phoebe and the Swamp Thing as mirror images of one another, implying that they are reflections of each other (see Figure 10). They are two sides of the same magical coin, much like the nurturing mother and the presumably dangerous menstruating woman seemed to be.

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Herein lies the problem. Moore’s First Nation, the Pennamaquot (Moore, “The Curse” 1), have adopted the Western view that menstruating women are dangerous and destructive. They are shown sequestering their women in squalor and darkness when their time arrives, as if to punish them for the sin of being embodied as a female. This portrayal was uncritically accepted by at least one comics fan, who wrote in a fanzine that Moore supplies “The Curse” with historical context. Though I cannot confirm its historicity, I am inclined to accept as accurate the brief and pertinent account of the mores and customs of the Pennamaquot Indians that has been woven so skillfully into this tale. (Alexander 25)

One suspects that the inclination to accept a white man’s tale of Native American savagery comes directly out of the ever present repetition of such accounts in the historical record. We expect to see Native Americans in this light. In this particular case, the quickness of the fan to condemn the Pennamaquot is, by turns, amusing and tragic, because that particular Nation was invented by Moore. [2]

Of course Moore is not the first feminist to accept the notion that Native American men have horrid attitudes about women. He is repeating the tropes created by early anthropologists to explain and understand Native American ceremonies and practices concerning menstruation. They viewed Native practices through the lens of their own culture’s distaste for menstrual blood, causing them to misinterpret the behavioral data that they saw and to mistakenly attribute their own cultural assumptions about the bodies of women to Native Americans. For example, the isolation of menstruating women which anthropologists witnessed in the tradition of the Red Lodge was “interpreted by Western investigators as a sign of defilement and degradation” (Powers 56). It was assumed that the separation of the women from the men was carried out for the protection of the men from what must be the corrupting influence of the menstrual blood.
In reality, many Nations utilize the Red Lodge because menstruation is seen as the time at which women are at the "peak of their fecundity" and "are believed to possess power that throws male power totally out of kilter. They emit such force that, in their presence, any male-owned or -dominated ritual or sacred object cannot do its usual task" (Allen 47). It is not a question of purity versus impurity. Rather it is a question of balance. Menstruating women are at the height of their spiritual potency. The fullness of their power holds the potential to tip the balance between the male and the female out of harmony.

Another explanation, given by a contemporary Yurok woman, casts the Red Lodge as a kind of positive spiritual retreat.

A menstruating woman should isolate herself because this is the time when she is at the height of her powers. Thus, the time should not be wasted in mundane tasks and social distractions, nor should one's concentration be broken by concerns with the opposite sex. Rather, all of one's energies should be applied in concentrated meditation on the nature of one's life (Buckley 49).

Yurok women are not excluded from the life of the people during menstruation. On the contrary, their cycles provide them with the opportunity to exercise their power on behalf of the people by utilizing the power that they wield at this time to the fullest.

The misrepresentation of Native practices came to be a part of the anthropological record in part through the inappropriate privileging of the testimony of Native men over that of Native women, a discrepancy which ensured that Western anthropological studies would contain a distorted view of the role of women in Native society. It was incorrectly assumed by many social scientists that Native men were the sole keepers of tribal culture and knowledge (Buckley 57). On the contrary, "among many if not most tribes, important ceremonies cannot be held without the presence of women. Each ritual depends on a certain balance of power" (Allen 47). Both genders play roles and tell stories that are integrally important to the well-being of the group. And yet, because the samples utilized by anthropologists were almost entirely composed of Native men, they were told only one set of stories, which led to the creation of a view of Native American gender relations that distorted and inflated the importance of the male. White male anthropologists described the role of men in all First Nations as central when, in reality, the gender system of many Native American peoples insists upon balance and parity (Sellers 25).

These mistakes, which Moore's comic perpetuates, form one part of a larger pattern in which Western studies of American Indian tribal systems are erroneous at base because they view tribalism from the cultural bias of patriarchy and thus either discount, degrade, or conceal gynocratic features or recontextualize those features so that they will appear patriarchal (Allen 4).

Western scholars saw their inquiry as being, in part, about the justification of white male privilege, and so they were quick to seize on an interpretation through which it appeared that abuse of women was the norm in other, supposedly primitive cultures, thus eliminating potential threats to the white, patriarchal worldview.

It is quite likely, however, that Moore's tale was influenced just as thoroughly by the accounts of Native gender roles put forth by white feminists. Unfortunately, the colonialist and sexist scholarship of white anthropologists was championed by the First Wave of the feminist movement, who used racist rhetoric to try and open up new venues for white female participation in the public sphere. Following the Civil War, during the debate over the adoption of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, white feminists worked to distance themselves from people of color so as to avoid some of the political fallout surrounding racial reforms
In doing so, the leaders of the white women's movement ignored those issues that primarily affected black women, including miscegenation, interracial rape, and lynching (Newman 6). According to Louise Michele Newman,

the refusal of white reformers to address black women's specific experiences of gender oppression meant that the white woman's movement would remain mostly white, even when individual women of color were invited to become members of white-dominated women's groups (6).

Such segregation, it was thought, would make women's rights seem more palatable to the average citizen, who was fed up with constantly hearing about "the race question."

Furthermore, First Wave feminists used the contemporary interest in evolutionary science and anthropology to fuel a public relations campaign aiming for the creation of new public positions of power for white women based on notions of racial hierarchy (Newman 7). They argued that their race-based moral superiority over people of color made them the perfect candidates to take on leadership roles in civilizing missions such as the education and so-called "uplift" of African Americans and the Christianizing and assimilation of Native Americans (Newman 8-10). In other words, they attempted to break out of the bonds of the domestic sphere by arguing that "they were effective civilizers, every bit the equals of white men" (Newman 14).

Although such rhetoric was intended to cast white women into the role of self-sacrificing do-gooders out to give aid and succor to people of color, "the main beneficiaries of this civilizing work were white women themselves," who broke out of the role of the household caretaker and into the role of the imperialist colonizer (Newman 119).

In fact, some white feminists of the period had the gall to hold Native American men responsible for white women's subjugation by white men, arguing that "patriarchy was an invention of the primitive, and sexual differences were a constraining legacy [of evolution] that would have to be overthrown if the white race were ever to advance beyond its primitive heritage" (Newman 131). These white feminists held that the only reason patriarchy still had a hold on white society was because white men had not evolved sufficiently far enough away from men of color, whose animalistic and barbaric natures were supposed to be the source of mankind's continued abuses of women. One can imagine such arguments for women's rights being better received by white men than the truth: that many Native women were powerful leaders in their communities, and that true women's liberation would involve moving away from the hierarchical ideals of Western civilization and towards those of the so-called "primitive" (Allen 23).

Perhaps this is one reason why Moore re-uses such tropes in his comic. He soothes his white, male comic book audience by sugar-coating his anti-patriarchal message with the reassuring thought that men of color treat women even worse than white men do. It is also possible that Moore was channeling the racial divides that were present in contemporary feminism in the 1980s when Swamp Thing #40 was released. Following the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the 1970s, the Second Wave of the women's movement once again found itself fractured along lines of race. By the 1980s, feminists of color were vociferously critiquing their white sisters for their tendency to frame their own concerns as if they were universal to all women (Breines 3-4) and for failing to address the ways in which issues of race and class impacted women of color living under patriarchy differently (Lorde, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly" 95).

Many felt that white feminists assumed that "the herstory and myth of white women is the legitimate and sole herstory and myth of all women" and that non-white women and our herstories are noteworthy only as decorations, or examples of female victimization" (Lorde "An Open Letter to Mary Daly" 96). Others criticized a tendency by white feminists to adopt a patronizing attitude towards women of color. Gloria Anzaldúa describes these women as "the
pseudo-liberal ones who suffer from the white women's burden. She takes a missionary role. She attempts to talk for us what a presumption!” (206). Within academia, women of color often felt as though they had been reduced to the status of token minorities at panels on women's rights and felt personally dismissed by the leadership of many feminist groups (Lorde “The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House” 98). Many experienced white feminist groups, as Doris Davenport so candidly put it, as “elitist, crudely insensitive, and condescending” (86).

An episode recounted by self-described Third World feminist Barbara Cameron about an encounter with a white interviewer encapsulates the way in which this combination of ignorance and dismissal of women of color operated, not only in the Second Wave of the feminist movement but also in Moore's Second Wave feminist narrative.

A few years ago, a white lesbian telephoned me requesting an interview, explaining that she was taking Native American courses at a local university, and that she needed data for her paper on gay Native Americans. I agreed to the interview with the idea that I would be helping a “sister” and would also be able to educate her about Native American struggles. After we completed the interview, she began a diatribe on how sexist Native Americans are, followed by a questioning session in which I was to enlighten her mind about why Native Americans are so sexist. I attempted to rationally answer her inanely racist and insulting questions, although my inner response was to tell her to remove herself from my house. Later it became very clear how I had been manipulated as a sounding board for her ugly and distorted views about Native Americans. Her arrogance and disrespect were characteristic of the racist white people in South Dakota. If I tried to point it out, I'm sure she would have vehemently denied her racism (51).

Like Cameron's interviewer, Moore uses racist assumptions about Native men in order to push forward a (white) feminist agenda. His comic is a snapshot of the white feminist movement of the 1980s, both its earnest confrontation with the myriad facets of patriarchal oppression and its struggle to acknowledge and confront the vestiges of racism and colonialism within its own ranks.

A women's movement supported by such arguments is incapable of addressing the specific problems that women of color face due to the intersection of racist and misogynist discrimination. These erasures directly harm women of color because they elide the abuses perpetrated upon them by white men. For example, since the American government began trying to force Native Americans to assimilate into the patriarchal systems of white America, Native women have found themselves to be under a statistically higher threat of violence from both white colonizers and from Native men themselves, some of whom internalized violent colonialist models and rigid, biblically influenced gender roles from institutions like the Christian boarding schools (Smith 13-27). Furthermore, many formerly gynocratic Native American societies have been re-organized following contact with missionaries and U.S. government-backed assimilationist projects to more closely resemble American patriarchal systems (Sellers 8). Today, Native American women are more likely than any other female demographic to be victims of sexual assault (Smith 26). They are twice as likely as any other group, male or female, to be victims of violent crime. And contrary to the ongoing narrative that Native men are the primary perpetrators of this violence, sixty percent of violent crimes committed against Native women are committed by whites (Smith 28).

"The Curse" utilizes outdated and flawed historical research in an attempt to craft a feminist message. This scholarship was wielded by the First Wave of feminism and has echoed forward in time, showing up once again within the Second Wave. If left unchallenged, this scholarship becomes common knowledge, showing up in unexpected places such as the comic book stand. Though the inclusion of a feminist critique of patriarchy within the male-
centric world of comic books is a great step forward, Moore’s repackaging of feminism’s past mistakes with regard to race elides and erases many of the most pressing concerns of women of color. These women require a feminism that takes an intersectional approach to overlapping forms of race and gender-based oppressions.

Notes

[1] This essay does not endorse the proposition that all Native American Nations are interchangeable. However, the racist/sexist anthropological practices that this essay intends to refute tend to lump all First Nations together under the same rubric. As such, many of the revisionist texts that I use as sources attempt to refute such claims from a collaborative, Pan-Indian revolutionary perspective. Whenever possible, I have attempted to utilize resources that focus on Nations of the Eastern Woodlands, where Moore’s comic takes place. However, in some cases I refer to texts by the likes of Paula Gunn Allen and Andrea Smith. These texts use broad brushstrokes to explicate patterns that can be found in many (but by no means all) Native American Nations.

[2] The list of federally recognized tribes found provided by the U.S. Department of the Interior and the Department of Health and Human Services shows no group named “Pennamaquot.” There is a Passamaquoddy and a Penobscot listed, and both groups reside in Maine, the state in which Moore’s story takes place. One can imagine that Moore used these names as inspiration to generate the name of his fictional tribe. A Google search for “Pennamaquot” yields only one result: a plot synopsis of Moore’s comic.

References


Moore, Alan (w), Stephen Bissette (p) and John Totleben (i). "The Curse." *Swamp Thing* #40 (September 1985), DC Comics. Print.


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The fictional character Swamp Thing has appeared in five American comic book series to date, including several specials, and has crossed over into other DC Comics titles. The series found immense popularity upon its 1970s debut and during the mid-late 1980s under Alan Moore, Steve Bissette, and John Totleben. These eras were met with high critical praise and numerous awards. However, over the years, Swamp Thing comics have suffered from low sales which have resulted in numerous series cancellations